

Chapter 41

“Just Listen to What the Panthers Are Saying”: A History of the Black Panther Party From Its Vision and Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Within the American Black Movement, the Black Panther Party (BPP) became the most prominent and influential organization of the 1960s and 1970s. The movement initiated in Oakland (California) and captured the attention of politicians, journalists, intellectuals, and scholars. From a documentary corpus that shows its protagonists' perspective, this chapter aims to focus on the actions, goals, and development of the Black Panthers: what they did, how and why they did it, and what they represented to the Black freedom struggle. It offers an analysis of their tactics and strategies of struggle against police brutality, poor housing and living conditions, unemployment, poverty, and structural racism. The authors aim to show how the BPP went from being a local grassroots organization to a national and highly popular political party for collective action, much more complex and influential than what the collective memory and the dominant historiography have shown.

INTRODUCTION

The Black Panther Party (BPP) and the movement it initiated in the mid-1960s captured the attention of politicians, journalists, intellectuals and scholars. Many authors from the right and from the left, tried to analyze the history and legacy of a group that conquered the popular imagination and the country's attention for two decades.

The most extended historiographical trend characterized the Black Panthers as the most violent version of the Black Power movement, heading the “radical” (and erroneous) turn that the Civil Rights Movement took after 1965, an analytical paradigm that has prevailed until today. In this historiographi-

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cal interpretation, however, the history of the BPP plays a very small role. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams stated that “much of what we now call ‘histories’ of the Party are crafted by activist-scholars – former leaders, high profile members, or supporters – in which recollection collapses into data collection, scholarship into subjective analysis, history into memory” (Lazerow & Williams, 2006, p. 4).

Most historical works have focused on what was characterized as the “apogee” period of the BPP (1966-1972), with limited references to the subsequent “decline” years. Considering the premise that although the organization lingered on until 1982 the government’s repressive tactics had weakened the Panthers considerably by 1972 (Wendt, 2006, p. 162), research has mostly focused on topics such as:

- The BPP as the embodiment of black radicalism and its role in the end of non-violence and civil disobedience, main characteristics of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.
- The role played by the notions of “violence” and “armed self-defense” both in the rhetoric, activism and organization of the Party, as in its rise and fall.
- The centrality of “machismo”, gender relations, and the role of women within the Party.
- The role of systemic institutional repression in the advent and disappearance of the BPP.

These lines of research emerged from what historian Joe Street has identified as three periods in the historiography of the BPP (Street, 2010). The first period (from the end of the 1970s through the 1980s) was dominated by (auto)biographic accounts written by participants and observers of the BPP in action. These productions offered insight into the BPP leadership but included relatively little on the Party’s rank and file. The nineties brought works that focused on local BPP chapters, its community work and the experiences of BPP’s rank and file. A third period emerged in the early 2000s with publications that focused on the Party’s legacy and contribution to African American and American culture beyond its political program and violent image.

These works fell mostly short at offering a comprehensive view of the Black Panther Party as a national phenomenon. Likewise, they largely leave aside the analysis of tactics and strategies of struggle and resistance, and forms of community organization in the 1970s and early 1980s, years in which the Panthers had to fight against a fierce repression and persecution, sabotages and infiltrations by the FBI, and the relentless murder and imprisonment of leaders and activists.

OAKLAND IN THE 1960’S AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE PARTY

The BPP was the product of the activism and mobilization of the black community throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s, as well as of the impact of the socio-economic situation on African Americans. It was Huey P. Newton who contextualized the emergence of the organization in the political and socio-economic reality of Oakland in the aftermath of World War II:

The great exodus of poor people out of the South during World War II sprang from the hope for a better life in the big cities of the North and West. In search for freedom, they left behind centuries of southern cruelty and repression. The futility of that search is now history. The Black communities of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Newark, Brownsville, Watts, Detroit, and many others stand as testament that racism is as oppressive in the North as in the South. (Newton, 1973, p. 14)

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