
Black Panther Movement: Integral Force Of Black Power

Historical Context and Development of the Movement

In the decade of the 60s, the United States was immersed in the revolutionary environment of the civil rights movement. The fragrance of the revolution and the continuous attacks against the black community led to the creation of the Black Panther Party.

Black Panther Party founders (Huey Newton and Bobby Seale) met in 1961 while they were studying at Merritt College in Oakland, California. Every year, the college celebrated the "Pioneer Day", which honoured the history of settlers who arrived in California in the 1800s, but they noticed that the role of African Americans in the settling of the American West were never mentioned. So, they decided to create the "Negro History Fact Group", which called on the school to offer classes that covered black history, or as called back then, "Negro history" in America.

The organization was founded in October of 1966 with the name "Black Panther Party for Self-Defence", later simply known as the Black Panther Party. It is said that they chose that name because "the black panther doesn't strike first, but if the aggressor strikes first, then he will attack" (Huey Newton, 1966). The Black Panther Party appeared in the wake of the assassination of black nationalist Malcolm X and after police in San Francisco shot and killed an unarmed black teen named Matthew Johnson. Their main activities involved monitoring police activities in black communities in Oakland and other cities.

One of their main goals was to educate black people on their rights and their right to defend themselves, so Black Panthers felt that violent revolution was the only way to achieve black liberation. In order to achieve liberation, the party called on all blacks to arm themselves for the struggle. This issue caused, in some cases, internal fights within the movement due to some members of the party who were against using violence to reach their goals. The "non-armed" members argued that in order to free all people, they could not act as their oppressors do, but the "armed" members were willing to use whatever it took to achieve their liberation. In that terms we could say that they were trying to change roles with white people intending to be their own masters.

This quote from the book "Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency" by Doug McAdam is a great reflection of the ideology of the movement: "The range of collective action open to a relatively powerless group is normally very small. Its program, its form of action, its very existence is likely to be illegal, hence subject to violent repression. As a consequence, such a group chooses between taking actions which have a high probability of bringing on a violent response (but which have some chance of reaching the group's goals) and taking no action at all (thereby assuring the defeat of the groups goals)."

Black Panthers were part of the larger Black Power Movement, which advocated black pride. In order to organise their own philosophical views and political objectives, Newton and Seale outlined the "Ten-Point Program", in which they called, along with other demands, for an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people, full employment, education that

included African-American history, decent housing and justice for all. Briefly, they wanted to empower black communities economically and culturally.

In order to accomplish point number 5 of the Ten Point Program (“We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.”) the party opened an elementary school in East Oakland. They offered 120 tuition-free classes on math, reading and writing and broader history. This school had also Mexican minorities students. As the party grew, this school began to achieve value between the black community, and it developed to the “Oakland Community Learning Center”. This accomplishment helped to educate many blacks into literacy and taught them their history and culture. These empowerments will lead to a strong sense of self-worth and black pride among young black people. Nowadays we can still appreciate the remains of this black studies legacy in many US’ universities, known as HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities).

They were also interested in giving free healthcare and basic care to the black community, so they opened healthcare clinics referred to as 'medical self-defence' providing black communities with medication and vaccinations. Furthermore, they had their own ambulance services.

They also started the “Free Breakfast for School Children Program”, by which they would cook and serve food to the poor inner-city youth of the area, becoming the central activity of the group. Both initiatives succeed in cleaning up the reputation of the Black Panthers and helped to continue the black civil rights movement by providing food and healthcare to communities that could not afford these basic services.

The party boasted an influential newspaper: “The Black Panther: Black Community News Service”. Its editor was Eldridge Cleaver, who became a very persuasive voice within the movement. While in prison, he wrote a collection of essays called “Soul on Ice” in which he describes his process from being a drug dealer to a revolutionary and his relationship with the politics of America. We could find a close connection of his speech with the one of Frederick Douglass in “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave”, although the figure of Cleaver is very controversial because he admits to have raped white woman as a “revolutionary act”.

Obviously, they come from different historical moments, but their speech is almost the same: white people have been oppressing them in almost every field of their lives and nothing has really changed throughout the years. Cleaver declares that it is hard “to identify as a black soul which has been 'colonized' by an oppressive white society that projects its brief, narrow vision of life as eternal truth.” (Cleaver (1999) Soul on Ice, p. 14). Frederick Douglass begins his book explaining that he does not even know the day he was born, that get us closer to the idea of the lost of identity of black people, who are violently moved away from their roots and culture. Throughout the book, we get to know Frederick and the events that had led him to become an abolitionist. Some people even said that in 1863, he proclaimed in front of an audience that “it is better to die free, than live as a slave”, getting again in contact with the future idea of liberation of Cleaver.

Women in the Black Panther Party.

By most account, the first woman to join the Black Panther Party was Tarika Lewis, a student activist at Oakland Technical High School who rapidly advanced to taking on various leadership roles, such as teaching classes and working on the newspaper. She was not always well received among male members, but she was a very tough woman and had no problem to defy their comrades (as she had good reputation with weapons).

Assata Shakur, a student from the City College of New York, joined the party stating that she had been around other Black nationalist groups but none of them were as concerned on the gender issues as the Black Panther Party:

“The BPP was the most progressive organization at that time [and] had the most positive images in terms of... the position of women in the propaganda... I felt it was the most positive thing that I could do because many of the other organizations at the time were so sexist, I mean to the extreme... There was a whole saturation of the whole climate with this quest for manhood... even though that might be oppressive to you as a human being... For me joining the BPP was one of the best options at the time.” (Charles E. Jones, 1971, p. 294)

Even though her words make the party look as a progressive movement (in terms on gender), the “Free Breakfast for School Children Program” was almost fully developed by women because some members thought that it was “women’s work”. In contrast with those who had those thoughts, women were proud to be the leaders on that task because it helped them to reach a greater number of women who joined the movement. Men were also expected to play an active role in those programs, so a big number of them participated in order to break the ideas established by gender roles.

As women realised some of the male members discriminated them, they asked to educate those men who did not want to be told what to do by women. Women Panthers were experienced discrimination from their own comrades, and they were not willing to allow it longer, so they had to deal with oppression inside their own movement in order to keep fighting against outside’s oppressions.

Emory Douglas, minister of culture of the Black Panther Party, declared in an interview: “We had to deal with the issues of chauvinism in the Black Panther Party by having political education classes, and those brothers who didn’t want to work under women or were using the ‘b-word’--those things that cause the deterioration of party--had to be corrected. Because women demanded that. So, when those brothers did that and refused to listen to sisters, they were required to take orders from sisters to learn to respect them as their comrades.”

These few examples have been used to say that the Black Panther Party was a misogynist organization. Although the sexism was very substantial within the movement, it is true that the organization and the members operated a huge evolution on gender questions over the course of the years.

Connection with Mainstream Movements

Many years after the foundation of the organization, the Black Panthers remain a role model in the struggle for black equality in the USA. Although the violent ideals cannot survive through the years, it is true that the efforts of the member to make a difference led to a strong sense of pride and strength in the black community. In spite of the efforts to end with police brutality and racism against blacks, the USA continues to be a deep xenophobic country and there is still much work to do. As a consequence, contemporary movements such as “Black Lives Matter” have emerged and are fighting against discrimination. Either for better or worse, the Black Panther Party is part of the African American culture today.

As for the issue of discrimination against women, black women have been fighting against sexism from even before the Black Panther Party and will still continue with it. Black women have created feminist movements such as “Afrofeminism” or “Black Feminism” to fight against a system that oppress them for their gender and race.

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