Do Guns Preclude Credibility?:

Considering the Black Panthers as a legitimate Civil Rights organisation

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Discontent over social, political and racial issues swelled in the United States during the mid-sixties. Even victories for the Civil Rights movement could not stem the dissatisfaction, as evidenced by the Watts riots that broke out in Los Angeles during August 1965, only two weeks after the Voting Rights Act was signed.[1] Rioting had become more frequent, thus suggesting that issues existed which the non-violent Civil Rights groups could not fix. In 1966, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders reported that forty-three race riots had occurred across the country, nearly tripling the fifteen previously reported for 1964.[2] The loss of faith in mainstream civil rights groups was reflected in a 1970 poll of black communities conducted by ABC-TV in which the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP) was the *only* black organisation that 'respondents thought would increase its effectiveness in the future.'[3] This was in contrast to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which the majority thought would lose influence.[4]

Equality at law had been achieved, but that meant little in city ghettoes where the issues of poverty and racism continued to fester.[5] It was from within this frustrated atmosphere that in October 1966,

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1 See Robert Charles Smith, *We Have No Leaders: African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 17. The Watts riots were a series of riots in South Central Los Angeles incited by the arrest of an African American man for drunk driving. Thirty-four people died, and injuries and arrests numbered into the hundreds, in addition to property damage valued in the millions: Jill A. Edy, *Troubled Pasts: News and the Collective Memory of Social Unrest*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 5.

2 See Charles E. Jones and Judson L. Jeffries, '"Don't Believe the Hype": Debunking the Panther Mythology,' in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones, (Baltimore: DuForcelf, 1998), 25.

3 Jeffrey Ogbonna Green Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 121.

4 Ibid.

5 See Smith, *We Have No Leaders*, 17. John Wood suggested the growing discontentment despite increased legal rights for African Americans was due to DeTocqueville's notion of the 'revolution of rising expectations.' That is, when an oppressed social group start to believe that they can achieve a better life, they become less willing to endure the same treatment that they endured when they were without hope: John A. Wood, *The Panthers and the Militias: Brothers Under the Skin?*, (Lanham:

the BPP emerged in Oakland, California.[6] The BPP drew on Willie Ricks and Stokely Carmichael's concept of *black power* and Malcolm X's 'by any means necessary' philosophy and coupled this with inspiration drawn from communist revolutionaries such as Che Guevara and Mao Zedong.[7] *Black power*, as defined by Stokely Carmichael, meant 'the creation of power bases from which black people can work to change statewide or nationwide patterns of oppression through pressure from strength – instead of weakness.'[8] From these sources, BPP leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale aimed to channel the social frustrations of African Americans into a constructive movement designed to protect and improve African American communities.

Despite being a relatively short-lived organisation with few members, the BPP's association with the late Civil Rights period (1954-68) is well-remembered. Though the Party existed from 1966-82, its national influence had begun to decline by 1971. Its membership peaked somewhere between 5,000-10,000 people. Given that the nation's black population was roughly 30 million at the time, this demonstrates that few African Americans actually joined the Party.[9] Dressed in their iconic militant image of leather jackets, black berets and accessorising with a gun, it is hardly surprising that within two years of their formation, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director, J. Edgar Hoover, labelled the BPP, despite their small membership, 'the greatest threat to the internal security of the country.'[10] Certainly they had the potential to destabilise American society; indeed with their synthesis of Black Power and socialism, their *intent* was to undermine the oppressive structures within American society, including the government. Although the BPP's ideology endorsed violence only in situations of self-defence, not all members adhered to this belief. It should be noted however, that the BPP had branches in many communities, each with its unique history and issues, and thus it is difficult to generalise about the Party's character promoted by its original members.[11] This paper argues that the violence associated with the BPP has overshadowed the important contribution the organisation made to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, particularly regarding social welfare. It will be demonstrated that through its establishment of programs to help African Americans in need, the BPP provided legitimate help to African Americans residing in urban ghettoes, and subsequently, became a symbol of *black pride* during

University Press of America, 2002), 10.

