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A Synthesis Of Race And Class
A Look at the Black Panther Party and its Goal of Black Liberation
2003

Retrieved on March 18, 2016 from web.archive.org
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theanarchistlibrary.org

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chapters and members of the party, it would have taken more than a couple blows to effectively end the BPP in 1971.

The Black Panther Party was genuinely committed to the people it aimed to liberate. Its theory was clearly revolutionary and, in true Marxist and Fanonist spirit, it emanated from the material, as well as social, cultural and racial conditions of the African American population of the US.

Nevertheless, where the BPP excelled in revolutionary theory and commitment it lacked in revolutionary structure. Regrettably, it failed to recognize the oppressive nature of its leadership and party organization that ultimately led to its very demise.

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ative effects on the Black population as members of a given class and racial group.

The party's emphasis on vanguardist organizational structures replicated some of the very oppressive structures that it aimed to combat. Race and class are not abstract concepts; racism, classism and capitalism therefore exist and manifest themselves at every level of social interaction. To claim that a revolutionary organization is immune from reactionary elements is therefore flawed. It would be ridiculous to claim that the party practiced "reverse racism" — as some have claimed over the years in hopes of discrediting its legacy — nevertheless, social oppressions found outside of the party were present inside of the party as well. Authoritarian structures, such as those advocated by the majority of the leftist organizations of the 60's, failed to address the issue of social oppressions in their entirety. Additionally the PartyÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s failed to address issues of Patriarchy as an explicit point in their 10-point Program. This, coupled with notorious examples of male dominance, sexual harassment and abuse towards women within the ranks of the Party, shows an inherent conflict within the Party's platform, and is another example of the leadership of the Party failing to recognize how they were in fact maintaining oppressive institutions.

By developing hierarchical social and political systems within the BPP, Huey Newton and other party leaders were effectively replicating oppressive forces found within the system they were combating. The question of "human emancipation" is simultaneously a question of social as well as individual liberation. If the power of the individual is compromised over the good of the collective, the revolutionary potential of the said collective is compromised as well. What if the party had developed more participatory and horizontal structures? Surely, the leadership would have seen its power and authority compromised. Nevertheless such compromise could have ultimately benefited the party structure. For if the authority had been decentralized and delegated through the many

Perhaps the party would have benefited and maximized its potential as a Revolutionary Black Nationalist organization by broadening its struggles to both remedial and immediate programs as well as more militant activities so long as they were both aimed at a common and revolutionary goal: the necessity for Black people to gain control of the institutions in their own communities, eventually transforming them into cooperatives, and of one day working with other ethnic groups to change the system.

More importantly however, and for the fate of the Black liberation movement, the party would have benefited from adopting less authoritarian practices and structures. Regrettably, and given the hierarchical nature of its organization, the BPP's demise was ultimately sparked by a simple feud between two party leaders.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

It is safe to say that the Black Panther Party was the most important revolutionary organization in America during the late 20th century. Its successes were not coincidental. The Panther theoretical analysis and development outlined the oppression of African Americans within the institutions of racism and capitalism. Its struggles and ideology made the necessary connections between the two forms of oppression. Partly drawing from previous movements and ideologies (more importantly Marxism, Fanonism and Maoism) and partly because of their own active involvement in the day-to-day struggles of Black America, the BPP was able to develop a truly revolutionary political platform that presented a more just and viable alternative.

Nevertheless, mistakes were made and shortcomings led to the early demise of the party. While the BPP's racial and class analysis might be commended (indeed it produced one of the most complete and revolutionary theories resulting of the 1960's) it must be observed that some of its practices and beliefs ultimately had neg-

In bringing about radical social change wherein lies the revolutionary potential of a people? Is the racial/national condition of primary importance? Or is class and the relation to the means of production the guiding principle of a people in revolt? Are race and class mutually exclusive? Is nationalism always reactionary and bourgeois, or can revolutionary nationalism exist?

These and similar questions come about when discussing the legacy of the Black Panther Party, its political platform, ideology and its positions on race and class. Many critics, especially of Marxist tendencies, have questioned the revolutionary character and potential of the BPP given its nationalist and race-specific beliefs.

The International Workingman's Association (or First International) declared: "the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves." The logic is implicit: the liberation of a given group must occur from within. A prisoner in order to be free must first and foremost understand that they are a prisoner; they must show a willingness to free themselves. That the warden will free the prisoner is as ridiculous and unlikely as the prospect of the bourgeoisie emancipating the working class.

