

“(B)lack power is not the question; revolution is. It is only the fist that is black.”¹

As the Black Panther Party was struggling to gain a positive consensus, and political will of the oppressed masses all over the globe in later half of 1960s, and their organizational programme, and functioning was sending shivers down the spine of many white-supremacist organization like Ku Klux Klan as one of them. The fourth pillar of the democracy that is, the newspapers and news channels could not completely understand the sudden though systematic outpour of the black masses in a form never visualized before by the mainstream media. The media as always dominated by the ruling class discourse found it difficult to digest the events and report ethically without any bias towards the Imperialist America fighting war in Vietnam and facing crisis within its own dominion by the depressed classes, and majority of the oppressed black people. In its representation of the Black Panthers Movement, it was always a script that ran down the broadcasting machinery to create a certain kind of perception about the Black Panther Party. It is obvious the ruling white-class with its imperialistic agendas would only label the rebellion in the heart of the nation as terrorism, like it does all over the world wherever it receives resistance against its policy of profit making and loot. The real aspects of the movement were forcefully brushed under the carpet, so as not to let the dissent grow. And coercion thus became easier once the label of terrorism was pasted on the head of BPP.

Thus, this paper will be the first attempt to look into the discourse of media trial and opinion making academic machinery, and then deconstruct it through facts or rather

¹“If the mother countryrefuses to have a revolution, then the Panthers—and those white radicals who wish tojoin in—will inflict consequences on it. The last is left deliberately vague...violence isneither ruled out, nor ruled in. The burden of the interview is that black power is not thequestion; revolution is. It is only the fist that is black.”*Washington Post*, 28 July 1968. Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, 165.

achievements and reforms and revolutionary changes that were brought in the due course of Black Liberation struggle led by the Black Panther Party.

The *Washington Post* in late July 1968 published an editorial article titled: *The Making of a Martyr*. The major concern in this article was not what colour the protesters are of, but what are they planning, and demanding - seems revolutionary. The editorial reiterates or re-establishes the paranoia that the so-called world's largest democracy is in great danger. "Readers of the Times were provided with the fundamental elements of a superficial story—one that reproduced the standard journalistic practice of describing an issue rather than explaining it."² Sooner than expected the BPP (Black Panthers Party) got coverage on television, but most likely the circulation of speeches and image tropes were done by the TV channels in competition with each other rather than understanding the issue. As Jane Rhodes exemplifies later that, "television was an ideal site through which to spread the now familiar images of the Panthers standing at attention and holding banners aloft in a display of solidarity with their embattled leader. But if the print media failed to provide a coherent analysis or context to the group's rise, television presented little more than a confusing mix of images and tropes."³ Amidst all the chaos over reporting over Vietnam War the journalists heavily relied on military police fabricated news and in the same line of thought black and lower class white people's discontentment was also misrepresented. To counter this:

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, appointed by President Johnson to analyze the rash of racial uprisings in American cities, released its findings that spring. The commission investigated many of the core issues of the nation's racial crisis—unemployment, ghettoization, economic exploitation, and conflicts between

²Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, 165.

³Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, 166

police and community. The news media were held up for particular scrutiny, with the commission asserting that both print and television generally failed in their fundamental duty to give a representative accounting of events:

The media report and write from the standpoint of a white man's world. The ills of the ghetto, the difficulties of life there, the Negro's burning sense of grievance, are seldom conveyed. Slight and indignities are part of the Negro's daily life, and many of them come from what he now calls "the white press"—a press that repeatedly, if unconsciously, reflects the biases, the paternalism, the indifference of white America. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 385.⁴

This rebuttal from the commission was not enough for the dominant white supremacist governed media houses. Thus, as a boon to the BPP, came the alternative media presenters, one amongst them was famous Agnes Varda's film *Black Panthers*, "functioned in opposition to the sensationally violent and threatening Panthers that had become the standard trope for the mainstream media. They were ennobled rather than denigrated, romanticized rather than condemned."⁵ However, Varda was not beyond criticisms and compliments, especially from the Eurocentric Film scholars like David James. For them "Varda, an early feminist, also romanticized the role of women in the organization, celebrating the "promotion of women to the political and military life of the party." One scene showed Panther women drilling in formation and marching along Oakland's Lake Merritt. The voice-over was of Huey Newton proclaiming that "the role of women in the Black Panther Party is exactly the same as the man." An interview with Kathleen Cleaver and comments from other women accentuated this point. But Varda clearly spent little time learning about the complex, and often contested, gender dynamics of the organization—her extended