6 Jones and Jeffries, '"Don't Believe the Hype",' 26. Judson L. Jeffries and Ryan Nissim-Sabat claimed that the formation of the BPP was triggered by looting and burning that occurred in the black community when a black 16-year-old boy was killed by the San Francisco police after allegedly stealing a car: Judson L. Jeffries and Ryan Nissim-Sabat, 'Painting a More Complete Portrait of the Black Panther Party,' in *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party*, ed. Judson L. Jeffries, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 3. By early 1967 the Party had removed 'for Self Defense' from its name as it was deemed a too limited depiction of their aims. See Annette T. Rubinstein, Robert Rhodes, Lili Solomon and Janet Townsend, 'The Black Panther Party and the Case for the New York 21,' http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/AmRad/blackpanthercase.pdf, accessed 25 September 2011, 2.

7 See Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 52; and Floyd W. Hayes and Francis A. Kiene, '"All Power to the People": The Political Thought of Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party,' in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones, (Baltimore: DuForcelf, 1998), 159. Newton went as far as to state that the BPP was 'a living testament to [Malcolm X's] life work': Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 32.

8 Peter B. Levy, *The Civil Rights Movement*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 189.

9 See Charles E. Jones, 'Reconsidering Panther History: The Untold Story,' in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones, (Baltimore: DuForcelf, 1998), 7; Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 154; and Ogbar, *Black Power*, 90.

10 Hoover made the remark in September 1968. See Robert O. Self, 'The Black Panther Party and the Long Civil Rights Era,' in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, eds. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 45; and Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post-War Oakland*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 225.

11 See Jeffries and Nissim-Sabat, 'Painting a More Complete Portrait,' 8-9.

this period of discontent and an important part of the African American struggle for racial and civic equality.

The Policies

Huey Newton, described by black activist and journalist Earl Ofari as the man who 'embodie[d] the spirit of the Black Panther Party,' was the Party's leader, who held the position of Minister of Defence. Seale was his second-in-command and the Party's chairman.[12] Despite being the obvious leader of the BPP, Newton was gaoled for most of the late 1960s when the BPP flourished. Thus, the Party's success can be attributed less to him than to leaders such as Seale and David Hilliard, the BPP's chief of staff.[13] However, it was Newton who wrote the BPP's *Ten Point Program*, on which all of the Party's activities were based. Essentially, it was Newton's vision that the BPP implemented.[14]

The *Ten Point Program* was titled 'What We Want, What We Believe,' and point ten encapsulated what the BPP desired to achieve: 'land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.'[15] The Party also had a list of 26 rules, which acted as a code of conduct for its members. Given the BPP's reputation, the most noteworthy of these rules was number five: 'No party member will *use*, *point*, or *fire* a weapon of any kind unnecessarily or accidentally at anyone.'[16] The BPP did not encourage spontaneous or indiscriminate violence. Regarding the 1966 riots sparked by police brutality, Seale described them as 'something that Huey and I were against.'[17] Similarly, the BPP's Minister of Information, Elridge Cleaver, firmly stated that he did not 'justify shooting the wrong people' only 'the oppressors.'[18]

Similar misconceptions existed about the BPP hating white Americans. Newton stated 'we don't hate white people; we hate the oppressor. And if the oppressor happens to be white then we hate him. When he stops oppressing us then we no longer hate him.'[19] Furthermore, although the BPP was a black only party, Newton remarked that white revolutionaries could aid the black movement 'first by simply turning away from the establishment, and secondly by choosing their friends.'[20] The BPP was not opposed to working with white Americans; in fact they were involved in white radical politics. For instance, on 22 December 1967, the BPP and the left-wing and anti-war Peace and Freedom Party (PFP) established a coalition. This was very much a symbiotic alliance wherein the

12 Earl Ofari, 'The Ultimate Justice of the People: Black Liberation,' http://archive.lib.msu.edu/AFS/dmc/radicalism/public/all/blackliberation/AAN.html, accessed 25 September 2011. See also, Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 34 and 37.

13 See Jeffries and Nissim-Sabat, 'Painting a More Complete Portrait,' 4. Newton was gaoled for allegedly killing a policeman. However, he only served three years following an appeal, which was likely won because of the extensive 'Free Huey' campaign of the BPP: Hugh Pearson, *Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*, (New York: Perseus Publishing, 1996), 7.

14 See Judson L. Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton: The Radical Theorist*, (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 58.

15 History is a Weapon, 'Black Panther Party Platform, Program and Rules,' http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/bpp.html, accessed 24 September 2011.

