

The History and Social Work Legacy of the Black Panther Party

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Abstract

The Black Panther Party was a prominent civil rights organization that gained prominence in the 1960s for transforming the Black Power Movement. The Black Panthers had a significant impact on public policy, activism, and community organization. The Black Panthers left a strong legacy of service, resistance, self-determination, and innovative social work programs.

Keywords: community service, self-determination, social work

1. Introduction

The Black Panthers were a national organization that existed from 1966 to 1982. The Panthers were community organizers, activists, and revolutionaries. They were labeled as anti-American terrorists. The Panthers defended the community with education, community services, independent media, and weapons. They attracted thousands of followers and international attention. At a turbulent time, the Panthers took a courageous stand (Shames & Seale, 2016).

Review of the literature

2. EARLY YEARS OF HUEY P. NEWTON

Huey P. Newton was born on February 17, 1942 in Monroe, LA. He was the youngest of seven children. He was named after Louisiana governor Huey P. Long. He was the son of a Baptist minister. His family later moved to California. He struggled in school, could not read or write, and got involved in petty crime. He taught himself to read and graduated from high school. He began attending Merritt College in Oakland and joined the Afro-American Student Association. He met Bobby Seale at Merritt College. Newton also studied at the University of California at Santa Cruz and at San Francisco Law School (Magoon, 2021).

3. EARLY YEARS OF BOBBY SEALE

Bobby Seale was born on October 22, 1936 in Liberty, TX. He was the oldest of three children. His family also relocated to California. He was raised by an abusive father. He dropped out of high school and joined the Air Force. He received a dishonorable discharge and got a high school diploma. He enrolled in Merritt College and met Huey P. Newton in 1962 (Magoon, 2021).

4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Lowndes County Freedom Organization was a political party founded during 1965 in Alabama. Its symbol was a black panther. Robert F. Williams was the president of the Monroe, North Carolina chapter of the NAACP. He set up a rifle club to defend African Americans in Monroe from the Ku Klux Klan. He wrote the influential book *Negroes with Guns*. Another influential group was the Deacons of Defense. They were founded in November 1964. The Oakland Police Department had a reputation for brutality and was 95% white. Additionally, civil rights icon, Malcolm X, was killed in 1965. The Watts Uprising occurred a few months later in August of 1965. In early 1966, community activist Mark Comfort started the Oakland Direct Action Committee police patrols (Walker, 2020).

5. BLACK PANTHER PARTY BEGINS

The Party was founded on October 15, 1966 by Huey P. Newton as the Minister of Defense and Bobby Seale as the Chairman. The Party established a Ten Point Program which advocated for full employment, housing, education, exemption from the army, an end to police brutality, trials by a jury of their peers, freedom from federal, state, county, and city prison and reparations for slavery. The Party sold the Red Book of Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Tse Tung at the University of California Berkeley to raise funds, opened their first office, and recruited new members. Little Bobby Hutton was their first and youngest member. The Party attracted attention by escorting Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X, during her West Coast visit and by their coverage of the police murder of a young Black man, Denzil Dowell (Walker, 2020).

6. GROWTH OF THE PARTY

The Party grew in popularity with the addition of Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and Eldridge Cleaver. In May 1967, the Panthers protested against the Mulford Act (which prevented the carrying of guns in public) at the California State legislature. Later that year, Huey P. Newton was stopped by police. A shoot out occurred that led to the death of Officer John Frey. In 1968, Newton was convicted of manslaughter. In response, The Panthers initiated the Free Huey campaign. Later in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. Bobby Hutton was killed by the Oakland Police a couple of days later. These controversies sparked growth in the Black Panther Party (Boyd, 1995).

7. CONTROVERSY

During the 1968 Democratic National Convention, anti-war protestors clashed with the police. A group of organizers, named the Chicago 8, were indicted on charges of conspiracy and inciting to riot. Panther Chairman Bobby Seale was also indicted with the group. During his trial, Seale requested to represent himself because his regular attorney was not available. The judge in the case denied his request. When Seale protested, he was bound and gagged in the courtroom.

In December 1969, Chicago police staged a pre-dawn raid on the local Panther headquarters. Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were assassinated with the assistance of FBI informant William O' Neal. Also in 1969, Black Panthers John Huggins and Bunchy Carter were killed in a shoot-out by members of Malauna Karenga's US Organization at the campus of UCLA. There was a disagreement over the development of a new Black Studies program on campus.