Thus, in October 1966 the Black Panther Party formed following the same logic. This time however, the targeted audience was not the orthodox Marxist revolutionary subject: the industrial proletariat, but instead the Black population of the United States. The first point of the party's ten-point program states: "We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny." It was obvious to Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the party's co-founders, that Black liberation would not only occur from within the Black population but also and more importantly that Black liberation would be defined in Black terms, and not exclusively, or even necessarily, in Marxist and other non-Black idioms. In this spirit, Revolutionary Black Nationalism became the BPP's guiding principle and founding ideology.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to the Party, nationalism in the vein of the BPP was indeed revolutionary because its political end was not the Black nation-state itself. Instead Black Nationalism served to counterbalance the bourgeois nation-state. Similar to Marx's dialectical evolution of the class struggle,

Black Nationalism emerged as the antithetical response to white bourgeois nationalism. The greater goal of the BPP in its earlier stage was to undermine the inequalities inherent in white nationalism, as well as provide a necessary step for the evolution of the Black liberation struggle. Similarly, it could be argued that the Black population of America acted as the proletariat of the white bourgeoisie. Black Nationalism, as opposed to traditional bourgeois/white nationalism, therefore is dialectically proven to be revolutionary.

It would be unfair to observe the Black Panther Party's ideology and political platform solely through a Marxist scope, however. After all, the party itself drew from other schools of thought, specifically the anti-colonialist views of Fanon.

Drawing from Fanon, Huey Newton thus explains the circumstance of Blacks in the United States to colonies in his Revolutionary Suicide: "Cut off, ignored, and forgotten, the people are kept in a state of subjugation, especially by the police, who treat the communities like colonies."

The revolutionary program in Fanonist terms, although comparable to Marx's call for a workers' revolution, further justifies nationalism and other forms of political and cultural identification as revolutionary. However, the BPP certainly did not use anarchist theory in its development (with the exception of Eldrige CleaverÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s fixation with Bakunin and Sergei NechaevÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s infamous Revolutionary Catechism). The BPP is notorious for having a highly authoritarian structure, and depending on which city or chapter is examined, the Party often

Newton argues that in fact such forms of community organizing and activism became more effective and appropriate than their earlier activities centered around self-defense: "We soon discovered that weapons and uniforms set us apart from the communityÃ¢â‚¬Â¦ perhaps our military strategy was too much of "a great leap forward." Indeed such genuine commitment served to encourage ideas of mutual aid and solidarity among low and middle class blacks. Furthermore, by limiting the struggle of the BPP to just one of the ten points of its founding program would be in contradiction to party ideology. Important to note is that party faced a militarily stronger enemy, hell-bent on disrupting and eventually destroying every and all efforts of the Black liberation movement. In fact, J. Edgar Hoover declared in June 1969: "the Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to internal security of the country."

Tactically, as well as politically, the decision to de-emphasize the armed persona of the Panthers was a conscious attempt on the part of Huey Newton and the National Headquarters at Oakland to better engage in the struggle of black liberation. Guns had served to jumpstart the BPP's popularity and demonstrate its resolve, but community organizing gave the party an opportunity to become more acquainted with the social realities of those it aimed to liberate.

Inasmuch as race and class were not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary to each other, community organizing and armed struggle could have been simultaneously engaged and supported. Both, after all, had the equal potential to advance the interests of Blacks and help in developing revolutionary consciousness. Nevertheless, inasmuch as exclusive attention to the armed struggle might have led to the party's early demise at the hands of the State, exclusive attention to solely remedial programs such as the free clinics and free breakfasts might have led to a more liberal and reformist BPP.

numbers of African-Americans were constant victims of police brutality and murders — and therefore began their program of patrolling the police. Newton explains the reasoning behind point seven: "The emphasis on weapons was a necessary phase in our evolution, based on Frantz Fanon's contention that the people have to be shown that colonizers and their agents — the police — are not bullet-proof. We saw this action as a bold step in making our program known and raising the consciousness of the people."

Other points of the program were stressed as well however, and the Black Panther Party did not limit its tactical struggles to what ultimately was a symbolic show of force. Perhaps the best of these programs was the Free Breakfast for Children started in 1969. Ward Churchill, a historian and Native American activist, states that such a program was "meeting the daily nutritional requirements of an estimated 50,000 grade-schoolers in forty-five inner cities across the country" and it accounted "for the Party's extraordinary popularity among urban blacks during the late 1960's."

