

## **Revolutionaries First: The Black Panther Party and Nationalism**

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### **Introduction**

In her introduction to Huey Newton's *To Die for the People*, Elaine Brown [former Black Panther Party (BPP) chairwoman] states that "[i]t is clear the question of national sovereignty is nearly a moot point, and inevitable that it shall be, as Huey foresaw in his theory of Intercommunalism..." (2009: xxi-xxii); however, as the 2016 Brexit vote, Donald Trump's presidency, and the debates around Scottish independence have shown, Brown and Newton seem to have been premature in their dismissal of questions regarding national sovereignty. Newton and Brown's thoughts on the issue no doubt stem from the Black Panther Party's own eventual shift away from advocating for nationalism. While the Party did originate as a Black nationalist organization, and many of the organization's membership remained Black nationalists throughout their time in the Party (Hilliard and Cole 1993: 319), the Black Panther Party leadership would come to regard the organization as intercommunalists and reject nationalism by 1971.

Despite this rejection of Black nationalism by key Party members, the Black Panther Party is still considered by many to be a Black nationalist organization. Writing during the Party's early days, Draper makes the argument that this legacy could be attributed to the BPP's status as an exclusively Black organization (1970: 110-111). But does allowing only Black members mean that the Party was a Black nationalist organization? I argue that to better determine the Black Panther Party's relationship to Black nationalism it is better to analyze the Party's goals, motivations, and stances rather than simply analyzing the organization's racial makeup.

Founded in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in Oakland, California and lasting until 1982, the Black Panther Party would go on to become one of the most impactful organizations to come out of the movements of the 1960s. Combining a form of Black nationalism that advocated armed community self-defense with the writings of Marx and Lenin (Newton 2009b: 200), the BPP would grow to include an estimated 5,000 members across 40 chapters and branches at its peak (Jeffries and Nissim-Sabat 2010: ix; Brame and Shriver 2013: 501).

The Party's unique combination of Black Power ideology and Marxist-Leninist theory that also included influences from Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung was facilitated primarily through the work of Newton (Jeffries 2002: x). This combination can make the Party's ideology difficult to classify and is complicated further by the Party's belief that one should always adapt their ideology to fit the current conditions (Hilliard and Cole 1993: 319). Nevertheless, scholars have identified four theoretical phases that the Party underwent which showcases this philosophy of adaptation and combination of a variety of theoretical backgrounds: Black nationalism, revolutionary nationalism, internationalism, and intercommunalism.

By examining these four phases through a nationalism studies lens, this paper will argue that the Black Panther Party should not be regarded as a Black nationalist organization. Rather, the Party should be considered amongst a broader coalition of global revolutionary movements that sought to implement a communist society and an erasure of all national boundaries and states. However, this does not mean that the Black Panther Party should be completely removed from the Black nationalist tradition. Making sure that the needs of Black communities across the United States were met remained central to the Party's aims, even as they shifted away from calling for a separate Black nation-state. By seeking to institute a communist society, the Black Panther Party

hoped autonomy would be gained for both the American Black community and minoritized communities across the world.

This paper's first section will define and examine theories regarding nationalism, the nation, and the state. These concepts will be analyzed through three perspectives. The first will be from nationalism scholars, such as Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson. The second will be that of Black nationalism scholars, particularly the work of Wilson Jeremiah Moses. The third aspect will be exploring how the Panthers themselves defined these terms. This paper's second section will then examine the four phase theoretical trajectory that the Panthers underwent over the course of the organization. While there are several aspects in which to examine how the Party's ideology was applied on the ground, section three will explore the domestic and international multiracial coalitions formed by the BPP that were outside of the Black nationalist tradition.

### **Section One: Theoretical Overview**

In *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner defines nationalism as a political principle that seeks to ensure that the state (the political unit) and nation (the national unit) are congruent (2006: 1). While this definition appears straightforward, this congruence between the state and nation is rarely achieved when looking at case studies. One example of this definition's practical weakness that relates to this paper's research is that, while some Black nationalists in the United States have sought this congruence by pursuing the establishment of a separate nation-state (usually in either Ethiopia or Liberia), there are also Black nationalists that primarily desire an increase in the Black community's cultural autonomy within the larger US state. Further still, there are Black nationalists who prioritize increasing the Black community's economic independence via Black capitalism.

These two examples appear to not meet Gellner's definition of nationalism because they do not strive for the congruence of the state and nation. However, the individuals involved, as well as outside commentators, would still argue that these are indeed forms of nationalism. So, how do we square Gellner's definition of nationalism with the self-identification of Black nationalists?

### **Defining Terms**

First, because they are crucial to both Gellner's definition and provide clarity about the aims of Black nationalists, the terms nation and state should be clarified. Beginning with the "state," Gellner builds from Weber's definition and defines the state as the institution or set of institutions that are primarily concerned with enforcing social order. Therefore, wherever enforcement agencies exist, such as police forces or court systems, so too exists a state (2006:4). As nationalists primary aim is to ensure that the political and the national units coincide according to Gellner's previous definition, a primary goal of nationalists is to gain state control and ensure that this congruency becomes a reality (Breuilly 2001: 32).