16 Ibid.

17 Bobby Seale in Jones and Jeffries, '"Don't Believe the Hype",' 40.

18 Elridge Cleaver in Wood, *The Panthers and the Militia*, 5.

19 Huey Newton in Philip Sheldon Foner, *The Black Panther Speaks*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1995), 57.

20 For example, Newton suggested the choice between Lyndon B. Johnson and Fidel Castro: Students for a Democratic Society, 'Huey Newton Talks to The Movement,' August 1968, http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/AmRad/hueynewtontalks.pdf, accessed 26 September 2011, 5. Whites were not allowed in the BPP because even white liberals were 'only oppressed in an abstract way; we are oppressed in the real way...Therefore we should decide what measures and what tools and what programs to use to become liberated.' Additionally, Newton stated 'there can be no black-white unity until there first is black unity': Ibid, 6-7.

BPP provided votes for the PFP and the PFP allowed the BPP to use their sound equipment (which the BPP used at rallies to mobilise support to free Newton from gaol).[21]

The BPP also supported other oppressed groups, as demonstrated by Newton's advocacy for gay rights. He stated: 'Homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in the society. They might be the most oppressed in the society...We should try to form a working coalition with the gay liberation.'[22] Gay activist, William B. Kelly, noted that 'the Black Panthers were one of the first radical groups to favour gay liberation.'[23]

It was not only race on which the BPP focused, but on class struggle in general. Newton declared in an interview that there were 'two evils to fight: capitalism and racism.'[24] In some situations, class allegiance took precedence over racial allegiance for the BPP, as indicated in Newton's statement: 'if the black bourgeoisie cannot align itself with our complete program, then the black bourgeoisie sets itself up as our enemy. And they will be attacked and treated as such.'[25] Every member was required to read Mao's 'Little Red Book' (1966) in order to better understand how class warfare should be waged. Cleaver explicitly said that the BPP was 'also Marxist in [its] orientation.'[26]

The Programs

The BPP's socialist objectives were reflected in the outcomes they hoped to achieve from the programs they implemented. For example, Elaine Brown, leader of the BPP from 1974-77, declared that after having become accustomed to programs like *Free Breakfast for Children*, the African American community would begin to demand similar programs from the Federal government, and 'bit by bit, city by city, they [would] attack the capitalist foundation.'[27]

The *Free Breakfast for Children* program was only one of the many aid projects established by the Party, which they labelled 'survival programs.'[28] When asked why he joined the BPP, Jimmy Slater explained that it was 'basically...because of the many different positive programs sponsored by the Party.'[29] According to Elaine Brown, the Hollywood film industry heavily contributed to the funding of such programs, stating that actors and writers 'sent monthly checks for our breakfast program.' She added that they 'paid our incessant bails.'[30] The *Free Breakfast for School Children* program was particularly significant both because it intended to eradicate childhood hunger – a symbol of racial inequality – and because of its success. By 1969, nineteen sites had a free breakfast

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21 See Jones and Jeffries, '"Don't Believe the Hype",' 31.

22 Ibid, 35.

23 Ibid.

24 'Huey Newton Talks to The Movement,' 4. See also, Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 80 and 170.

25 'Huey Newton Talks to The Movement,' 5.

26 Elridge Cleaver in PBS, 'The Two Nations of Black America: Interview Elridge Cleaver,' http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/race/interviews/ecleaver.html, accessed 24 September 2011. See also, Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 170.

27 Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*, (New York: Anchor, 1993), 5.

28 See Self, 'The Black Panther Party and the Long Civil Rights Era,' 46. It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of survival programs, but Jones and Jeffries cite an incomplete list of 16 programs initiated between 1967-74: Jones and Jeffries, '"Don't Believe the Hype",' 30.

29 Jimmy Slater in Charles E. Jones, '"Talkin' the Talk and Walkin' the Walk": An Interview with Panther Jimmy Slater,' in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones, (Baltimore: DuForcelf, 1998), 147.

