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The Black Panther Party and State Repression

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Abstract:

The interpretation of the 1960s in America is always clouded by two opposing views. While a revolutionary faction believes that the Civil Rights Movement was the beginning of the crumbling of the edifice of racism, there is a class of critics who believe that the revolution of the 1960s died under the weight of its own rhetoric. An unbiased and objective study of the popular struggles of the blacks reveals that these movements did not die on their own accord, but were destroyed by the racist American power structure. While most research related to the Black Liberation Movement and the Black Panther Party in particular, emphasizes only on the ideological and political gaps and differences, this paper will focus on the coercive state agencies which were out on the mission to destroy the black movement. The complex yet subtle state repression subverted the dream of a functionally democratic society in America.

Keywords: Black Panther Party, State Repression, Black Liberation Movement, Civil Rights.

The Black Panther Party emerged as a progressive political organization in the 1960s when the air was heavy with the possibility of radical social change in America. The Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, California on 15 October 1966 by two young intellectuals Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. It was the last great thrust by the masses of black people in America to achieve a more democratic, humane and egalitarian society. The embryonic party outlined a Ten Point Program and a blueprint of community programs which would redress the long standing grievances of the people and bring about a fundamental change in the social fabric of America. The de-facto denial of every civil right to the African Americans called for urgent measures which would put an end to the rampant lynching of the Africans in America. The prominence that the party gained with their creative propaganda techniques and visual cachet brought them under the suspicious eye of the state order.

State repression, which the party also invited, is always motivated by political conditions. The government discriminates against and tries to eliminate every individual as well as the organization which tries to alter the existing political order. Change is the luxury that the political circles are empowered with and anybody who tempers with the designs of this minority is considered to be a threat and an enemy. The masses are expected to adhere to the orders which are imposed on them by the people in power and this arrangement is

considered to be the key to the larger good of the society. This is the propaganda that fuels the wheels of hegemony. Myra Marx Ferree has aptly defined repression as: "Repression evokes an image of central political authority using the formal apparatus of the state to put down rebellions, whether overtly or covertly holding the reins and directing the actions being taken in its defence. Repression is (in a sense) what states do." (27) Repression is a mechanism of the state that strives to counter domestic challenges and maintain the domestic order either through force or the threat of force. Governmental coercion is not without consequence to human affairs and lies at the core of the state as its defining feature. The dominant culture is the bigger narrative which is sponsored by the people in power and it is difficult to question it. When this dominant culture becomes autocratic in nature, then factions of sub-cultures arise which contest the immobility of the masses. Every revolution is led by groups of people who unite to create ripples in the status quo. But unfortunately, most revolutions do not have the luxury of culminating into a success and one such phenomenon was the Black Panther Party.

The consciousness of the American masses during the late 1960s was highly dominated by the Black Panthers. These young men dressed in black uniforms organised the black community for a revolutionary change. The turbulent sixties were reverberating with the popular party slogans "Power to the People" and "Off the Pigs". The party reached out to the heart of the black communities and implemented numerous community programs which took care of the basic needs of the residents of their communities. The party offered the people the hope that their community could be freed from the blatant racism, police brutality and inferior standard of living which was plaguing the African American community despite the non-violence inspired Civil Rights Movement. It was the revolutionary politics of the party and their commitment to armed self-defence which brought them on the radar of the government agencies. The decision to bear arms was motivated by the need to gain a visual appeal and connect with the masses, and at the same time it was a powerful alternative to the integration inspired civil rights movement. The integration directed civil rights movement was not altogether a failure, but despite dismantling the vestiges of segregation, it could not improve the life chances of the African American people. The Black Panther Party was a black revolutionary cadre organization which was committed to the empowerment of the African Americans. Political activist Sahu Barron aptly asserts that "the Black Panther Party revolutionary struggle represented not only a most genuine and thorough-going mass movement of that period, but remains the highest expression of Black liberation." (3) Due to the highly charged confrontations which took place between the Panthers and the police, they became the headline makers of the press. The political rallies organized by the Panthers captivated the American and international public, thus becoming a potential threat for the state. The obvious outcome was the relentless political state repression. The Black Panther Party became the primary target of the local, state and federal police agencies which comprehensively assaulted the party for the better part of its existence.

Various assault tactics were employed at the federal, state and local levels which ranged from arrests, detention, agent provocateurs, disinformation to electronic tapping and assassinations. The Federal Bureau of Investigation employed these tactics through its

counter intelligence program and support of the police at all levels. An explanation for such tendency of the state is offered by Christian Davenport in his critical work Media Bias, Perspective and State Repression as:

> When challenges arise (e.g., strikes, demonstrations, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and civil war), repression is applied in an effort to hinder or to eliminate the capacity to challenge government authorities by altering the challenger's recruitment, resource acquisition, communication, morale, and perceived probability of success. Additionally, repressive behaviour is used to inform challengers, the general population and foreign actors that such behaviour will not be tolerated. (77)

The FBI worked very intelligently to create a rift between the party members and shatter the alliance which was formed between the blacks and the whites. This state repression had an adverse effect on the effectiveness of the party and the vicious circle of the arrests and detentions of the party members distracted the members from the activities for organizing of the community. The nexus between the state and the FBI allowed them to incarcerate most of the Black Panthers and other radical African American activists, thus devastating their plans. J. Edgar Hoover became the director of FBI in 1924 and added a sense of autonomy to the FBI as against the larger unit of Justice Department. The FBI continued to stifle the voices of dissent in America by silencing all those thought to be communists. By 1960s, the repressive state apparatus in America relied heavily on the covert operations which were subtle and complex at the same time. The local police agencies were further militarized by providing them with assault rifles and other military technology in response to the growing rebellion in various states of America.