Because it is viewed as the ultimate enforcer, the state becomes the political body that enforces and maintains a sovereign nation's boundary. Sometimes this may mean that the nation and state are singular i.e., the United States, or that a nation is a member of a multi-national state i.e., Scotland's position within the United Kingdom. Regardless, control over or say in the state is always viewed as a key component of national sovereignty. But what exactly is a "nation"?

For many scholars, the nation fulfills a facilitating role between the state and that state's citizenry. This can be done either by facilitating integration with the national culture (Eriksen 2010: 127) or by cementing a bond between society and state (McCrone 1998: 88-89). This is a circular process in which the nation defines the state, but the state also defines the nation.

There are also the aspects of self-determination and territorial separation. Speaking of Black nationalism's classical period, Moses states that a nation comes into existence when a group which views themselves as historically bounded together seeks to establish a sovereign state through the acquisition of territory that they have historical or sentimental connections to (1996: 4). Guibernau also highlights the importance of territory in her definition that a nation is, "a human group that is conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future, and claiming the right to rule itself" (2001: 243). So, while self-determination and territorial control are important to demarcate nationhood, there is also a cultural aspect that remains important. These definitions of nation and state lie at the heart of understanding how nationalism is defined.

As Gellner holds that nationalism is a political theory, this paper will examine political explanations of nationalism, rather than cultural for example, as this political aspect of nationalism is most relevant to understanding nationalism and how it relates to the Black Panther Party. For Breuilly, nationalism refers to political movements that either seek or exercise state power in defense of the nation (1993: 2). Since the nation-state is now viewed as the natural organizing principle of the world (Moses 1996: 4), it has become difficult for political parties to distance themselves from nationalism, whether in actions or language.

If the nation-state is now the default lens through which politics functions, can movements striving to end national borders and create a stateless society, such as the Black Panther Party, realistically be successful? Can they even an organization like this even truly exist? Or will political movements striving for some sort of internationalism always fall back into nationalist dialogues and activities? The Black Panther Party struggled with these questions throughout the organization's existence, as will be detailed in Section 2. First, however, some differing aspects

between the Panthers and other Black nationalist organizations will be highlights to make the case that the Panthers should not continue to be classified as a Black nationalist organization.

### **Black Nationalism Overview**

This political definition of nationalism presents difficulties when discussing American Black nationalism as there have been Black nationalists who also pursue economic and cultural self-determination, especially during the post-World War Two period (Robinson 2001: 2). In addition to challenging the previous definition of nationalism, this variety also makes Black nationalism itself difficult to define and has led to little academic consensus regarding the term (Newman 2018: 2). Attempting to capture its multitudes, Newman defines Black nationalism as, “an inclination or action by African Americans to improve their condition, whether political, economic, cultural, or psychological, collectively as a people through an ethnoracially conceived identity and program that seeks some measure of self-determination and autonomy that may, but does not necessarily, include statehood” (2018: 7).

The primary way in which scholars have sought to make sense of Black nationalism has been to divide these movements into a classical period (roughly the 1700s-1920s) and a modern period (post-World War Two). While the classical period is marked by a desire to establish an independent Black nation-state in control of a territory and with sufficient economic and military power (Moses 1996: 1-2; Robinson 2001: 2), the definition for the modern period is broader. In addition to those seeking an independent nation-state, the modern period also includes self-identified nationalists that worked to establish Black institutions, such as universities, and political parties that did seek to work within the US state and not to establish their own independent nation-state (Robinson 2001: 2).

Organizing around an ethnoracial identity makes Black nationalism unique to the study of nationalism because few nationalist movements are as explicit about organizing around a racial identity. By the term Black, Black nationalists primarily mean someone who is either recognized or identified as having ancestry among sub-Saharan African populations or as someone who possesses physical traits commonly associated with Black African ancestry. The term Black also includes those who can claim a connection with the political interests of African Americans or other Black peoples (Moses 1996: 3-4).

It is important to note that this racial identity is not always individually chosen and can often be imposed by others. This has historically been the case in the United States when it comes to Blackness. Because of their historically oppressed status as a racial minority in the US, Black nationalists, particularly those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have adapted traditional nationalist tenets to fit their own situation and use these common experiences of racial oppression as a basis for national identities and goals (Moses 1996: 5; DeBurg 1997: 4-5).

### **Nation, State, and the Black Panther Party**

The primacy given to race by Black nationalists is one of the main points of contention between the Black Panther Party and other Black nationalist organizations of the period. The Black Panthers strongly disagreed with organizing solely on racial grounds and felt that blindly supporting someone just because they were Black, such as Black police officers, was a racist and detrimental position for the Black community to have (Newton 2009a: 166). This is not to say that the BPP did not recognize the importance of race. The Panthers did identify as a Black organization and acknowledged that connecting with a larger Black heritage would give both the Party and the Black community a sense of communal strength and history, but the Party also felt that a full-scale

return to an African inspired culture could prove detrimental to the long-term goals of initiating a societal revolution (Newton 2009b: 73, 91).

