

A Brief History of the Black Panther Party and its Place in the Black Liberation Movement

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The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in October, 1966, in Oakland, California by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. The name was shortened to the Black Panther Party (BPP) and it began spreading eastward through the Black urban ghetto colonies across the country.

In the summer of '68, David Brothers established a BPP branch in Brooklyn, New York, and a few months later Lumumba Shakur set up a branch in Harlem, New York. I joined the Harlem BPP in the fall of '68 and served as its finance officer until arrested on April 2, 1969 in the Panther 21 conspiracy case which was the opening shot in the government's nationwide attack on the BPP. Moving westward, Police Departments in each city made military raids on BPP offices or homes in Philadelphia, Chicago, Newark, Omaha, Denver, New Haven, San Diego, Los Angeles, and other cities, murdering some Panthers and arresting others.

After I and most other Panther 21 members were held in jail and on trial for two years, we were all acquitted of all charges and released. Most of us returned to the community and to the BPP but by then COINTELPRO (short for "Counter-Intelligence Program") had taken its toll. The BPP was rife with dissension, both internal and external. The internal strife, division, intrigue, and paranoia had become so ingrained that eventually most members drifted or were driven away. Some continued the struggle on other fronts and some basically cooled out altogether. The BPP limped on for several more years, then died what seemed a natural death.

History will be the ultimate judge of the BPP's place in the Black Liberation Movement (BLM). But in these troubled times Afrikan people in the U.S. need to investigate both the positive and negative aspects of the BPP's history in order to learn from those hard lessons already paid for in blood. In particular, we need to learn the reasons for the BPP's rapid rise to prominence, the reason for its ability to move so many Afrikans and other nationalities, and the reason for its demise during its brief sojourn across the American scene. It is not possible in this short paper, on short notice, to provide much of what is necessary, so this paper will confine itself to pointing out some of the broader aspects of the BPP's positive and negative contributions to the BLM.

The Positive Aspects of the BPP's Contributions

1. Self-defense: This is one of the fundamental areas in which the BPP contributed to the BLM. It's also one of the fundamental things that set the BPP apart from most previous Black organizations and which attracted members (particularly the youth), mass support, and a mass following. The concept is not only sound, it's also common sense. But it must be implemented correctly, otherwise it can prove more detrimental than beneficial. The self-defense policies of the BPP need to be analyzed in this light by present day Afrikan organizations. All history has shown that this government will bring its police and military powers to bear on any group which truly seeks to free Afrikan people. Any Black "freedom" organization which ignores self-defense does so at its own peril.

2. Revolutionary nationalist ideology: The BPP was a nationalist organization. Its main goal was the national liberation of Afrikan people in the U.S., and it restricted its membership to Blacks only. It was also revolutionary. The BPP's theories and practices were based on socialist principles. It was anti-capitalist and struggled for a socialist revolution of U.S. society. On the national level, the BPP widely disseminated socialist-based programs to the Afrikan masses. Internationally, it provided Afrikans in the U.S. with a broader understanding of our relationship to the Afrikan continent, the emerging independent Afrikan nations, third world nations, socialist nations, and all the liberation movements associated with these nations. Overall the ideology provided Afrikans here with a more concrete way of looking at and analyzing the world. Heretofore much of Black analysis of the world, and the society in which we live, was based on making ourselves acceptable to white society, proving to whites that we were human, proving to whites that we were ready for equality, proving we were equal to whites, disproving racist ideas held by whites, struggling for integration or equal status with whites, theories of "loving the enemy," "hating the enemy," "they're all devils," spook-ism, and other fuzzy images of how the real world worked.

3. Mass organizing techniques: Another fundamental thing that attracted members and mass support to the BPP was its policy of "serving the people." This was a policy of going to the masses, living among them, sharing their burdens and organizing the masses to implement their own solutions to the day-to-day problems that were of great concern to them. By organizing and implementing the desires of the masses, the BPP organized community programs ranging from free breakfast for children to free health clinics, to rent strikes resulting in tenant ownership of their buildings, to liberation school for grade-schoolers, to free clothing drives, to campaigns for community control of schools, community control of police, and campaigns to stop drugs, crime, and police murder and brutality in the various Black colonies across America. For these reasons, and others, the influence of the BPP spread far beyond its actual membership. Not only did the BPP programs teach self-reliance, but years later the government established similar programs such as free school lunch, expanded medicare and day care facilities, and liberalized court procedures for tenant takeovers of poorly-maintained housing—partly if not primarily in order to snuff out the memory of previous similar BPP programs and the principle of self-reliance.

4. Practice of women's equality: Another positive contribution of the BPP was its advocating and practice of equality for women throughout all levels of the organization and in society itself. This occurred at a time when most Black nationalist organizations were demanding that the woman's role be in the home and/or one step behind the Black man, and at a time when the whole country was going through a great debate on the women's liberation issue.

