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Continuing the Legacy of the Black Panther

Party or Exploiting It?

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There is a great deal of debate around the purpose of the New Black Panther Party and if they are truly carrying on the legacy of the original BPP. The New BPP claims that the original BPP are their predecessors and that they are simply continuing on their legacy, however, the original Black Panther Party is adamant that they are not associated in any way. The original party, in unison with the Huey Newton Foundation, has even gone as far as to successfully sue the new party for these claims but was not successful in making them change their name. According to the National Archives, the Black Panther Party “was a revolutionary organization with an ideology of black nationalism, socialism, and armed self-defense.”¹ This paper aims to explore the relationship between the two groups by dissecting the New Black Panther’s platform in comparison to the original’s platform to understand how they were influenced. The New Black Panther Party claims to carry on the original legacy of the original party, however, the only ideals that they have in common are “Black Power” and resisting and protesting against police brutality. Although the new party may have begun with the hoping of reviving the original party’s ideologies, once they moved into more extremist territory, they isolated their chances of ever being acknowledged as the successors of the Black Panther Party.

The Black Panther Party, originally named the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, was created in October 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale and it originated out of Oakland, California while they were employed at Merritt College. He joined the Afro-American Association at Merritt where he helped secure the first African American history course at the university, this may have been the catalyst for his interest in social activism and pushed him to create change and bring social justice to his community. Bobby Seale took on the title of

¹ National Archives. (2016, October 18). The Black Panther Party. Retrieved November 25, 2019, from <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/black-power/black-panthers>.

Chairman while Huey Newton became the Minister of Defense.² They created a ten-point party platform in 1966 by asking their community about their needs and what they would want to be changed. Newton was able to gain international support for the party and Oakland was the perfect place for this kind of organization because there was plenty of police brutality to publicly resist and challenge. The organization was active for over a decade, dating from its start in 1966 to its finish in 1982.

Their creation followed shortly after MLK's assassination, which was a causal factor in the ending of support for the nonviolence movement. The Black Panther Party caused a lot of controversy because of their radical ideas about violence being used for resistance and self-defense. A key piece of Malcolm's platform that influenced this group was self-defense and the idea that their rights should be protected by any means necessary. The Black Panther Party's foundation in the Black Power movement was derived from Malcolm X's doctrine. Malcolm X was an African American leader during the Civil Rights Movement and held an important role in the Organization of Afro-American Unity and the Nation of Islam. He was one of the most influential leaders of the Civil Rights Movement because of his advocacy for black power and black nationalism and separatism.

"Black Power" was one of the ideas passed down from Malcolm's doctrine and adopted by the Black Panther Party. "Black Power" refers to the mindset that black people have power over themselves and their destinies. The first of the beliefs mentioned in the Black Panther Party Platform of 1966 was that black people could not be free until they can determine their own destiny, which is rhetoric borrowed from the "Black Power" movement.³ Similarly, the first

² National Archives, The Black Panther Party

³ Black Panther Party, "What We Want. What We Believe." Black Panther Party Platform and Program, (1966).

demand was for them to have the power to determine the destiny of the black community.⁴ The “Black Power” movement was extremely important because it called for black people to reclaim themselves and their independence.

However, these were not their only ideals; the Black Panther Party platform consisted of many different objectives. There is a misconception among the general public that the Black Panther Party was a racist organization with the sole purpose of combatting police brutality and opposing the United States government. The BPP Platform poster from October 1966 showcases the goals and beliefs of the BPP and the platform’s use of language such as “racist government” and “racist military” indicates that the BPP was not keen of this authority figures because of the wronging that they associate them with, which is what fuels the perception of opposition, yet it does not capture the entire essence of the party.⁵ The Black Panther Party was anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and classified themselves as Black Nationalists, which is the complete opposite of the discourse that surrounds the NBPP.

Other points in the party’s platform include reparations, full employment, and better housing. The BPP and their communities state that they believe the government is responsible for providing jobs or income to households. It also states that black Americans want their family’s reparations to be paid because it was promised one-hundred years ago. Lastly, the Black Panther Party reveals that their community does not trust white Americans to give the black community adequately decent housing while also calling for government aid to be available to

⁴ Black Panther Party, “What We Want. What We Believe.”

black homeowners.⁶ They were able to represent their community in the party platform because of the inclusion of their needs and wants.