This dispute played out most notably in the Party's distinction between revolutionary nationalism and reactionary, or cultural, nationalism. As the Black Panther Party began transitioning away from a traditional model of Black nationalism around 1968, they came to regard themselves as revolutionary nationalists. While the Party still advocated for the establishment of a Black nation-state as a solution to the racial oppression experienced during this period, the Black Panthers began to view capitalism and racism as intertwined with one another and that one could not be resolved without resolving the other. Therefore, to be a revolutionary nationalist, one had to advocate for the creation of a nation based on a socialist economy and not just upon racial characteristics.

In comparison, reactionary/cultural nationalists advocated for a return to an African heritage that the Panthers believed to be nonexistent because slavery had severed ties with people's traditional African homelands. Consequently, the Panthers felt that reactionary/cultural forms of Black nationalism were only looking towards the past and did not have a political philosophy that allowed them to actively change their circumstances (Newton 2009b: 90-91). After a shooting between the Black Panther Party and Maulana Karenga's cultural nationalist US Organization in January 1969 in which Black Panthers John Huggins and Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter were killed, the BPP began to view cultural nationalism as an outright threat to the progression and continued existence of both the Black community and Black Panther Party themselves (Hilliard and Cole 1993: 238-239).

These violent encounters between the Black Panther Party and cultural nationalist organizations could partly explain why the Panthers became averse to labeling themselves as

nationalists during the Party's later stages. If they viewed organizations like US as nationalist and were coming into constant conflict with them, it must have seemed that nationalism was directly opposed to what the Black Panther Party was trying to do. Common assumptions of nationalism as a regressive philosophy and the BPP's own experiences with violent nationalist groups must have driven them away from labeling themselves as a nationalist organization as the Party progressed, even though the Black Panther Party continued to prioritize the Black community and began inheriting nationalist state structures as Party members were elected to public office in the early 1970s.

Regardless of these future events, it appears that the Party did support the establishment of a separate Black nation-state during the Party's early stages as they argued that separatism was a moral right for all. The idea of a separate nation-state also appealed to Newton early on. He believed that separation from the United States would be the only way for Black Americans to protect and preserve their subculture while controlling their communal destiny (Jeffries 2002: 65).

As the Party shifted towards a more Marxist-Leninist position, they abandoned the pursuit of a separate Black nation-state as they did not foresee a situation in which the capitalist expansion of the United States would allow this nation-state to be successful. They maintained that it would only be after Black nationalists shifted their focus towards overthrowing the ruling capitalist class that a Black nation-state could move forward. However, in line with Marx and Engels (2008: 23-24), the Party hypothesized that the creation of a socialist society would ultimately alleviate the conditions that produced calls for nationalism (Newton 2009b: 197-198).

We can see how the language that the Black Panther Party utilized shifted overtime as they shifted away from a Black nationalist position. While they had consistently framed their struggle through the language of the 1960s by using terms such as "freedom," "power," and "the people"

from the beginning, the Black Panther Party expanded the meaning of these terms to include people outside of the Black community. As the BPP began forming coalitions with non-Black groups and acknowledged that a majority of Americans were oppressed by the capitalist system (Newton 2009b: 152), the Panthers adapted their usage of these terms to encompass all of these oppressed populations.

The Party never defined “the people” much beyond referring to those oppressed by the capitalist classes; however, their usage of “freedom” and “power” was less vague. During their nationalist stages, “freedom” meant that Black institutions would be established in the form of co-operatives to serve the Black community and ensure that profit remained in the community. Later, as intercommunalists, the BPP advocated for the creation of co-ops in every ethnic community so that communities throughout the world could work together in a “spirit of mutual aid” (Newton 2009a: 178, 182).

To establish these co-ops, the Black Panthers needed to gain power, which they defined as having the ability to describe and manipulate situations for a desired outcome. For the Black community this meant that Black people would control how their communities were governed in a way that they had previously been unable to (Hilliard and Cole 1993: 116; Newton 2009b: 99).

This shift in language was a result of the Party’s shift towards Newton’s theory of intercommunalism that occurred during the early 1970s. Intercommunalism was Newton’s theory for explaining how the United States military could be active around the globe while militarized police departments could repress domestic dissent. The theory’s central tenet was the hypothesis that the US had become an empire and that US imperialism was so pervasive that the national sovereignty of other countries had been invalidated. Accordingly, Newton believed that there were no longer nations but rather there existed “communities” (Newton 2009b: 31-32).

Crucial to understanding Newton's theory of intercommunalism is to define how he defined the term "nation," in comparison to the definitions above, and how Newton differentiated this from "community." During Newton's 1970 speech at the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention where he first introduced intercommunalism he stated that a nation loses its characteristics of nationhood and no longer be classified as a nation if it is incapable of protecting itself from outside influence (2009b: 40). In a speech given that same year at Boston College, Newton stated that a nation should have "...economic independence, cultural determination, control of the political institutions, territorial integrity, and safety" (2009b: 31). The importance of territorial control would be reiterated in a 1971 essay in which Newton states that "[t]he most common definition for a nation...is a group of human beings who have in common their own land or territory, economic system, culture..., language, etc." (2009b: 210).

As intercommunalism developed further, Newton came to believe that the term community seemed a more apt description for these nations that had lost their sovereignty. He defined a community as organized around a comprehensive collection of institutions which serve the people that live there, labeled as "the state." Newton believed that nations were free of this institutional apparatus and that a nation's residents controlled their national destiny without influence from this larger political structure (2009b: 33).