30 Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 209.

program, and 20,000 children were being fed weekly.[31] Other survival programs included: a *People's Free Medical Research Health Clinic* (established in 1970); free clothing and shoe programs (1970 and 1971 respectively); *Sickle Cell Anaemia Research Foundation* (1971); the creation of an *Intercommunal Youth Institute* (1969); and a free ambulance program (1974). Furthermore, by 1972, free food programs existed where, periodically, bags of groceries were provided to needy families.[32] The grocery giveaway was significant for the Party as it garnered support for all of the other BPP programs. Elaine Brown commented that 'even middle-class blacks theretofore reluctant to support or be identified with the party began endorsing it and making contributions.'[33] Equally as successful was the *Intercommunal Youth Institute*, which grew from an initial twenty-eight students to four hundred children on the school's waiting list.[34]

Despite their low membership numbers, the BPP was very popular and its efforts were clearly appreciated by the wider community. Between 1968 and 1972, its newspaper, *Black Panther,* had an average weekly circulation of 100,000.[35] In 1970, Louis Harris conducted a nationwide poll which found that although only a quarter of African Americans concurred that 'the Black Panthers represent my own personal views,' 64 per cent agreed that the 'Panthers give me a sense of pride.'[36] Support for the BPP ranged from major Civil Rights organisations to gang members. The NAACP donated $50,000 to guarantee the continued existence of a commission that conducted probes into encounters between the police and the BPP. One Philadelphia-based member who helped with a breakfast program was being threatened by a local gang, until one of them recognised him as a member and got the others to stop their harassment because 'he feeds us every day.'[37]

For Seale, the survival programs were the essence of the BPP. He stated

> 'A true revolutionary will get up early in the morning and he'll go serve the Free
> Breakfast for Children. Then when that's done he'll go and he'll organise a boycott around
> a specific issue, to support Breakfast for Children, or support any other kind of program.'[38]

In his autobiography, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (1991), Seale wrote that a true member of the BPP would not incite violence. Instead, they would 'follow all the gun laws' and would not 'conceal' their 'weapon or other jive stuff.'[39] However, Seale did note

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31 See Self, 'The Black Panther Party and the Long Civil Rights Era,' 46; and Ogbar, *Black Power*, 90.

32 See Self, 'The Black Panther Party and the Long Civil Rights Era,' 46; and Jones and Jeffries, '"Don't Believe the Hype",' 30. Sickle Cell Anaemia is a potentially fatal blood disease that only affects blacks, hence the emphasis on it as opposed to other diseases: Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 290.

33 Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 290.

34 See JoNina M. Abron, '"Serving the People": The Survival Programs of the Black Panther Party,' in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones, (Baltimore: DuForcelf, 1998), 188.

35 See Jones and Jeffries, '"Don't Believe the Hype",' 29. However, the *Black Panther*'s circulation was minor compared to the Nation of Islam's *Muhammad Speaks,* which was the most circulated black newspaper per week with 500,000 readers: Ogbar, *Black Power*, 121.

36 Daniel U. Levine, Norman S. Fiddmont, Robert S. Stephenson and Charles Wilkinson, 'Differences Between Black Youth Who Support the Black Panthers and the NAACP,' *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 42, No. 1, (1973), 19.

37 Ogbar, *Black Power*, 109. See also, Jones and Jeffries, '"Don't Believe the Hype",' 42.

38 Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*, (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991), 380.

39 Ibid.

that a BPP member should 'defend himself and his people when we're unjustly attacked by racist pigs.'[40]

The Violence

The seventh point in the BPP's *Ten Point Program* called for all African Americans to 'arm themselves for self-defence.'[41] The BPP had cause to believe that African Americans needed to be on the defensive. In the spring of 1968, Oakland police killed at least three African American men.[42] In interviews with Los Angeles black residents conducted by the University of California and Los Angeles' Institute of Government and Public Affairs, forty-seven per cent claimed to have witnessed police brutality, while nine per cent claimed to have personally been victims. Information collected by the American Civil Liberties Union suggested that conditions were no better in New Orleans, Boston and Chicago.[43] Even without provocation, the police targeted BPP members. One such incident occurred on 4 December 1969 at 3am when Chicago police fired dozens of shotgun rounds into an apartment bedroom where they had been told Fred Hampton, the BPP leader in Illinois, lived. Consequently, Hampton and another member died.[44]

In addition to the police, the BPP also had to contend with the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program. Hoover oversaw the FBI's use of various covert tactics against the BPP, including infiltration, surveillance, forgery, lying witnesses and blatant harassment, for the intended purpose of gaoling BPP members and expending their funds.[45] The FBI were so preoccupied with the BPP in the late 1960s and early 1970s that, out of 295 FBI operations aimed at undermining African American liberation organisations, 233 of them concentrated on the BPP.[46]

The FBI and the police were successful in undermining the BPP's effectiveness. Through their interference, they contributed to the BPP's early demise.[47] Continual arrests side-tracked members from the running of their survival programs, and as they had to post bail frequently, the Party's funds dwindled.[48] However, the FBI's tactics were eventually disparaged. On 23 April 1976, a Senate report titled 'The FBI's covert action program to destroy the Black Panther Party' declared that the FBI had 'engaged in lawless tactics and responded to deep seated social problems by fomenting violence and unrest.'[49]

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40 Ibid.

