The Black Panther Party – A Closer Look

Thesis Mentor: Prof. Dr. K. Kennard
Program Director: Prof. G. Buelens
The Black Panther Party – A Closer Look
What They Were About & Its Relevance and Effect Today

Nathalie Beeckman
Ghent University
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Introduction

The Black Panther Party (BPP) was either one of the most successful components of the US Civil Rights Movement or it was just its evil younger brother, the jury is still out.\(^1\) The basis for this disagreement can be found in the notion that the BPP’s delivery, audience and even its deeper aims differed radically from the iconic Martin Luther King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).\(^2\) On the surface the broader aims of the BPP and MLK might have been not dissimilar – both identified respect for human rights, and freedom and justice for black people\(^3\) – on a deeper level the differences were clear. King rallied and articulated his dream of an integrated society where black and white could live peacefully together, while the BPP seemed disinterested in integration into white America. They were fighting for a separate but equally powerful black community. This was partly inspired by the ideas of Malcolm X and his Nation of Islam, who also advocated the partition of black and white Americans. Malcolm’s assassination in 1965, just a year before the Black Panther Party was founded, had only helped highlight this growing gap between the despair felt by many impoverished black Americans and the inclusive notions of King.\(^4\)

The method used by the BPP and the SCLC to accomplish their goals was also seemingly very different. The Black Panthers advocated violence in order to free the black community from white dominance while King and his SCLC tried to accomplish their aims through a powerful message of non-violence.\(^5\) Last but not least, the audience of these two organizations differed greatly. While King aimed at older progressives in the South the BPP directed their actions at the northern ghetto – at the very heart of the poor, disfranchised and often-uneducated black youth. One could also observe that the Civil Rights Movement moved north between 1965 and 1967, just like many blacks had moved north before to escape segregation. The fleeing migrants hoped to find the ‘Promised Land’ but their destination usually met just a different form of social control: the black ghetto.\(^6\) Moreover, the civil disobedience strategy did not work in the northern setting where urban revolutionaries rejected the method,\(^7\) so over there the Civil Rights Movement radicalized and became much more complicated. The BPP perceived themselves as a completion of the shortcomings of the southern-based Civil Rights Movement.\(^8\) They were now directly fighting for reform of the federal government instead of struggling against Jim Crow laws, a heritage of the Confederacy. Moreover, in some ways segregation in the North was often worse than in the South.\(^9\)

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The death of Malcolm X seemed to have created a void in the evolving Black Power movement. By the mid 1960’s King’s graduated response to civil rights was losing its effect and influence; non-violence did not seem to be the way to many young angry blacks living in unequal conditions compared to their white counterparts. All the marches, freedom rides, bus strikes and lunch sit-ins might had done much to highlight the inequities of the American social system but had these methods really helped change anything? Had King’s belief that the black community could be part of the American Dream been swallowed up by conservative America that looked to nullify any notion of real societal change? The peaceful approach King advocated might have been powerful but it also led to countless beatings, acts of extreme white violence, and the deaths of many innocent black citizens. And it still did not set them free. The influence of Martin Luther King seemed to be fading; he was now considered to be the spokesperson for blacks by older progressive African Americans in the South and by liberal whites. Young blacks and their idealist young white allies were looking for a new black leader to emphasize their changing beliefs and to guide them in a direction of a more militant approach. The environment was now right for the birth of the Black Panther Party. In the mean time white America, which had called him a radical only a few years before, started to embrace Martin Luther King now. Since the popularity of radical organizations increased, whites started to appreciate MLK more and more, as being the lesser of two evils. One could say that as radical black leaders became more popular among black people, King’s popularity automatically increased among white people.

On 15 May 1967 the BPP offered through its leadership Huey Newton and Bobby Seale a Ten Point Platform and Program, which included as its most important subjects freedom, employment, decent housing, and education for black people. An immediate end to police brutality and the robbery of the black community by white capitalists was another major demand included in this ‘seditious’ document, which had a very concrete and straightforward character. The most important aspects being summarized in point ten the BPP simply demanded “Land, Bread, Housing Education, Clothing, Justice and Peace”, followed by a piece of text closely referencing the American Constitution, therewith punctuating the importance of the program.