Newton's distinction between nation and community does not come without conceptual problems. First, Newton's insistence on the ability of a nation to maintain internal control within its borders is more in line with the previously mentioned definitions of a state rather than those of a nation. This conceptual oversight may result from the interconnection between the terms nation and state discussed previously and the difficulties in separating the two concepts, but what we are left with is an under theorization of the state that leads to conceptual confusion in Newton's

distinction between nations and communities. Second, Anderson's definition of the nation as an imagined political community (2016: 6-7) shows that nations and communities are not so easily separated.

The Black Panther Party had a philosophy to always be adapting to situations as they were presented. This can be partly attributed to the state repression that the Party faced but can also be credited to many Party members learning the works of Marx, Fanon, and Mao through the Party's Political Education classes as the Party progressed (Hilliard and Cole 1993: 319).

It is unsurprising then that theoretical contradictions would sometimes arise within the Party, such as Newton's inaccurate use of the word nation according to nationalism scholars. It is important to note, however, that the field of nationalism studies was nonexistent during the time of the Black Panther Party. So, while it would be easy to say that Newton incorrectly conflated nation with state, it is better to not dwell too long on this and instead look at how the Panthers put their conceptual understandings into practice, which will be the focus of the following two sections.

## **Section Two: The Theoretical Shifts of the Black Panther Party**

This section will examine the theoretical shifts that the Black Panther Party underwent regarding their positions on Black nationalism, the creation of a Black nation, and eventual shift to the positions of internationalism and intercommunalism. Scholars have identified four theoretical phases of the Party related to the BPP's position on nationalism: Black nationalism, revolutionary nationalism, internationalism, and intercommunalism. It should be noted that the boundaries between these phases were permeable and that issues being dealt with during one phase would often continue to be discussed in a future phase, such as a focus on the Black community. As Huey Newton has been identified as the Party's primary theoretician (Jeffries 2002: x), the

theoretical changes discussed in this chapter will largely deal with his own philosophical shifts on the matters. This is not to say that other Party members like Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale, and Elaine Brown did not contribute ideas. It is merely that Newton's role as primary theoretician within the Party should be recognized.

### **Black Nationalism 1966-1968**

Inspired by the writings of Malcolm X and informed by the experiences of Bobby Seale and Huey Newton's participation in Donald Warden's Afro-American Association (AAA), the Black Panther Party was founded as a Black nationalist organization. During this foundational period of the Party, one of the more notable actions that the Panthers took was to call for a United Nations supervised vote to be held throughout the Black community in the United States to determine if Black Americans wanted to separate from the US and create their own nation-state that would receive diplomatic recognition (Newton 2009b: 95, 161-163; Bloom and Martin 2013: 122). However, support for the vote never gained traction and the Party eventually shifted away from calling for nation-state status (Bloom and Martin 2013: 123).

Towards the end of 1968, the Panthers began prioritizing the end of capitalism instead of creating a separate nation-state (Robinson 2001: 58). The Party also began viewing the Black community as a colony rather than a nation (Jeffries 2002: 67). Those in the Black Power movement that described the condition of the Black community via the internal colonization lens did so based on conditions of economic and physical exploitation. However, equating the Black American community to other examples of colonies did not prove to be a perfect comparison. A primary problem with this comparison is that colonization usually implies a historical ownership of the land, which the Black community did not have because of slavery (Draper 1970: 121).

To resolve the contradictions presented by the issue of historical connection to the land, and because of the geographical displacement of Black communities, the Black Panther Party believed that the Black community should be described as a “dispersed colony.” They then argued that Black communities throughout America should unite with colonized communities across the globe to fight for their right of self-determination (Tyner 2006: 113).

For the Black Panther Party, this shift towards the internal colonial model instead of a Black nation-state was largely due to a recognition of the limits placed on the Black community by the United States government. As mentioned in section 1, the BPP believed that the US, as a result of the country’s imperialist policies, would not allow for a separate Black nation-state to be economically or culturally independent and successful (Jeffries 2002: 65, 67). The idea that US imperialism was so pervasive that other nations had lost their ability to exist independently would greatly inform the Newton’s theory of intercommunalism that will be discussed below.

Transitioning away from a Black nationalist position did present problems for the Black Panthers and created tensions between the Party and the Black community, other Black nationalist groups, and even within the Party itself that would continue throughout the Party’s future theoretical shifts. A primary criticism of this initial shift was that the Party was moving away from tangible solutions for the Black community and towards more theoretical analysis that had no real-world impact for people (Umoja 2013: 14-15; Tyner 2006: 113, 115-116).

Regardless of these tensions and criticisms, the Black Panther Party had always had a tenuous relationship to Black nationalist ideology. For example, Eldridge Cleaver was selected to represent the multiracial Peace and Freedom Party (PFP) during the 1968 presidential campaign (Bloom and Martin 2013: 110). Hayes and Kiene mark this alliance between the BPP and the PFP as the first definitive signs that the Panthers were transitioning away from what they label as a

“quasi-nationalist” organization and towards becoming a revolutionary nationalist organization (2005: 166).