There were further controversies involving the New York 21. The New York 21 was a group of Panthers accused of plotting acts of terrorism that included killing police officers and blowing up department stores. In May 1971, a jury acquitted them on all charges. In Los Angeles, Panther leader Geronimo Pratt was falsely imprisoned in 1972 for the murder of Caroline Olsen. He ultimately served 27 years in jail.

In Connecticut, Panthers Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale were falsely accused in the death of Alex Rackley. During this time, Panther Angela Davis was accused of conspiracy, kidnapping, and murder in the death of Judge Harold Haley as Jonathan Jackson attempted to help his brother, George, escape from prison. A gun belonging to Davis was allegedly used during the escape. She was later found not guilty of all charges (Walker, 2020).

8. SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMS

The Black Panthers established over sixty programs to focus on the immediate needs of the people. The programs were designed to address concrete community needs until the Panther Party was able to achieve revolution. Before the emergence of Black Lives Matter, the Panthers patrolled the community and observed police conducting their duties in order to curtail brutality.

Free Breakfast Program

The Panthers created a free breakfast program in January 1969. At the end of the year, twenty chapters across the country had initiated their own programs. Members of the Panthers sought support from grocery stores, restaurants, and other local businesses to support the program. It is important to note that this program existed before public school initiatives or Meals on Wheels.

Medical Clinics

Before the advent of Obama Care, the Panthers provided basic medical care and first aid to the poor. Health clinics were opened in major cities throughout the country including Detroit, Memphis, Dallas, Seattle, Kansas City, Chicago, etc. The Panthers also were pioneers in their focus on researching and finding a cure for sickle cell anemia in the Black community. In 1971, they established a Sickle Cell Research Foundation to promote testing for the disease.

Education

In the arena of education, the Panthers established the Intercommunal Youth Institute later renamed the Oakland Community School. The school educated youth from preschool to middle school. The school was one of the most popular of all the Party's programs. The school grew to accommodate 150 students. The school flourished many years before the school choice and charter school movement.

Other Programs

The Panthers started a newspaper called the *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*. It was first published on April 25, 1967. It was purchased and read by individuals throughout the nation and throughout the world. *The Black Panther* featured popular news events, civil rights struggles, and international liberation movements (Jones, 1995). The newspaper also displayed political cartoons dramatizing police brutality and corruption. *The Black Panther* contained poems, art, and socially conscious song lyrics. It also provided information about the Black Panther Party's philosophy and activities. At its peak, the newspaper had a circulation of 400,000 a week (Magoon, 2021). Before the advent of Black Entertainment Television and TV One, the *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service* was an important example of independent Black media.

Additionally, the Panthers started many other initiatives such as Free Clothing, Free Busing to Prison, Free Shoes, Free Pest Control, Free Plumbing, Free Food, Free Ambulance Program, and Seniors Against Fearful Environment (Jones, 1995).

9. CHALLENGES

In 1968, the membership of the Black Panther Party expanded quickly after the deaths of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Hutton and nationwide summer protests. Thousands of new recruits joined the Party. Some people were obviously attracted by the Panthers macho image, smooth fashion, open display of weapons, and bold confrontation of the police. All new members were not necessarily committed to the Party's political platform or community outreach programs.

As the Party grew larger, the Panthers became increasingly concerned about government spies and informants. Explosive growth made organizational structure harder to maintain. During this time, the government raided Panther offices across the nation.

Another concern was the conflicting visions of Eldridge Cleaver and Huey P. Newton. Newton wanted to downplay armed self-defense and place greater focus on community service programs. Cleaver disagreed and sought confrontations with law enforcement. The FBI exacerbated tension in the Party and some members were expelled and removed from the Party around 1970. J. Edgar Hoover initiated a counterintelligence program called COINTELPRO to prevent the rise of a Black Messiah. He declared the Panthers the greatest internal threat to the security of the United States. Subsequently, the Panthers decided to close chapters around the nation. Bobby Seale ran for mayor and Elaine Brown ran for city council in Oakland. The campaigns were unsuccessful and some members became disillusioned and left the Party. These developments quickened the eventual decline of the organization.