5. Propaganda techniques: The BPP made significant contributions to the art of propaganda. It was very adept at spreading its message and ideas through its newspaper *The Black Panther*, mass rallies, speaking tours, slogans, posters, leaflets, cartoons, buttons, symbols (i.e., the clenched fist), graffiti, political trials, and even funerals. The BPP also spread its ideas through very skillful use of the establishment's TV, radio, and print media. One singular indication, although there are others, of the effectiveness of BPP propaganda techniques is that even today, over a decade later, a large part of the programs shown on TV are still "police stories," and many of the roles available to Black actors are limited to police roles. A lot of this has to do with the overall process of still trying to rehabilitate the image of the police from its devastating exposure during the Panther era, and to prevent the true role of the police in this society from being exposed again.

The Negative Aspects of the BPP Contributions

1. Leadership corrupted: COINTELPRO eventually intimidated and corrupted all three of the BPP's top leaders: Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver. Each, in his own way, caved in to the pressures and began acting in a manner that was designed deliberately to destroy the BPP and to disillusion not only Party members but Afrikan people in America for years to come. COINTELPRO's hopes were that Afrikans in America would be so disillusioned that never again would they trust or follow any Afrikan leader or organization which advocated real solutions to Black oppression.

2. Combined above and underground: This was the most serious structural flaw in the BPP. Party members who functioned openly in the BPP offices, or organized openly in the community by day, might very well have been the same people who carried out armed operations at night. This provided the police with a convenient excuse to make raids on any and all BPP offices or on member's homes, under the pretext that they were looking for suspects, fugitives, weapons, and/or explosives. It also sucked the BPP into the un-winnable position of making stationary defenses of BPP offices. There should have been a clear separation between the above-ground Party and the underground armed apparatus. Also, small military forces should never adopt, as a general tactic, the position of making stationary defenses of offices, homes, buildings, etc.

3. Rhetoric outstripped capabilities: Although the BPP was adept at the art of propaganda and made very good use of its own and the establishment's media, still too many Panthers fell into the habit of making boisterous claims in the public media, or selling "wolf tickets" that they couldn't back up. Eventually, they weren't taken seriously anymore. The press, some of whom were police agents, often had only to stick a microphone under a Panther's nose to make him or her begin spouting rhetoric. This often played into the hands of those who were simply looking for slanderous material to air or to provide possible intelligence information to the police.

4. Lumpen tendencies: It can be safely said that the largest segment of the New York City BPP membership (and probably nationwide) were workers who held everyday jobs. Other segments of the membership were semi-proletariat, students, youths, and lumpen-proletariat. The lumpen tendencies within some members were what the establishment's media (and some party members) played-up the most. Lumpen tendencies are associated with lack of discipline, liberal use of alcohol, marijuana, and curse words, loose sexual morals, a criminal mentality, and rash actions. These tendencies in some Party members provided the media with better opportunities than they would otherwise have had to play up this aspect, and to slander the Party, which diverted public attention from much of the positive work done by the BPP.

5. Dogmatism: Early successes made some Panthers feel that they were the only possessors of absolute truths. Some became arrogant and dogmatic in their dealings with Party members, other organizations, and even the community. This turned people off.

6. Failure to organize economic foundations in the community: The BPP preached socialist politics. It was anti-capitalist and this skewed its concept of building economic foundations in the community. The Party often gave the impression that to engage in any business enterprise was to engage in capitalism and it too-frequently looked with disdain upon the small business people in the community. As a result, the BPP built few businesses which generated income

other than *The Black Panther* newspaper, or which could provide self-employment to its membership and to people in the community. The BPP failed to encourage the Black community to set up its own businesses as a means of building an independent economic foundation which could help break “outsiders” control of the Black community’s economics and move it toward economic self-reliance.

7. TV mentality: The ’60s were times of great flux. A significant segment of the U.S. population engaged in mass struggle. The Black Liberation, Native American, Puerto Rican, Asian, Chicano, anti-war, white revolutionary, and women’s liberation movements were all occurring more or less simultaneously during this era. It appears that this sizable flux caused some Panthers to think that a seizure of state power was imminent or that a revolutionary struggle is like a quick-paced TV program. That is, it comes on at 9 p.m., builds to a crescendo by 9:45, and by 9:55 victory! all in time to make the 10 O’clock News. When it didn’t happen after a few years—that is, Afrikans in the U.S. still were not free, no revolution occurred, and worse the BPP was everywhere on the defensive, taking losses and riddled with dissension—many members became demoralized, disillusioned, and walked away or went back to old lifestyles. They were not psychologically prepared for a long struggle. In hindsight, it appears that the BPP didn’t do enough to root out this TV mentality in some members. But it did in others, which is an aspect to ponder on.

Although the BPP made serious errors it also gained a considerable measure of success and made several significant new contributions to the BLM. The final judgment of history may very well show that in its own way the BPP added the final ingredient to the Black agenda necessary to attain real freedom—armed struggle—and that this was the great turning point which ultimately set the Black Liberation Movement on the final road to victory.