Despite the criticisms, partnerships with White organizations such as the PFP proved beneficial to the Panthers. The Panthers would never have successfully been able to launch campaigns like the “Free Huey” campaign in December 1967 without forming these cross-racial alliances and going against mainstream Black nationalist thought (Jeffries 2002: 25). These coalitions, both domestic and international, that the Black Panther Party built will be looked at in more detail in Section 3.

### **Revolutionary Nationalism 1969-1970**

Revolutionary nationalism is the second theoretical phase of the Black Panther Party and is directly tied to socialism because the Party believed that revolutionary nationalism’s end goal should be to put the people in power. The Party’s distinction between revolutionary and reactionary nationalisms was briefly discussed in Section 1. This section will examine the actions that the BPP took that highlight this distinction and how these actions are indicative of their evolving stance on nationalism.

This period in the development of the Party saw them attempting to resolve the theoretical contradictions that stemmed from their original Black nationalist position and their emerging sense of internationalism that was rooted in socialism (Hayes and Kiene 2005: 164). Simultaneously, a recognition of the connections between American empire, racism, and capitalism led the Panthers to craft an analysis of exploitation that accounted for both race and class. They concluded that only the destruction of US capitalism could dismantle racism, giving way for a path towards Black self-determination (Jeffries 2002: 69-70, 72-73).

Despite this phase of the Black Panther Party being short lived, there were a few key developments that took place. First, the Panthers organized the National Committee to Combat Fascism in July 1969, which marked a definite transition of the Party towards a more class-oriented position (Hayes and Kiene 2005: 167). Second, Newton called for the creation of a socialist government during the 1970 Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in Washington D.C. (Jeffries 2002: 71). Third, the Party revised Point 3 of their Platform to read: “[w]e want an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our Black community” whereas the original version had centered race and stated, “[w]e want an end to the robbery by the white man...” (Jeffries 2002: 71).

The Party's shift towards revolutionary nationalism also came at an important time in the formation of a broader left-wing coalition. Growing opposition to the Vietnam War allowed the Party to step into a vanguard role amongst these opposition groups. Inspired by Lenin, the title of “Vanguard Party” meant that Black Panther Party members saw themselves as disciplined, full-time revolutionaries and that the Party should maintain rigid entry standards so as to educate communities in the “correct political revolutionary ideology” (Clemons and Jones 2013: 25, 29).

As the Vanguard Party, the Black Panthers viewed their role in the freedom struggle as that of leadership. By inhabiting this role, it was their place to tackle domestic instances of poverty and hunger while confronting the US capitalist system abroad (Newton 2009b: 192). The Party also used this leadership role to grow their support base, particularly amongst White revolutionaries (Jeffries 2002: 72). This growing multiracial support will be discussed in Section 3.

### **Revolutionary Internationalism 1970-1971**

With the opening of their Algerian office on 13 September 1970, the Black Panther Party began abandoning any form of nationalism as a potential solution for the Black community's

problems and towards a policy of internationalism (Hayes and Kiene 2005: 170). This period of internationalism saw the Party combine their pursuit of revolutionary socialism with the politics of Third Worldism (Narayan 2019: 61-62). As the Black Panther Party continued broadening their theoretical outlook along socialist lines, they began connecting struggles fighting domestic colonialism with struggles against American imperialism abroad. This primarily involved making connections with movements, organizations, and governments in countries such as China, North Korea, and North Vietnam.

Recent Black Power mobilizations in countries such as Canada, England, and Australia, and the decolonial struggles of the previous decades provided an opportunity for the BPP to pursue their internationalist agenda (Jeffries 2002: 74). This increased activity brought global issues to the attention of Panther leadership and provided opportunities for international alliances that would raise the credibility of the Party. By maintaining global alliances, the Black community in the US would increase in numerical strength when combating American imperialism (Jeffries 2002: 75-76).

The Party's recognition that the US had become an empire is crucial to understanding both the Party's stance on nationalism and internationalism for two reasons. First, while the Party no longer advocated for nationalism themselves, they continued to defend the right of developing countries to claim nationhood for themselves, so long as this fight for national self-determination was internationalist in nature. Newton argued that nationalism could still prove a beneficial strategy if it were rooted in anti-imperialism; however, if a nationalist movement was not simultaneously anti-imperialist then it was nationally chauvinistic and went against the Panthers' goal of eradicating national borders and should not be supported (Newton 2009b: 182, 202).

This became a crucial point of departure between the Black Panther Party and Pan-Africanist movements. While the Party's internationalism was compatible with Pan-Africanism, the BPP saw many pan-Africanist movements as failing to advocate for the eradication of national borders (Hayes and Kiene 2005: 170).

Second, viewing the United States as an empire also affected how the Black Panthers related to domestic Black nationalist movements. While the Party still supported Black nationalist movements like the Republic of New Africa, they maintained that a Black nation would not be guaranteed freedom because of the continued expansion of US capitalism, as previously mentioned. They cited the continued involvement of North American and European powers in African countries even after the decolonization period as an example (Robinson 2001: 67; Newton 2009b: 95-96).