The Black Panthers also addressed issues that were not explicitly mentioned in their platform like combatting issues of food injustice and health in the black community. The original Black Panthers also extended their resources to help feed hungry children in programs called The Free Breakfast Program for Children and the Survival Programs. Original Black Panthers took necessary steps to better their communities while also fighting national battles. Another survival program that they created was medical self-defense which was characterized by creating their own healthcare systems as well as providing free medical testing for diseases such as sickle cell anemia- which is a disease most common among people from African descent- and HIV/AIDS.⁷ The original Black Panther Party did advocate for self-defense, but they also provided for their communities in ways that they felt the government was never going to.

The New Black Panther Party was created in Dallas Texas in 1989 by Aaron Michaels, following less than a decade behind the demise of the original Black Panther Party. Its purpose of creation was originally to increase the presence of influential black leaders in the community, and more specifically on the Dallas school board, in hopes to secure equality within the school system for black children.⁸ They also had initiatives to reduce drug dealing in black neighborhoods, so it can be surmised that they began with the focus of bettering communities in the same way the original Black Panther Party did. They copied the exact Ten Points platform

⁶ Mulloy, D. J. "New Panthers, Old Panthers and the Politics of Black Nationalism in the United States." *Patterns of Prejudice* 44, no. 3 (2010): 217-38.

⁷ Mulloy, D. J. "New Panthers, Old Panthers and the Politics of Black Nationalism in the United States"

⁸ Mulloy, "New Panthers, Old Panthers and the Politics of Black Nationalism in the United States"

from 1966 almost exactly to broadcast their intentions of becoming the, and better, Black Panther Party. However, by the 1990s their tactics began to turn extreme and whatever support they could have gotten from the original party went out of the window. They went from having a broad agenda to only publicly addressing issues of police brutality and violence. They had no community outreach programs to better the lives of their communities, the closest that they came to community outreach was when they created security details for the college students whose lives were at stake after murder allegations in Pennsylvania in 2001.⁹

According to Southern Poverty Law Center, which is a civil rights monitoring group, “the New Black Panther Party is a virulently racist and antisemitic organization whose leader encouraged violence against whites, Jews, and law enforcement officers.”¹⁰ The original party was also accused of being against whites and law enforcement because of the language in their Ten Point platform, but any violence that ensued around them was out of self-defense. Furthermore, they rarely went public and bashed white people because they were more concerned about raising their people up. Bobby Seale said that it was impossible to fight racism with racism and that they were not going to be revenge nationalists. However, the new party did not operate in the same way.

NBPP Party Chairman Khalid Abdul Muhammad once openly said that “there are no good crackers, and if you find one, kill him before he changes.”¹¹ Another prominent leader in the NBPP King Samir Shabazz said, “We keep begging white people for freedom! No wonder we not free! Your enemy cannot make you free, fool! You want freedom? You going to have to

⁹ Mulloy, "New Panthers, Old Panthers and the Politics of Black Nationalism in the United States"

¹⁰ SPLC. (n.d.), New Black Panther Party, Retrieved from <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/new-black-panther-party>.

¹¹ SPLC. (n.d.), New Black Panther Party

kill some crackers! You going to have to kill some of their babies,” in a National Geographic documentary in 2009.¹² A quote that proves religious intolerance within the NBPP comes from Malik Zulu Shabazz who publicly said, “Kill every goddamn Zionist in Israel! Goddamn little babies, goddamn old ladies! Blow up Zionist supermarkets!” These comments, while there are many more, fuel the rhetoric about the NBPP being a radical hate group because they are extremely violent towards adults and children. They are also a key component in the reasoning behind the denial of any affiliation between the two parties by the original Black Panther Party because these views do not represent their party or their ideals.

The Dr. Huey P. Newton foundation put out a statement addressing the claims of an association between the parties, it is as follows. “There Is No New Black Panther Party’, it read. The NBPP had ‘no legitimate claim on the Party’s name’, it argued, because they ‘were never members of the Black Panther Party’, and they were denigrating that name by ‘promoting concepts absolutely counter to the revolutionary principles on which the [original] Party was founded’. The Black Panther Party ‘never presumed itself to be above the people’, nor did it operate on the basis of ‘hatred of white people’, the statement continued, and the NBPP’s claims about teaching ‘the black community about armed self-defense’ were both reactionary and arrogant.”¹³ This quote explains that there is no correlation between the original Black Panther Party and the so-called new one because they are simply exploiting their hard work and legacy to further their own agenda because using this name gets them the media attention they desire without having to put forth the effort to continue on the true legacy. Instead, they are actually

¹² SPLC. (n.d.), New Black Panther Party

¹³ “There Is No New Black Panther Party: An Open Letter From the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation”. Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation.

tainting the legacy by attaching the original party's name to their racist views and extremist tactics.

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