Therefore, within the context of this program we consider the BPP’s philosophy, method, origins, its effect on the Civil Rights Movement and the outcome of its confrontational approach, in order to be able to interpret the ultimate impact and relevance of the Black Panthers on American society. The focus almost exclusively will be on the 1966-1971 period when the BPP was most influential and operated nationwide. After 1971, when Newton was released from prison, the impact of the BPP

\[10\] H. Pearson, The Shadow of the Panther (Cambridge, 1994) p. 51
\[12\] H. Pearson, The Shadow of the Panther (Cambridge, 1994) p. 64
faded quickly. Its eventual tragic demise was already visible even though the Party existed for some more years to come. This particular part of Black Panther history is – although interesting enough to write a separate thesis about – not very relevant in the scope of this research. The same applies to another aspect of the BPP that will be disregarded, which is their international approach. Although an important aspect of their legacy, which transcended the national borders of the United States, it was excluded here because of the strictly American, national focus of this thesis. Considering the recent events of racial tension in the United States we will investigate if the BPP’s ideology is still relevant today and, last but not least, we will look into the shooting of the black teenager Michael Brown and its aftermath. Taking these happenings into consideration, has anything really changed at all in terms of race relations in the United States?

When the unarmed black eighteen-year-old was shot and killed in Ferguson on August 9, 2014 by a white police officer, the black majority of the town was outraged. Weeks of protest, both peacefully and violent, followed the incident. The black inhabitants of Ferguson, already living with racial tension with the majority white government and police, did not accept the explanation of self-defense officer Wilson gave after the shooting. The belief that Brown was facing the police officer when he was shot and most probably was in the midst of surrendering, led to major unrest in the community. The large amount of twelve bullets the officer fired did not help his case much either. When on November 24 a grand jury decided officer Wilson would not be indicted, unrest flared up again in Ferguson and soon spread to other parts of the country.

Nationwide protests against unnecessary police brutality were held and attended by many, both black and white, as if the hands of time were turned back almost half a century to the late 1960’s, the heyday of the Black Panther Party. It seemed that the whole country has become involved when similar incidents as the Michael Brown case took place during a short period of time in New York, Dallas, Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland and Baltimore – the Eric Garner case in New York being the most infamous one. On July 17, 2014, Garner was suspected of illegally selling cigarettes on the streets in Staten Island and was being held in a chokehold after he allegedly resisted arrest. He was already pronounced dead upon arrival in the hospital. In this case too the grand jury decided not to indict the involved officer Pantaleo, intensifying national protests already in place for Michael Brown. The protests were gaining further notoriety with slogans such as “Hands up, don’t shoot” (which is probably what Brown did when being confronted with officer Wilson), “I can’t breathe” (which is what Garner apparently uttered eleven times when lying face-down on the pavement) and “#BlackLivesMatter” (a Twitter statement used to show involvement and empathy with the ongoing demonstrations). Eventually events got really out of hand when two random police officers were shot in cold blood in New York out of revenge for the black lives lost, and when Baltimore changed into a warzone after the unnecessary killing of Freddie Gray.

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The focal point in all these recent events was once again the ever-existing police brutality and in a wider context the still present racial prejudice against African Americans. Topics closely related to the key points the Black Panther Party was fighting for in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, which is why the differences and similarities, and basically the link between then and now are worth investigating. The BPP, in their time, tried to change the existing American mindset regarding racial matters. Do these recent events prove they did not succeed? And what needs to be done to really start changing this entrenched state of mind?

In the first chapter we will discuss the context and the origins of the ideas of the Black Panther Party and all its major influences. Malcolm X will be addressed as the BPP’s most important example, including the reasons why they did not simply choose to join his ranks. We will discuss how they eventually continued Malcolm X’s ideology and what the links between them are, even though there were some major differences between them too. We will also focus on the difference with King’s SCLC, and the differences and similarities between the BPP and all other black power organizations that were relevant back then will be discussed too, and we will address other specific influences on the Panthers.

In the second chapter we will look deeper into the foundation, personalities and politics of the Black Panther Party and interpret the BPP’s two major characteristics, being the encouragement and use of violence, and the Party’s ghetto background and audience. We will take a look at the history of the BPP, its most important leaders and the creation of the Ten Point Program and Platform and its contents. The Panther’s growing popularity and the positive aspects will be discussed but also the organization’s criminal image, its internal struggles and the problems they had with the FBI. We will then focus on the reasons for the founding of the Black Panther Party, putting emphasis on the topic of police brutality and the reason why they adopted their own particular strategy such as they did. Eventually we will shortly discuss the release from prison of Huey Newton, the change he tried to bring and the Party’s quick demise after that.

In chapter three we will debate the BPP’s effects by recognizing their legacy. We will discuss how the Panthers’ violent image proved to be both a blessing and a curse, in what way the overpowering police attention determined the direction of the Party and what the nationwide media attention did to the Black Power organization. We will also argue how the BPP fitted into the zeitgeist of the 1960’s and whether or not this proved to be an advantage to them. We will then discuss the difference between the BPP’s cultural and political heritage and finally conclude how today’s society looks back on the Black Panther Party and how it values their legacy.