The Black Panthers also began pushing against Black nationhood on a historical basis during this period. Newton argued that the effects of the slave trade had removed Black Americans' historical ties to Africa economically, geographically, and culturally. Newton concluded that this lack of connection meant that Black Americans should look towards the future rather than attempting to rediscover a lost past (Jeffries 2002: 75; Newton 2009b: 182).

### **Intercommunalism 1971-1982**

Intercommunalism is the final theoretical stage of the Black Panther Party and is credited as first being introduced during the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in September 1970 (Hayes and Kiene 2005: 170). Although the groundwork for this theory was already present during earlier phases of the Party, particularly the internationalist phase, this does not mean the Party's rank-and-file membership readily accepted intercommunalism when it was fully adopted as the Party line. In fact, there is evidence that the adoption of this theory further

exacerbated previous theoretical disagreements within the Party (Hilliard and Cole 1993: 321-322). Because of these disagreements, the theory of intercommunalism is almost exclusively attributed to Newton, while previous phases saw theoretical input from others in the Party.

Intercommunalism is the idea that US imperialism has transformed the geopolitical landscape to such an extent that the sovereignty of international borders no longer exists. As a result, nations have been reduced to nothing more than a collection of integrated communities. This shift in geopolitics was a result of American corporations economically dominating communities while the American military kept global order and enforced American economic and political interests (Brown 1994: 280-281; Brown 2009: xix-xx; Newton 2009b: 32, 213).

Newton identified two opposing types of intercommunalist. The first is that of reactionary intercommunalism, represented by American corporations. Reactionary intercommunalism was characterized by the usage of the world's technological advancements and increased interdependence for the sole benefit of the global capitalist class. As such, the world became increasingly connected by and for the needs of the ruling class. The ruling class then used their position of authority to control the local institutions of communities to such an extent that these institutions no longer served the local populations. This economic domination was then enforced by the US military abroad and through law enforcement domestically (Brown 2009: xx; Newton 2009b: 32). Newton also cites the increased development of mass media and transportation systems as aids to ensure that reactionary intercommunalists gained a foothold in communities across the world (2009b: 35).

The second form of intercommunalist, revolutionary intercommunalism, relies upon these same technologies and techniques but utilizes them with the intent of creating a nationless and stateless society. The Panthers labeled themselves as such and believed themselves as the leaders

of this push for revolutionary intercommunalism (Brown 2009: xx; Newton 2009b: 32, 210, 213). Newton's theory of intercommunalism acted as a synthesis of the Party's different theoretical phases covered in this section.

### **Conclusion**

The Black Panther Party's call for a UN supervised vote on Black nationhood and their focus on the unique experiences of Black Americans shows the impact that Black nationalism had on the Party and places the Party within this tradition (Hayes and Kiene 2005: 162). There is debate, however, about just how much the Party supported the creation of a Black nation-state. Therefore, the BPP's focus on the Black community should be recognized as more of a desire to end the exploitation of the Black community from capitalism and police rather than full support of nationhood. Thus, even in the Party's early stages we can see theoretical distinctions between the Panthers and the Black nationalist tradition. These distinctions were highlighted further when the Party stopped calling for a Black nation-state and began advocating for socialism as a revolutionary nationalist organization.

This sense of revolutionary nationalism was connected with international solidarity towards nationalist movements abroad as the Party began to conceive of the Black community more as a colony than a separate nation. The Panthers related the Black colony in America to colonies in the "Third World" from the point that both were being colonized by the United States (Jeffries 2002: 75-76). The dismantling of American imperialism would end the need for national liberation struggles because the colonized would no longer struggle against an imperialist force (Newton 2009b: 202-203).

The final theoretical stage of the Party was that of intercommunalism. The Panthers no longer saw the struggles of Black Americans and colonized communities as separate. Both

conflicts had roots in the expansion of American imperialism. The Black Panther Party stepped into the role of Vanguard party while implementing a broad range of community programs to meet the needs of exploited communities, primarily the urban Black population, and formed successful multiracial coalitions. These coalitions will be the focus of section 3.

### **Section Three: The Panthers and Coalition Building**

To successfully bridge the gap between domestic and international issues, the Panthers relied on forming and maintaining alliances, particularly with White organizations. While forming alliances in the Black nationalist tradition was not unheard of, during the Black Power era most Black nationalist organizations refused to work with White activists because they saw White sympathy towards the Black cause as a fleeting thing. The Black Panther Party broke with this mindset by maintaining high-profile alliances with White organizations such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Peace and Freedom Party (PFP).

While the Black Panther Party was formed during a time in which people felt that a more radical approach was necessary, the Panthers did not agree with the conclusion that White allies should be completely rejected. As the civil rights movement was giving way to more radical organizations, the Black Panthers were also beginning to incorporate this more confrontational approach with a socialist, specifically Marxist-Leninist, ideology. As a result, the Party was just as influenced by the tenets of Black nationalism as they were by the works of Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and Kim Il Sung when it came to their revolutionary philosophy and pursuit of self-determination for the Black community in the US (Clemons and Jones 2013: 27-30).