10. HUEY P NEWTON ACCUSATIONS

Huey Newton was accused of involvement in the assault of his tailor Preston Callis, and the murders of a prostitute Kathleen Smith and an accountant named Betty Van Patter in the early 1970s. He traveled to Cuba to avoid prosecution and Elaine Brown became the first female leader in the history of the organization. In 1977, Huey P. Newton returned to the United States and became increasingly autocratic in his leadership. He was eventually convicted of embezzlement of state funds and the Panther sponsored Oakland Community School closed in 1982. This development marked the official end of the Black Panther Party.

11. RETROSPECTIVE OF HUEY P. NEWTON

Huey P. Newton was the central leader, symbol, and philosopher of the Black Panther Party. He was a formidable intellectual who went back to college and attained a PhD in 1980. He was a noted author who published the books, *To Die for the People*, and *Revolutionary Suicide*. However, Newton's ego, substance abuse, and mental health issues diminished his leadership and he was murdered in 1989 by Tyrone Robinson, a drug dealer, outside of a crack house in Oakland. Tragically, Newton died at the age of 47 years old (Boyd, 1995).

12. RETROSPECTIVE OF BOBBY SEALE

Bobby Seale was an underappreciated leader who contributed greatly to the development of the Black Panther Party. He led the protest at California State capitol in 1967. He started the Black Panther newspaper. He started the free breakfast and many other community programs for the organization. He ran for mayor of the city Oakland in 1973. Seale wrote the books, *Seize the Time* and *A Lonely Rage*. He overcame many controversies including the Chicago 8 trial and being falsely accused of the murder of Alex Rackley. In the middle 1970s, Seale had a major conflict with Huey Newton and eventually left the Black Panthers. Interestingly, Seale always downplayed the issue and insisted that he and Newton remained on good terms. He demonstrated humility and consistency over an extended period of time. Bobby Seale is still alive and continues to speak and lecture (Boyd, 1995).

13. LESSONS FROM THE PANTHERS

The Black Panthers left a legacy of community service, armed resistance, a commitment to self-determination, and an example of political activism. They did an outstanding job of attracting the youth, building multiracial coalitions, engaging the community, and creating interest around social issues.

From the macro social work perspective, the Panthers were affected by autocratic decision making, philosophical disagreements, and external government pressure. The Panthers were also accused of mishandling money, and engaging in criminal activities. The Panthers made mistakes but made a valiant effort to make social change in their time. They showed fierce commitment to their mission and made great sacrifices. The legacy of the Panthers is a mixture of revolution and redemption, tragedy and triumph, forgiveness and the future, loss and legacy (Shames & Seale, 2016).

14. CURRENT ISSUES

In spite of the great Panther legacy, significant challenges remain for disadvantaged communities. Racial profiling contributed to the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. The 2013 *Shelby v. Holder* Supreme court decision weakened the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Police brutality took the lives of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, and Sandra Bland. Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd were killed in 2020. In the aftermath of the death of George Floyd, mass protests broke out in America and around the world.

In spite of the conviction of Officer Derek Chauvin, there has been controversy surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement. The leaders of Black Lives Matter have been accused of lavishly spending money to acquire real estate properties. There have also been questions related to the structure and organization of Black Lives Matter movement.

Many activists have also been frustrated by the failure to pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act through the Senate. The legislation would prohibit no knock warrants, chokeholds, and body cameras. It would also establish use of force guidelines and ban qualified immunity for police officers. The For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act which mandate same day voter registration, eliminates gerrymandering, and requires federal pre-clearance for redistricting have also been stymied.

The future of the progressive movement is in question. Bomb threats have been made against black colleges. The mass shooting which occurred at the TOPS Supermarket in the city of Buffalo disturbed the nation. The overturning of the Roe vs Wade decision has concerned many. The passage of anti-protest laws and the Kyle Rittenhouse decision in Wisconsin could lead to the presence of guns at nonviolent protests.

Most importantly, the attempts to restrict the right to vote by supporters of Former President Donald Trump has the potential to put American democracy at risk. However, people who believe in freedom cannot rest. Activists must train the youth to take up and continue the struggle for freedom and justice. The courage, community organization, and creativity of the Black Panther Party will be sorely needed in the days to come.

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