⁴ Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, 169

⁵ Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, 170

interviews were with male Panthers, including Newton and Brent. What was on the surface was enough. Like other sympathetic white writers, filmmakers, photographers, and artists, she saw her role as giving the Panthers a voice and an audience.”⁶ Although, such a harsh criticism by David James in his book *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* only further reconsolidates the mixed responses of the academia towards BPP. Even when the insider women leadership “accentuates” or emphasize the same point of view about gender sensitization which the movie represent, the Eurocentric worldview liberal intelligentsia criticise Agnes Varda’s depiction is only out of sympathy. The agency of the women in BPP and Agnes Varda’s herself is negated when such academic exercises of people like David James calls it “Allegories” and not something which is developing and is not static. The critique is not just of the representation of Agnes Varda; through her personal criticism by using terms like “an early feminist”, “romanticized the role of women in the organization”; was by enlarge demeaning critique of the BPP’s women organization and their leadership.

In the case of Huey P. Newton’s trial the Communist party came out in full support of BPP and campaigned and collected funds by using a pamphlet titled *Black Liberation on Trial: The Case of Huey Newton*. Amongst the authors Celia Rosebury also argued “that many journalists covering the trial “had accepted their assignments with preconceived notions of Newton as a ‘cop-killer,’ ” and that they too had been won over to Newton's side. Rosebury created vivid verbal images of the occurrences both inside and out of the courtroom as she tried to convey the political importance of the case. “Newton's supporters kept up a loud, determined vigil under the hot sun,” she wrote, while across the street “a line of nearly 100 Panther brothers stretched the length of the block, and they stood there, facing the courthouse, all day.” Such details were important in conveying the role of the trial in the lives of the

⁶David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) 183. I screened an original print of *Black Panthers* at the British Film Institute in London; videotape copies are available through International Historic Films. ne Rhodes. *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, 170

BlackPanthers—no mainstream media recounted the stamina or commitment required to standwatch day after day. A deep admiration for the rank-and-file of the party was evident inthis narrative.”⁷

In one of the interviews of Huey P. Newton from jail called *Huey P. Newton Talks to the Movement* reprinted by SDS portrayed him - ““Newton behind bars flashing a V-forvictoryor peace sign. Other versions of the pamphlet were also distributed with a coverfeaturing a cropped version of Newton in the wicker chair and the snarling black catemblem. Newton explained his critique of black cultural nationalism by stating that “asfar as returning to the old African culture, it's unnecessary and it's not advantageous....We believe that culture itself will not liberate us.” He told the SDS membership that theBlack Panthers were deeply concerned with the connections between capitalism andracism, and that their role as “white mother country radicals” was to “aid blackrevolutionaries first by simply turning away from the establishment, and secondly bychoosing their friends.”⁸

All this theoretical advancement in the understanding of the question of race, class and identity were markers of change in the thinking of the new generation of black youths after the civil rights movement era.

The Black Panthers knew what they were heading towards and were not without any program or intellectual calibre to achieve what is required and the form in which it has to be achieved.

⁷Celia Rosebury, *Black Liberation on Trial: The Case of Huey Newton* (Berkeley: Bay Area Committee to Defend Political Rights, 1968), Bancroft Library, University of California; Hilliard and Cole, *This Side of Glory*, 144–45, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, 171

⁸*Huey Newton Talks to the Movement* (San Francisco: Students for a Democratic Society, August 1968), copy atthe SchomburgCenter for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; *Huey Newton Talks to the Movement* (San Diego: San Diego Commune, August 1968), copy at the San Francisco Afro American Historical Society.*Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, 171

PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION OF BLACK PANTHERS CRITIQUE AND AGENDA:⁹

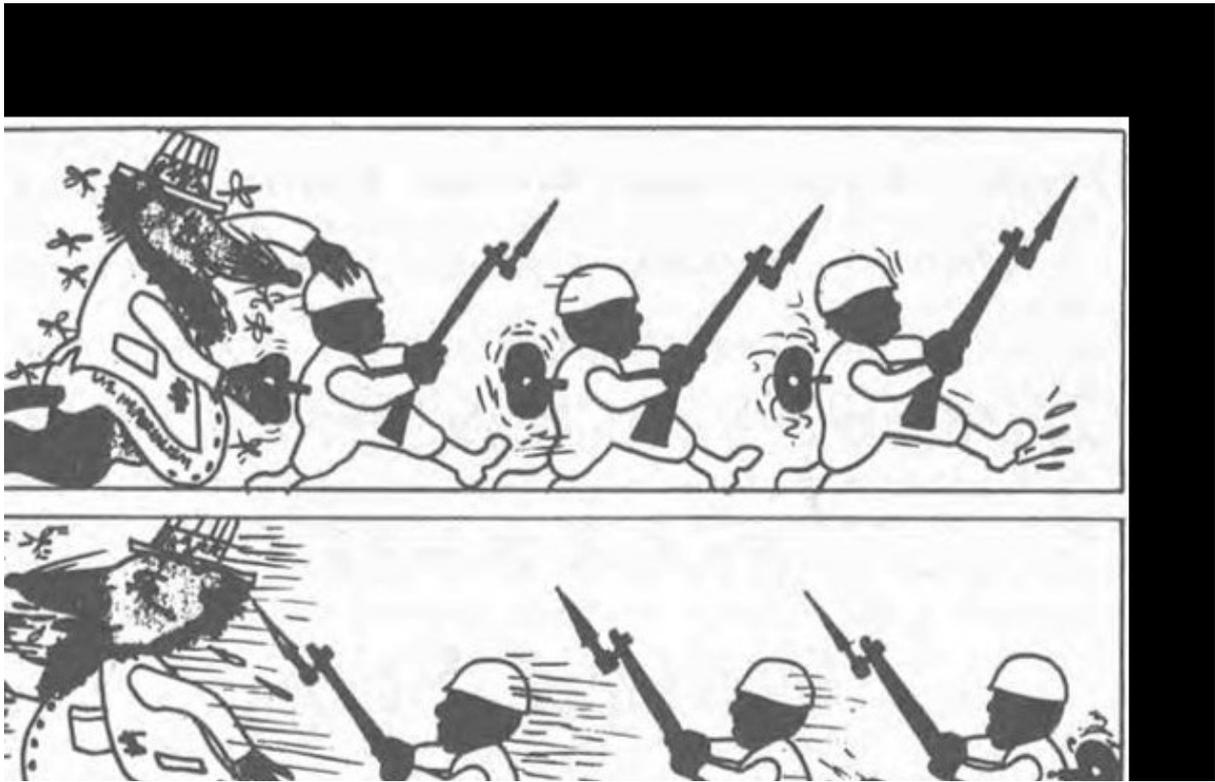
IMPERIALIST PLANS ...

⁹Philip S. Foner, *Black Panthers Speak*, 155



The Black Panther Party

Stands for Revolutionary Solidarity¹⁰



¹⁰Philip S. Foner, *Black Panthers Speak*, 221

The Black Panthers movement began by consolidating ““what Fanon was saying about organizing the lumpen proletariat first, because Fanon explicitly pointed out that if you didn't organize the lumpen proletariat, if the organization didn't relate to the lumpen proletariat and give a base for organizing the brother who's pimping, the brother who's hustling, the unemployed, the downtrodden, the brother who's robbing banks, who's not politically conscious "that's what lumpen proletariat means" that if you didn't relate to these cats, the power structure would organize these cats against you.””¹¹

Bobby Seale recaps in his book how the first program of uniting lumpen-proletariat began. He writes:

In June 1966, the summer...work program provided jobs for about 100 - twenty-five girls and seventy-five boys. They worked in the community cutting lawns, cutting hedges, digging up grounds, etc. They were supposed to do repairs on fences and steps and things like that, but the equipment wasn't available. There were four such programs, so only 400 kids were employed by the poverty program in Oakland. My objective in the program was to teach Black American History if I could, and teach them also some degree of responsibility; not teach them responsibility in old Establishment terms, but in terms of their own people living in the community. In the poverty program the young brothers many times would try to be slick and think they were pimps, or think they could out-gamble or out-talk or out-rap anybody. Some of them would fool around and carry knives, and I'd have to hip them about the knife-carrying. In working with the poverty program, I never wanted to use the authoritarian-type old school tactics which I had rejected, and I knew these young brothers rejected. They drank wine, shot dice, and things like that. I knew there was a

¹¹Bobby Seale, *Seize the time: The story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*, 21-22

way to reach these brothers because I wasn't too much different from them. I knew how to drink wine, how to shoot dice, play cards, and chase women. Sometimes I caught cats playing cards and I'd have to make them stop. I'd say, "You cats can't play cards, man, because you've got a job to do." But generally I refused to be authoritarian. I did a lot of things that weren't conventional. I tried to make the brothers understand that they had a right to set a price on their labor. I knew that in the future they probably would be workers, especially if we ever change this system. If I had ten cats on a job, I would say, "All right, you've got six hours of work today. You get one hour for lunch. Now if all you cats get together and do this job you can do it in four hours. I know you can do it easily in four hours." Then I'd say, "I'll let you off for the next two hours, and I'll see to it that you still get your pay for the entire six hours." The administrators up there probably didn't know what I was doing but I was trying to make the young cats respect their labor. At the same time, I was trying to make them respect responsibility, and to go ahead and do things.¹²

These kinds of activities were further theoretically legitimized and were penned down by Michael "Cetewayo" Tabor, a Political Prisoner who wrote a small booklet from the jail addressing the broader masses titled: *Capitalism Plus Dope Equals Genocide*. In this booklet he addressed, and demanded the youths especially black masses of the repercussions of being a druggie. He articulated his demand democratically for the youths to understand that:

The racist pig-police, the demagogic politicians and the avaricious big businessmen who control the politicians are delighted that Black youths have fallen victim to the plague. They are delighted for two reasons: one, it is economically profitable, and two, they realize that as long as they can keep our Black youths standing on the street

12 Bobby Seale, *Seize the time: The story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*, 24-25

corners "nodding" from a "shot" of heroin, they won't have to worry about us waging an effective struggle for liberation. As long as our young Black brothers and sisters are chasing the bag, as long as they are trying to cop a fix, the rule of our oppressors is secure and our hopes for freedom are dead. It is the youth who make the revolution and it is the youth who carry it out....The Black Panther Party is presently in the process of formulating a program to combat the plague. It will be controlled totally by the people. We, the people, must stamp out the plague, and we will. Dope is a form of genocide in which the victim pays to be killed.¹³