This mixture of influences would give the BPP an international outlook that would, according to Kathleen Cleaver, allow the Panthers to see the condition of Black Americans as resulting from the same racist and imperialist policies of the US that victimized people in Africa,

Asia, and Latin America from the very beginning of the Party (Clemons and Jones 2013: 27). This sense of international solidarity would guide the alliances that the Black Panthers sought to create to push for a global socialist revolution and not just the improvement of Black Americans. The first section of this chapter will look at the international alliances and organizations that formed either in conjunction with the Black Panther Party or were inspired by the Party's activities. The second section will then examine the domestic alliances that the Black Panthers formed.

### **International Coalitions**

There are a few key aspects to how the Black Panther Party built international alliances. First, several international organizations formed independently of the US-based Black Panther Party but styled themselves rhetorically and organizationally on the actions of the US Panthers. Second, the BPP reached out to other revolutionary movements operating globally, notably those in Vietnam, North Korea, and China. And third, the Black Panthers established an international chapter in Algiers.

While the Black Panther Party would only establish one formal international chapter in Algeria, the Party did inspire the creation of grassroots organizations across the world. Some of these organizations included the Black Beret Cadre in Bermuda, the Black Panther Party of Israel, the Dalit Panthers in India, and the Black Panther Movement in England. These organizations were founded throughout the period from 1968 to 1987 (Clemons and Jones 2013: 23), with some of these organizations even predating the Algerian chapter.

While the tactics used by these international groups were informed by their local circumstances, they were largely guided by the goals, community programs, and style of the US Black Panther Party. By following the example set out by the US Panthers, these international organizations embodied a similar spirit of community service and resistance (Angelo 2009: 18-19;

Clemons and Jones 2013: 26); however, these groups had little connection with the US BPP because the US-based group had not yet developed the institutional framework needed to internationalize its activities by 1968 when many of these international organizations began (Angelo 2009: 22-23).

The first of these international organizations to form outside of the United States was the British Black Panther Movement (BBPM) that existed from 1968 to 1972 and had its foundations in the British Black Power Movement. From 1967 to 1968, the British Black Power Movement began using symbols, slogans, and demands similar to those of the US Black Panther Party until members of the British Black Power Movement split off and began identifying themselves as the British Black Panther Movement (Angelo 2009: 18-19). The British Black Panthers conducted community programs, such as organizing events at the Oval House in South London and leading political education classes, similar to those conducted by the US Panthers (Angelo 2009: 26; Clemons and Jones 2013: 25).

In addition to these community focused activities, another commonality between the British Black Panthers and the US Black Panther Party was the presence of repression by the police and other state bodies. In the case of the British Black Panthers, police suspicion of Black British communities led to increased surveillance and animosity between the two groups. This is reflected in a 1963 report by the Home Office that complained of perceived West Indian immigrants' refusal to assimilate while demanding equal opportunities and treatment. This animosity would lead to several clashes between the BBPM similar to those between US Panthers and police (Angelo 2009: 23-27, 29). As police repression continued, the BBPM was eventually able to mobilize Black British communities around the issue of police brutality and repression (Clemons and Jones 2013: 25).

The influence of the US Black Panthers went beyond international organizations adopting similar rhetorical and structural patterns. Some of the strongest ties that the US Panthers made were with revolutionary armies operating in the Asian, South American, and African continents. During the internationalist phase of the Party, they formed alliances with groups such as the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam (Narayan 2019: 61).

In 1970, Newton would even offer an undetermined number of Panthers to the NLF. He justified the proposition by stating that the NLF and the Panthers were both fighting American imperialism in a conflict that did not recognize national boundaries. By offering these troops, Newton and the Black Panthers were recognizing the need of international alliances and seeking to solidify their position as leaders in the global freedom struggle (Newton 2009b: 180); however, while this offer was not taken up by the NLF, this move proved controversial with other members of the Black Panther Party. Opponents of this move argued that it was hypocritical for Newton to offer the NLF fighters while not advocating for armed conflict domestically (Tyner 2006: 115).

One of the Party's first attempts to formally expand their organization internationally was through Eldridge Cleaver's efforts to internationalize the "Free Huey" campaign that launched in 1968 after Newton's arrest for the murder of officer John Frey. As a result of the campaign's popularity, international organizations in other countries began requesting that Party members speak at their solidarity events (Clemons and Jones 2013: 27).

"Free Huey" events would go on to take place in countries ranging from Tanzania to the United Kingdom and were often met with state resistance. At the "Free Bobby" event in London, for example, sixteen protestors were arrested after confrontations with police (Angelo 2009: 17; Clemons and Jones 2013: 32). The news coverage that these events received, along with the foreign

travels of Panther members, the formation of the International Section of the Black Panther Party in Algeria, and the expatriate communities of Panthers that formed as a result of the repression experienced in the US, helped solidify both international recognition and connections for the Party (Clemons and Jones 2013: 32).

### **Domestic Coalitions**

The combination of political repression and malleability of rhetoric that connected the US Panthers with international organizations also connected the BPP with domestic movements. A notable departure between the Black Panthers and other Black Power organizations was the BPP's willingness to form multiracial coalitions. At the time, prominent Black Power groups (notably SNCC) had expelled their White membership. Although the Black Panthers also did not allow for White members, the Party was not opposed to working with other racial groups in the way that organizations like SNCC were (Jeffries 2002: 66). Through the use of coalitions, the organization continued to provide an outlet for more radical White activists to join the Black freedom struggle while also fighting American imperialism (Brown 1994: 208).