As time passed however, questions began to emerge within the party (as well as without) about the revolutionary nature of such remedial "survival programs." Was feeding children part of the agenda of an alleged revolutionary organization? Instead of devoting its energies in alleviating the conditions under the American capitalist and racist system, why didn't the party engage in more militant and armed-struggle-oriented activities? Such were the opinions of Eldridge Cleaver, who deemed the community-oriented programs "reformist" and instead preferred the party's original emphasis on self-defense and police patrolling. If Black people were going to be given aid within the system while not directly confronting the institutions of capital and racism, didn't the BPP run the risk of losing its radicalness? Surely providing lower class African-Americans with free health service alleviated their immediate needs, but how effective was it in ending racism and capitalism?

used militarist ranking systems when referring to one another, and digression from this structure was met with disdain.

As the party evolved, and its theoretical analysis developed, BPP ideology attained a more internationalist outlook. The anti-imperialist rhetoric of the BPP, and the authoritarian structure, are prime examples of the Maoist influence on the party's ideology. The United States was the mightiest imperialist government in the world, exerting its influence well beyond its own borders, but more importantly for the African-American population, the US was seen by the BPP as an imperialist power oppressing the Black nation within America. In turn, and following Maoist thought, the BPP engaged in their struggle for Black liberation within an anti-imperialist context.

The party also borrowed from Mao a strong sense of organizational discipline and emphasized criticism and self-criticism. The little red book was read by all party members and served as, not a guide for revolutionary praxis, but also as a sort of personal rule-book. Furthermore, the respect to the self-determination of all people and the belief that revolutionary potential is found in all victims of imperialism, and not just the industrial proletariat, is perfectly mirrored in the party's many "survival programs" such as the Free Breakfast for Children which served to alleviate the immediate needs of the black community but also hoped to educate and raise the revolutionary consciousness of the Black masses. Newton explains:

> "Every ethnic group has particular needs that they know and understand better than anybody else; each group is the best judge of how its institutions ought to affect the lives of its members."

Finally, the idea that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" is perhaps most obviously represented in the party's tactics on self-defense and their insistence on appearing in public fully armed.

RACISM, CAPITALISM, AND REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE

Which then was the greater evil to be fought? Were capital and the alienation of the Black worker the source of inspiration for the BPP when determining its revolutionary program? Or did the party reduce its analysis to a simple and two-dimensional, black and white racist "Amerikkka"? Clearly the party ideologues were interested in drawing from different schools of thought. Subsequently, their struggle developed with respect to the complex and multifaceted material, social, political and cultural condition of Blacks in the United States. It is safe to say then that their struggle against racism was as important as their struggle against capital. More importantly however, the Black Panther Party appreciated the connection between capital and racism. In this sense, their struggles against both evils were not mutually exclusive, but instead complementary. As was previously noted, Newton explains: "Never convinced that destroying capitalism would automatically destroy racism, I felt, however, that we could not destroy racism without wiping out its economic foundations."

The Black Panther Party acknowledged the importance of adopting a revolutionary attitude towards its racial and class struggles and consequently adopted a praxis of armed self-defense. The party's perspective on violence developed from their own violent oppression. Therefore, their decision to approach Black liberation from a self-defense standpoint was in fact a response towards their condition rather than an unapologetic justification of violence.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRAXIS: ARMED SELF-DEFENSE vs. COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

Tracing the ideological history and development of the BPP is a complex and at times counterintuitive exercise. Perhaps harder to determine however, is the lifespan of the party itself. Nevertheless, for all intents and purposes, the Black Panther Party was founded in 1966 and was dissolved in 1971 as a result of the Newton-Cleaver split. The reasons for the split, in true Panther spirit, are quite complicated. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale drafted the Panther ten-point program in October 1966. At the moment of its founding the BPP consisted of Seale and Newton alone. By 1970 however, the party had more than 45 chapters nation-wide, a membership of 5000+ and an international section. While external factors attributed considerably to the party's tragic demise, most notably J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO program, internal divisions played an important role in dividing and eventually destroying the BPP. As the party grew, and because the founding members found themselves in prison shortly after 1966 (Huey Newton was accused of the murder of a police officer in late 1967 while Bobby Seale was convicted as one of the "Chicago Eight" during the Democratic National Convention) different factionalisms emerged across the different chapters. Most of these divisions were sparked by ideological and tactical disputes between Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. Mumia Abu Jamal explains: "…there was no single BPP; there were many, unified in one national organization, to be sure, but sep rated by the various regional and cultural influences that form and inform consciousness."

Point number seven of the ten-point program advocated for armed self-defense of black people in America. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale believed that the situation in Oakland, California (as in many other cities in America) was intolerable — considerable