Chapter four will link us to contemporary society and addresses the question whether the BPP’s approach could still be useful today. We will research some latest examples of extreme police brutality and the responses that followed nationwide in the form of demonstrations and protests.
Similarities and differences between the situations then and now will be investigated and we will try and determine whether or not the Black Panther methods could help the black community advance. BPP-inspired organizations that pop-up throughout the country might point to the conclusion that indeed, a party like the Black Panthers is still very much needed today. Conversely, even though in some ways the situation seems to be even worse compared to the BPP era, there are still signals of hope and change to be found.

Chapter five eventually will expand the focus to whether or not anything has really changed in terms of race relations in the United States. Blacks are represented in government functions all over the country – we even have a black president now – and have therefore much more influence than before but the question remains what exactly this does for the black community. Police brutality is still there, blacks are still being killed in the streets, and officers are still hardly prosecuted for these deeds. The issues blacks struggle with seem to be more or less the same as in the 1960’s and 1970’s. We will also focus on the media and investigate the difference between the portrayals of black riots in comparison to white riots. We will of course also research the influence of the Black Panther Party on race relations and compare that to the legacy of King’s Civil Rights Movement.

To get to know everything we need to know about the Black Panther Party and in order to be able to write this thesis, it is worthwhile to get a quick overview of what already has been written about the organization. On one hand, this is a lot; there are tons of books and articles on the Black Panthers, their leaders, their philosophy, their approach etc. On the other hand though, it is hard to escape the thought that the BPP still has not been researched thoroughly enough to get the full picture – from all different angles – of this complex movement and its aims and accomplishments. Many books seem to be one-sided or biased, and therefore do not do full justice to the organization the BPP really was.

At least three phases can be distinguished in the Black Panther Party historiography: the participant-observer period, which mostly consists of eyewitness testimonies such as published works of former Panthers and other contemporary witnesses. Then there is the empiricist-activist period, which basically starts in 1994 with the publication of Hugh Pearson’s very influential but also controversial account on Newton’s life: The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America. In this period scholars mostly focused on a straightforward analysis of the BPP’s activism and politics. The last phase is usually called the Post-Pearson era, which we are in now. Emphasis has shifted to the BPP’s continuing place in African American and American popular culture, and the role of political activism is often downplayed. If one dives into the literature that exists of the Black Panther Party it is important to consider in which period a certain work has been written en by whom, in order to be able to place a work in the right context and time.

Chapter 1: Origins & Context

All predecessors of the Black Panther Party, such as King’s SCLC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – originally founded by W.E.B. DuBois – had a mostly peaceful approach. The BPP truly advocated violence as a core principle of its beliefs and, as opposed to most other black movements, had its origins in the ghetto. The Panthers represented the poor, unemployed ‘brothers from the block’. This was – according to founder Huey P. Newton – exactly what made them stand out from other organizations that failed “to recruit and involve the very people they professed to represent – the poor people in the community who never went to college, probably were not even able to finish high school”.

After MLK’s ‘safe’ middle-class approach, the BPP managed to take the revolution to the ghetto. The respect King received from the white establishment, never applied to the ghetto blacks. The Panthers wanted nothing to do with ‘assimilated’ blacks. They considered them coons or Uncle Toms who denied their own culture and identity in order to fit into white society. The BPP had a special word for them: ‘armchair revolutionaries’; they might have had great intellectual ideas but were not ready to stand in the line of duty and to die for the cause. Or as Huey Newton remarked in his autobiography: “We had seen Martin Luther King come to Watts in an effort to calm the people and we had seen his philosophy of nonviolence rejected. Black people had been taught nonviolence; it was deep in us. What good, however, was nonviolence when the police determined to rule by force?” Newton was probably right, in the urban jungles of the northern cities the method MLK advocated was more or less useless; violence and aggression were an everyday reality there.

So the new generation blacks, especially in the North, were sick of ‘turning the other cheek’ to the white violators and racists. They might have had a dream too but it was different from King’s dream of integration and harmony. And as opposed to King, they refused to gently ask for change by trying to get laws installed. Instead they simply demanded it by responding to force with force. This made them outlaws and it made the white establishment point the finger at them, calling them a bunch of thugs. But as Tupac Shakur, son of Black Panther Afeni Shakur, later pointed out in his song Violent, the Panthers were being violent because in order to be heard they had no other choice. And also, they were taught to act as such by their own country that was based on violence since its foundation:

They claim that I’m violent

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20 J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 111
21 R. Major, The Panther is a Black Cat (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 63
22 J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 107
23 H.P. Newton, Revolutionary Suicide (New York, 1995) p. 110
Just cause I refuse to be silent
...
I told them fight back, attack on society
If this is violence, then violent is what I got to be
If you investigate you’ll find out where it’s coming from
Look to our history, America is the violent one

As Malcolm X argued, America is proud of its violent character, whites take great pride in their picking up the arms during the American Revolution, fighting the Native Americans, dropping bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II, and killing people oversees in all kind of wars. But as soon as black people started to be violent it is labeled as being wrong, even if it is meant as self-defense.