Two reasons can be identified for why the Black Panthers were more amicable to forming coalitions with White groups than other Black Power organizations. First, the Black Panther Party was receptive to working with groups advocating for their own local communities because of the Party's focus on their own local communities (Tyner 2006: 109). After seeing how effective their community programs were the Panthers saw the need for aid in all these communities. The success of these programs also further showed the ineffectiveness of the US government when it came to feeding and clothing the poor at home (Tillotson 2017: 78). Second, during their revolutionary nationalism phase, the Black Panther Party believed that the only way for a Black nation to successfully come about was if the broader struggle of creating a socialist society was successful.

To achieve this goal, the Party knew they would have to expand their demographic reach beyond the Black community.

One of the more beneficial alliances that the Black Panther Party was able to maintain was with the wider movement against the Vietnam War. By becoming a leading organization in this movement, the Party attracted a broad range of domestic and international support. The Party also connected their earlier efforts of armed self-defense as anti-imperialist action to this larger anti-war movement which created support for the Party when they were faced with legal pressure (Bloom and Martin 2013: 12, 79, 160).

In addition to aligning themselves with the antiwar movement, the Black Panther Party made efforts to connect with the movements for women and gay rights. There do not appear to be any formal alliances made with these organizations, but Newton did call for the Party to stand in solidarity with these movements. Newton saw women and sexual minorities as some of the most oppressed groups in the United States; thus, in the fight for a more equitable society common cause between these members and the Black Panther Party should be made. Newton even went so far as to ban the use of homophobic language within the Party on the basis that use of this language would hinder opportunities to create alliances (Jeffries 2002: 27; Newton 2009b: 155-156).

The Panthers' willingness to work with White groups distinguished them from other Black Power groups at the time, but coalition building between White organizations and Black nationalist groups was not unheard of within the Black nationalist tradition. Sometimes these coalitions were formed from unlikely partnerships. For example, Blain describes the unusual alliances between United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) activists and avowed White supremacists (2018), and early proponents of Black emigration as a form of Black nationalism often worked with White organizations that also advocated for the emigration of freed slaves (Robinson 2001: 19).

What distinguishes the Black Panther Party's cross-racial alliances from these previous Black nationalist alliances is what the Panthers' coalitions ultimately hoped to accomplish. Whereas the main purpose of the alliances mentioned above was to create a separate nation for Black Americans (either in Liberia or Ethiopia) via emigration, the goal of the Black Panther Party's coalitions was an end to national boundaries.

The alliances formed between the Black Panther Party and other organizations were not without problems. The theoretical contributions of Panther leaders were often belittled or overlooked, and some White activists used the Party's notoriety to push their own agendas without advocating for Black communities. These instances created strain between the Panthers and other Black Power groups that negatively affected the Party's standing in the Black community (Hayes and Kiene 2005: 167).

Despite these negative instances, the Black Panther Party was able to use its strong positioning amongst these various alliances to place itself at the head of the larger New Left movement taking shape in the United States. In the process, the Black Panthers became known as the Vanguard Party of the New Left (Bloom and Martin 2013: 299). Similar to the international organizations mentioned above, future domestic organizations built themselves on the groundwork laid down by the Black Panther Party (Rofel and Tai 2016: 239). These domestic organizations influenced by the Black Panther Party include: the American Indian Movement (AIM), the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Young Lords (Abron 1986: 34).

Being recognized as the Vanguard Party also came with limitations. Specifically, their position as leaders of the New Left restricted the amount of armed resistance the Black Panthers could advocate for because of the increased scrutiny they faced from other Left movements, the public, and the police (Brown 1994: 231). So, while the Panthers initially organized around armed

self-defense for the Black community, some of the Party's leading members no longer believed this to be an effective strategy for organizing (Brown 1994: 247). As a result, the Black Panther Party began focusing on electoral politics and the implementation of their Community Survival programs (Brown 1994: 248). The constraints mentioned and the subsequent shift away from armed self-defense shows how the BPP often found itself in a difficult position that required navigating competing demands between the various coalitions that they formed.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to clarify the relationship between the Black Panther Party and nationalism, specifically the Black nationalist tradition in the United States. Highlighting organizational and theoretical shifts, I have argued that the BPP should not be regarded as a Black nationalist organization but rather a revolutionary organization in line with organizations and movements operating in China, North Korea, and Cuba.

While the Party eventually advocated for intercommunalism and an eradication of national boundaries, they were unable to fully account for an internalized sense of US nationalism. As Anderson states, "...even the most determinedly radical revolutionaries always, to some degree, inherit the state from the fallen regime." (2016: 159-160). By ultimately competing for US state power through electoral politics, the Panthers would have inherited a form of nationalism that would compete with their long-term goal of creating a nationless and stateless society.

Nevertheless, while the Party may have been unable to accomplish their desired society, to continue framing the Party as solely a Black nationalist organization de-centers the Party's multiracial and international coalition building at best and completely erases this tradition from the Party's history at worst, at a time in which organizational models for building international solidarity is needed most.



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