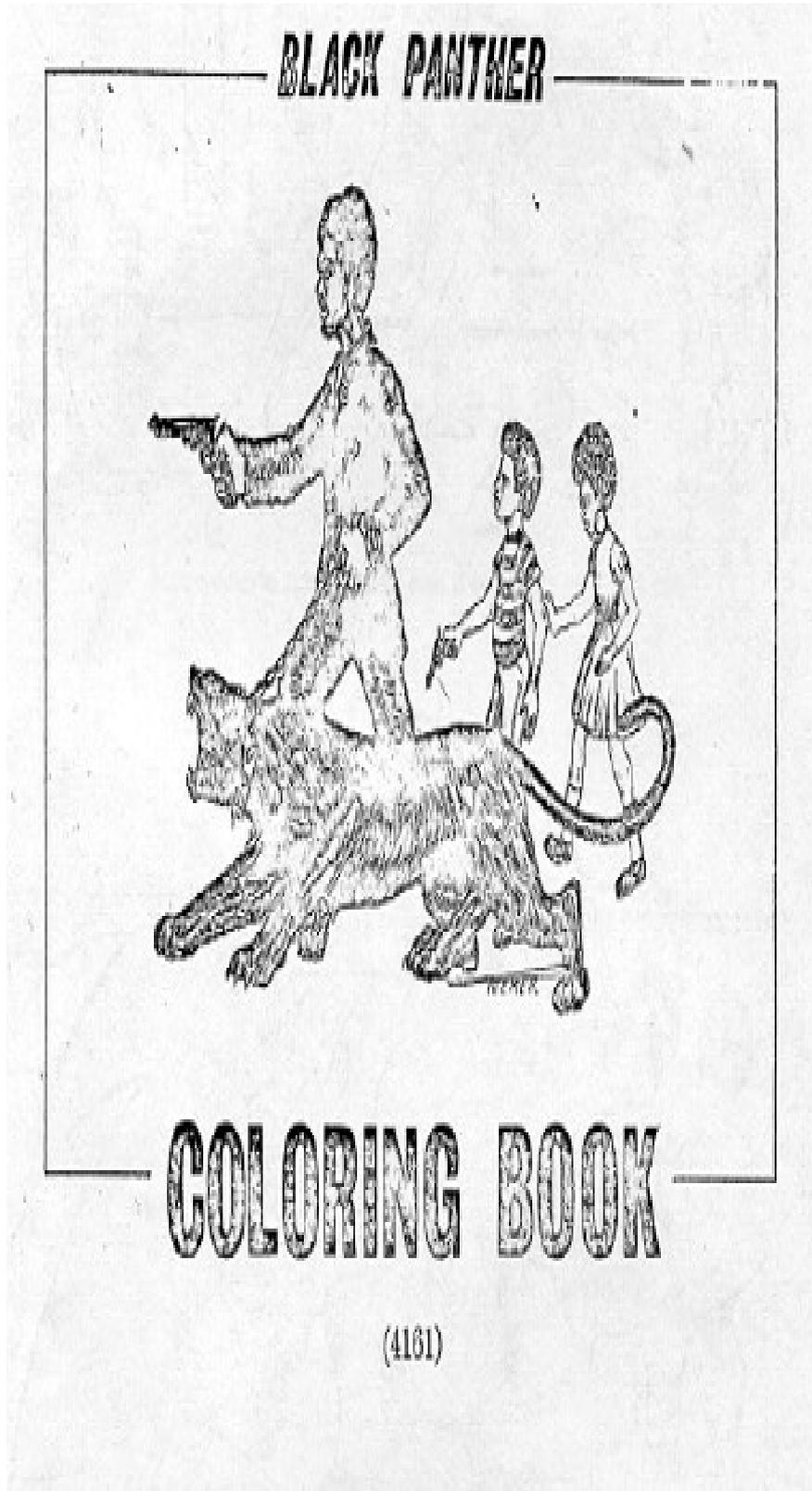
But the state was also not quite in propagating counter-revolutionary propaganda against the BPP. In their effort to derail the movement “a central part of the FBI's counterintelligence program, known as COINTELPRO (was formed). “The FBI has attempted covertly to influence the public's perception of persons and organizations by disseminating derogatory information to the press, either anonymously or through ‘friendly’ news contacts,” concluded the committee, headed by Senator Frank Church. In August 1967 the FBI launched a new project under the category “Black Hate Groups,” which sought to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize” SNCC, the Nation of Islam, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Revolutionary Action Movement, among others. This initiative was based on the Cold War rationale that much of the black power movement was inspired and financed by Communists.”¹⁴

Amidst all the witch-hunting of the leadership, mass-incarceration of black masses and putting behind bars on false or fabricated cases on the BPP activists; the masses never gave up the fight.