In 1967, Hoover released a counter intelligence program called the COINTELPRO which sought to "disrupt" and "neutralize" a number of "Black Nationalist Hate Groups". The list of the organizations on target included Nation of Islam, Revolutionary Action Movement, Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and eventually, the Black Panther Party. The Federal Bureau of Investigation Director, J. Edgar Hoover, once called the party "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" as quoted in the September 1968 issue of The New York Times. By the end of 1969 the Black Panthers had become the focus of the domestic war program of the FBI to counter independent Black political thought. The police treatment of the Black Panthers, including Bobby Seale, the chairman of the party was a vivid example of how arrests and detentions were misused by these agencies to drain the party of its resources. The house of Bobby Seale and Artie Seale was raided and they were arrested for the possession of shotguns and the proofs in the court fell short when their finger prints could not be found on the weapon. Along with arrests and detentions, the police agents also resorted to physical and electronic surveillance to neutralize the party. Another tactic which the FBI lavishly employed was "snitch-jacketing", which was an anonymous document that accused an activist of being informant to the police forces. Since the government had actually employed a lot of young men as agent provocateurs, it became difficult to see through the tricks of the state. The FBI had the legal record of all members of the party and sometimes they made a pact with the Panthers that if they agreed to be the agent provocateur, all charges against them would be dropped and they will be set free. The

malicious devices of the FBI didn't go in vain because the anonymous letters, calls and misinformation was slowly spreading the seeds of dissention everywhere.

The counter intelligence program capitalized greatly upon the rift that already existed between the Black Panther Party and Us organization in 1969. Taking advantage of the ideological battle between the two organizations, the FBI orchestrated the deaths of Panther Alprentice Bunchy Carter and John Huggins of Us and widened the distance between the two. The police stormed the Black Panther offices with great ferocity and very often to terrorize the party out of existence. Panther community activities like the free breakfast services and many other services for the uplift of the weakest sections of the society also had to suffer because FBI persuaded their supporters to withdraw and not cooperate with them in terms of parents, uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces. Many bogus letters were also released and sent to the Panthers David Hilliard and Elridge Cleaver to insinuate them with the idea that they are more deserving of being the head of the party than Huey P. Newton.

The immediate effect of all these FBI procedures was nothing short of internal chaos. All the false letters showed their effect in 1971 when Elridge Cleaver got into an argument with Huey Newton and challenged his decision about expulsion of one of the party members. There was a heavy shadow of confusion in the party because of getting so many letters from everybody and phones being tapped. The result of all this was mass distrust.

Angel Davis, a Black radical activist was put behind the bars for her political beliefs and she offered this definition of political imprisonment in 1971:

> There is a distinct and qualitative difference between one breaking a law for one's individual self interest and violating it in the interests of a class or a people whose oppression is expressed directly or indirectly through that particular law. The former might be called a criminal (though in many cases he is a victim), but the latter, as a reformist or revolutionary, is interested in universal social change. Captured, he or she is a political prisoner. (22)

Mumia Abu-Jamal who is also a former Philadelphia Black Panther is still incarcerated and is on the death row. He left the party during the split that came about between Huey Newton and Elridge Cleaver, the two most seminal Black Panthers. He said in this regard: "I felt that it was proper to fight the system, but when the system can manipulate you into fighting your own, then the system wins and the people lose." (151)

Thus, the FBI, in conjunction with the state and local law enforcement agencies, launched a fierce campaign to imprison most of the dedicated key activists so that the party and their movement becomes rudderless. They were the prisoners who were arrested for their thoughts, ideas and beliefs which were not in line with the dominant world order. Such prisoners challenge the general assumption that all those who are behind the bars are criminals. Rather the government uses various tricks to criminalize the legitimate movements of the activists.

Conclusion

The covert domestic war that the State launched against the Black Panther Party and other revolutionary groups had the motive of complete destruction of the dissent which these parties had floated among the masses. The predominant objective of the American government was avoidance of defeat from any agency of the commoners. Herman Bell, another political prisoner has observed in this regard that the inexperience of the young leaders of the party became a major reason for the demise of the party. He further observed: "Given the level of sophistication, unlimited manpower and resources available to the federal government's repressive machinery, it was not only understandable that the party met its eventual demise, but remarkable that the party lasted as long as it did." (11)

It would be unjust to declare the moment as an absolute failure because their actions are a lesson for the future generation of activists and a warning against the infiltration techniques of the state agencies. Every social movement is prone to fall prey to the government repression, intra-organizational conflicts and strategic errors. The confluence of the intra-party conflicts and party authoritarianism led to the dismantling of the party. Government repression is likely to occur for every radical social movement and it becomes detrimental if the core of the party is not strong. The crucial lesson to be learnt is that a revolutionary group should ensure that there are no internal contradictions in their party because the State agencies look upon those as potential loopholes. The sophisticated ways of the federal agencies have been very cowardly to feel scared of the activists who were making survival conditions better at the usually neglected grass roots level.

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