41 Marxist History, 'The Ten-Point Program,' http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/1966/10/15.htm, accessed 9 February 2013.

42 See Self, *American Babylon*, 229.

43 See Robert M. Fogelson, 'From Resentment to Confrontation: The Police, the Negroes, and the Outbreak of the Nineteen-Sixties Riots,' *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 83, No. 2, (1968), 224.

44 See David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 208-209.

45 See Self, *American Babylon*, 229. See also, Jones, '"Talkin' the Talk and Walkin' the Walk",' 151.

46 See Internet Archive, 'Book III: Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities,' S.R. No. 94-755, 94th Congress, 2nd Sess., 1976, http://archive.org/details/finalreportofsel03unit, accessed 9 February 2013, 188.

47 See Self, *American Babylon*, 229.

48 See Winston A. Grady-Willis, 'The Black Panther Party: State Repression and Political Prisoners,' in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones, (Baltimore: DuForcelf, 1998), 363.

49 'The FBI's covert action program to destroy the Black Panther Party,' 23 April 1976, in Self, 'The Black Panther Party and the Long Civil Rights Era,' 45.

However, that criticism could have just as easily been applied to the BPP. Incendiary rhetoric was commonplace among the BPP. Their Minister of Foreign Affairs, James Forman, remarked that if he was assassinated, he wanted 'thirty police stations blown up, one southern governor, two mayors, and five hundred cops, dead. If they assassinate Brother Carmichael...Brother Seale, this price is tripled.'[50] The BPP did not limit themselves to violent words. Cleaver later admitted that provoking violence was part of the BPP's tactics: 'we definitely were not sitting back waiting for the authorities to attack us...We would go out and ambush cops, but if we got caught we would blame it on them and claim innocence.' Regardless, Cleaver still noted that the police were 'abusive and violent. They were murderers.'[51]

Furthermore, there were cases of BPP members that threatened local stores who would not contribute resources to the survival programs. In North Oakland on 10 May 1969, members firebombed a shop whose owner they thought was miserly in his donations to a breakfast program.[52] Similarly in August 1971, straddling the line between lawful protest and extortion, the BPP initiated an extensive boycott of an alcohol shop in Oakland because it was owned by the president of Cal-Pak (Cal-Pak was a collection of African American business owners), who would not give cash payments to the BPP.[53]

Unfortunately for the BPP, ideology did not always transfer into practice, and their vicious altercations with the police and their aggressive acts towards African American business owners overshadowed the successes of their socialist projects. In 1997, Cleaver described Huey Newton as 'a gun toting gangster, but that's not all he was.'[54] These exact words can be applied to the party that Newton founded. In other words, violence cannot be considered the sum of the BPP or its legacy. Their *Ten Point Program* made it explicit that education, housing, justice and *peace* were the issues paramount to the Party. Nothing can negate the fact that their survival programs had measurable success regarding the number of children that they fed and the graduates that their institutes produced. Given that at their peak the BPP was frequently cited as a source of black pride suggests that their efforts were recognised and appreciated in the African American community. At that time, when dissatisfaction was rising and when battles at the legal and federal levels had already been won, success at the community level was what was needed. The BPP provided that during their short existence, making them a legitimate part of and contributor to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

50 Hugh Pearson, *Shadow of the Panther*, 151.

51 Reason Online, 'An Interview with Elridge Cleaver,' February 1986, http://reason.com/archives/1986/02/01/an-interview-with-eldridge-cle, accessed 24 September 2011.

52 See Self, *American Babylon*, 228.

53 Ibid. The boycott ended in January 1972: Ollie A. Johnson, 'Explaining the Demise of the Black Panther Party: The Role of Internal Factors,' in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones, (Baltimore: DuForcelf, 1998), 403.

54 PBS, 'The Two Nations of Black America: Interview with Elridge Cleaver.'