¹³ *Capitalism Plus Dope Equals Genocide*, 6

¹⁴ Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, 201

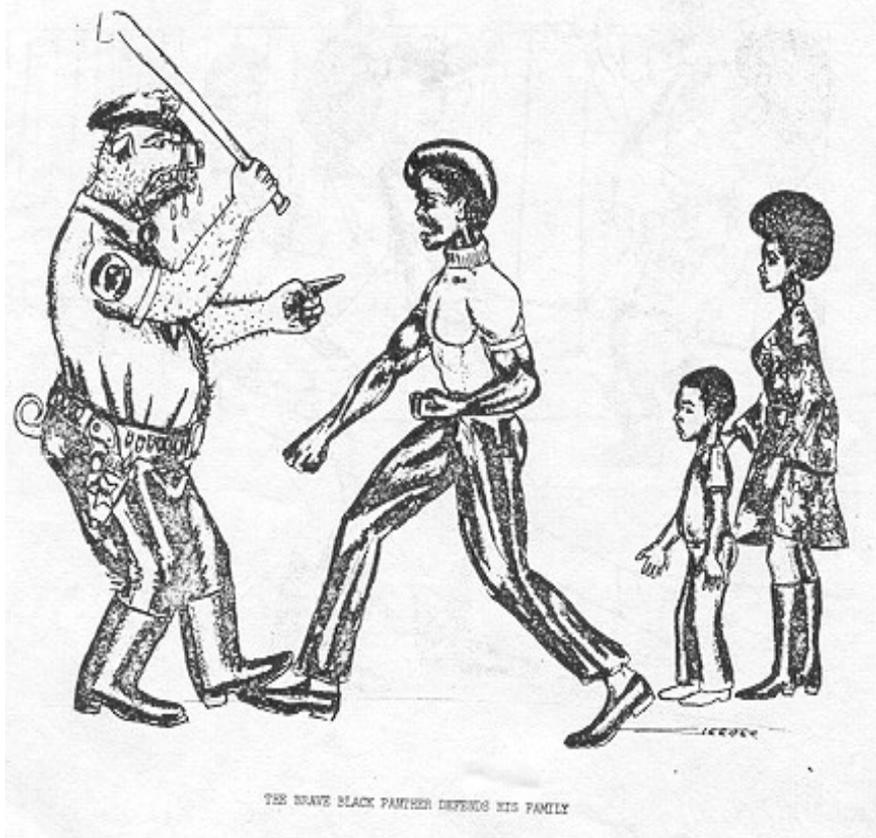
In one of the colouring books meant for young black boys and girls were taught lessons that this is how dedicated and committed a black person should be when it comes to self defense:



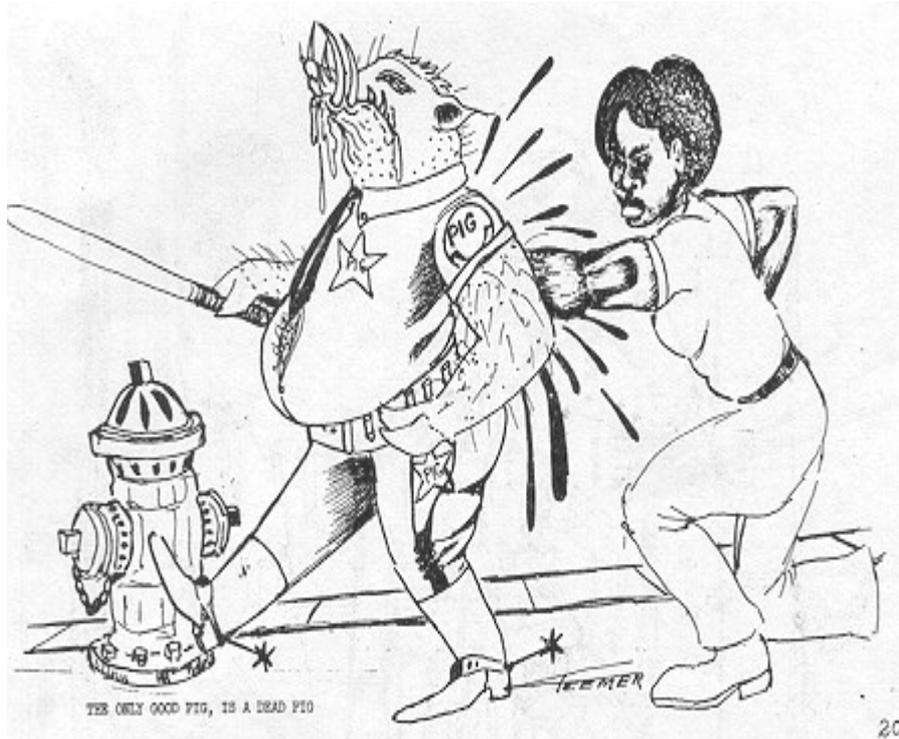


BROTHERS AND SISTERS DEAL WITH THE WHITE STORE OWNERS THAT HURT BLACK PEOPLE

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THE BRAVE BLACK PANTHER DEFENDS HIS FAMILY



To utter surprise to the so called white feminists in U.S. it was hard to believe that the power shift and leadership after Huey P. Newton's arrest will be in the hands of black women of BPP. As Elaine Brown in her fury argues that:

Oddly, I had never thought of myself as a feminist. I had even been denounced by certain radical feminist collectives as a "lackey" for men. That charge was based on my having written and sung two albums of songs that my female accusers claimed elevated and praised men. Resenting that label, I had joined the majority of black women in America in denouncing feminism. It was an idea reserved for white women, I said, assailing the women's movement, wholesale, as either racist or inconsequential to black people. Sexism was a secondary problem. Capitalism and racism were primary. I had maintained that position even in the face of my exasperation with the chauvinism of Black Power men in general and Black Panther men in particular. Now hearing the ugly intent of my opponent's words, I trembled with a fury long buried. I recognized the true meaning of his words. He was not talking about making love with women he (refers to the young negro man during her trial in San Quentin Six Case and Betty Van Patter's murder) was attacking me for *valuing* women. The feminists were right. The value of my life had been obliterated as much by being female as by being black and poor. Racism and sexism in America were equal partners in my oppression. Even men who were themselves oppressed wanted power over women. Whatever social stigma had been intended by the label "lesbian"-always invoked when men felt threatened, I observed with the benefit of hindsight-did not concern me. It was simply the rattle of a man terrorized by a social order dominated by other men. It was a social order I was bent on destroying. But these accusations did wake me. There would be no further impositions on me by men, including black men, including Black Panther men. I would support every assertion of

human rights by women—from the right to abortion to the right of equality with men as laborers and leaders. I would declare that the agenda of the Black Panther Party and our revolution to free black people from oppression specifically included black women.¹⁶

It was not only the revolutionary rhetoric that made BPP the prime targets of extermination. It was also most importantly the community work the Panthers did. After the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, the black police workers formed their own organization and tried improving their community relations.

By the summer of 1968 concern over the relationship of the police to the black community began to be shared by black officers on the force. The Afro-American Patrolmen's League (AAPL), formed in the spring of that year, began to exert pressure within and without the department to alter the existing relationships between the police and the community. The AAPL represented far more than a black version of one of the many traditional police associations. A founder of the organization, Renault Robinson, described its formation as follows: "The League wanted the public to know that they formed to improve the relationship between the black community and the black policemen. Also, the League wanted to change the relationship between the white policemen and the black community." More significantly, Robinson said: "A group of black policemen wanted to fracture the traditional relationship that existed between themselves and the police administration and the black community. This relationship is, of course, a colonial police type relationship. The white police administration has used the black police against black people. This is the only reason black police make it impossible to integrate the police force, or deploy black police in sufficient numbers in

¹⁶Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* 367-368

the white community. Therefore black police have only one function and that function is "pawns" of the white man to be used against black people.¹⁷

Another set of community establishments that BPP started was and strove towards was “Breakfast for Children pulls people out of the system and organizes them into an alternative. Black children who go to school hungry each morning have been organized into their poverty, and the Panther program liberates them, frees them from that aspect of their poverty. This is liberation in practice If we can understand Breakfast for Children, can we not also understand Lunch for Children, and Dinner for Children, and Clothing for Children, and Education for Children, and Medical Care for Children? And if we can understand that, why can't we understand not only a People's Park, but People's Housing, and People's Transportation, and People's Industry and People's Banks? And why can't we understand a People's Government?": So wrote Eldridge Cleaver from exile in an article entitled "On Meeting the Needs of the People," published in *The Black Panther* of August 16, 1969.”¹⁸

Most of these programs and the fight towards them were the real achievements of the BPP. These achievements are rarely highlighted because it signals towards the alternative model of governance which is more like commune based development of the society and its functioning and every day running. For instance the functioning of Liberation schools after community kitchen and breakfast for children was a revolutionary model of development. Its plan was charted out in this manner:

¹⁷Roy Wilkins and Ramsey Clark, *Search and Destroy : A Report by the Commission of Inquiry into the Black Panthers and the Police*, 17

¹⁸Philip S. Foner, *Black Panthers Speak*, 167

Liberation School is the second of the many socialistic and educational programs that will be implemented by the Black Panther Party to meet the needs of the people. The first program began Wednesday, June 25 at 9th and Hearst Streets in Berkeley, California. The program is a success with the maximum participation coming from the youth and volunteers throughout the community. The curriculum is designed to meet the needs of the youth, to guide them in their search for revolutionary truths and principles. Brunch and a well-balanced lunch is served daily. Three days of the week are spent in class. Thursday is Film day and Friday is set aside for field trips throughout the community. The 30th of June marked the opening of two additional schools in East Oakland, and Hunters Point in San Francisco, California. Additional programs are scheduled to begin in the very near future throughout the Bay Area and across the country. The youth understand the struggle that's being waged in this society. It's evident by their eagerness to participate in the program. They understand that we're not fighting a race struggle, but in fact, a class struggle. They recognize the need for all oppressed people to unite against the forces that are making our lives unbearable. Their understanding manifests itself in their definitions, i.e. Revolution means Change; Revolutionaries are Changers; Liberation means Freedom and by their collective view of themselves as being part of a BIG FAMILY working, playing, and living together in the struggle. The beauty of socialism is seen through their daily practice while involving themselves in the program.¹⁹

Conclusion

The beauty of socialism as BPP documented its effort gets reiterated by the new generation of Black Panthers like Ta-Nehisi Coates who goes back the memory lanes and pens down what he could remember of those good days when he was a child:

¹⁹ Philip S. Foner, *Black Panthers Speak*, 170-171.

I wore a powder-blue short-sleeved shirt, matching navy Travel Fox, and stonewashed jeans. I had a green tie-dye book bag, with twin yellow ropes in place of straps. The back festooned with buttons, the totems of my champions—Bob Marley, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X. Nigger, I was fly—my cut, two days old, tops. The angles of my lineup could have cut the chains, freed the slaves. Likely, I hung a wooden ankh from my neck. Likely, I was armed with Knowledge of Self—*The COINTELPRO Papers* or *A Panther Is a Black Cat*.²⁰

A lot of people sacrificed to keep up the good revolutionary agenda that BPP started with utmost clarity of what they wanted and how they were trying to achieve it. But mostly the fearful aspect or paranoia has always been circulated or disseminated intentionally about the movement so that it blurs its real aims and objectives and also achievements and only generate fear of disruption of ‘normalcy’ a term synonymous to consensual or non-consensual exploitation. It is like George Jackson, famously known as the Soledad Brothers who while addressing the international situation made an appeal to the oppressed masses in America, he announces that:

International capitalism cannot be destroyed without the extremes of struggle. The entire colonial world is watching the blacks inside the U.S., wondering and waiting for us to come to our senses. Their problems and struggles with the American monster are much more difficult than they would be if we actively aided them. We are on the inside. We are the only ones (besides the very small white minority left) who can get at the monster's heart without subjecting the world to nuclear fire. We have a momentous historical role to act out if we will. The whole world for all time in the future will love us and remember us as the righteous people who made it possible for

²⁰Ta-Nehisi Coates—*The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, two sons and an unlikely road to manhood*, 82

the world to live on. If we fail through fear and lack of aggressive imagination, then the slaves of the future will curse us, as we sometimes curse those of yesterday. I don't want to die and leave a few sad songs and a hump in the ground as my only monument. I want to leave a world that is liberated from trash, pollution, racism, nation-states, nation-state wars and armies, from pomp, bigotry, parochialism, a thousand different brands of untruth, and licentious usurious economics.²¹

Finally, what drew BPP activists was this small poem by Huey P. Newton-

Revolutionary Suicide

By having no family,
I inherited the family of humanity.
By having no possessions,
I have possessed all.
By rejecting the love of one,
I received the love of all.
By surrendering my life
to the revolution,
I found eternal life.²²

²¹ George Jackson *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, xiv

²² Huey P. Newton with the assistance of J. Herman Blake, *Revolutionary Suicide*.

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“Fuck copyright. Feel free to mirror this book, print it out, quote parts of it, or better yet --

ACT upon it!” - Bobby Seale, Chairman, Black Panther Party led by the Minister of

Defense, Huey P. Newton, San Francisco County Jail, 1969-1970. Print.

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