Despite the differences, King’s Civil Rights movement had an influence on the Black Panther Party. They were also influenced by many other Black Power organizations, as well as revolutionary struggles in Africa, Asia and Latin America, countless books, political organizations, the streets, and many other things. The militant black leader Malcolm X and his Nation of Islam formed the BPP’s major inspiration though. Both Newton and Seale had been huge admirers of Malcolm X and went to watch him speak on several occasions during the early 1960’s. His debating skills were unbelievably strong and many black Civil Rights activists, King included, were scared to step into a discussion with Malcolm X, which gained the respect of the future leaders of the BPP. Conversely from King, Malcolm X spoke to people in the street, people just like Huey Newton. This is probably one of the reasons Newton was so attracted to this outspoken black leader. He said about him: “Malcolm impressed me with his logic and with his disciplined and dedicated mind. Here was a man who combined the world of the streets and the world of the scholar, a man so widely read he could give better lectures and cite more evidence than many college professors... He knew what the street brothers were like, and he knew what had to be done to reach them”. Newton admired this approach and started to self-educate himself by reading a lot. A street brother he already was.

While Malcolm X was still alive (he was killed in 1965; probably by three Nation of Islam members. He had a conflict with the organization, parted ways and since then was repeatedly threatened by them, which eventually resulted in his assassination), Newton and Seale never really considered joining his ranks though, probably because Malcolm X’s Nation of Islam would never approve of their lifestyle. The Nation demanded discipline and abstinence, aspects Newton and Seale did not necessarily pursue. They took a certain pride in their tough street-like behavior – Newton especially

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was feared and respected by many – which according to them was part of being a true revolutionary. Another aspect that did not attract them was the religious focus of the Nation of Islam. Instead of joining Malcolm X, the two future Panther leaders chose to seek refuge in several other (smaller) Black Power movements. None of those proved to be truly satisfactory.

Though definitely influential, all other Black Power movements differed from the Black Panther Party, which explains why there was room for yet another black militant organization in the late 1960’s. The discrepancy with both Kings beliefs and those of the NAACP was that the Panthers were not interested in integration. They were not aiming for blacks to go to white schools and live in white neighborhoods; they wanted their own specific place in society. The BPP saw integration as a technique of the dominant majority to exert power over African Americans. Another major difference with King’s SCLC was that the BPP was not at all affiliated with the opposition to the Jim Crow laws, typical of the South. The big difference with the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) was that the Panthers practiced an above ground campaign for revolutionary struggle, instead of underground, as RAM did. According to the BPP being underground was part of the initial problem. By going above the ground the revolution became visible and concrete to the ordinary people they tried to reach. The main objective was to be loud and to be heard: here we are and you cannot ignore us any longer. SNCC did form a major influence and a blueprint for activism – the BPP borrowed their idea to identify with the people they worked with – but they were more southern-based than the Panthers and therefore different in their specific approach. MLK’s Civil Rights movement largely influenced SNCC while the BPP formed itself more after the northern-based black nationalism.

So we can state that the Black Panthers did not form an isolated phenomenon but were influenced by many. They borrowed from the large landscape of the history of political black struggle, having their roots firmly in the ongoing fight for black civil rights. The BPP simply mixed all of the existing ideologies together and gave their own militant and a bit of a communist twist to it. They did not try to civilize black people, or educate them; instead the BPP tolerated and even advocated rough behavior, criminality, heavy drinking and violence. This created a new sort of self-consciousness that gave blacks a certain feeling of invincible manhood. The question remains whether this tough image worked for or against them, which will be touched upon further in this thesis.

When we take a closer look into the Black Panther philosophy, the origins can be found in a few specific inspirations. The Panther’s basic ideology was derived from socialist and communist

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33 C.J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall* (University of Arkansas, 2006) p. xx
revolutionaries such as Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Ming and Ernesto Che Guevara because, as Newton said: “We believed it was necessary to know how they gained their freedom in order to go about getting ours”. To emphasize this belief he was selling Mao Zedong’s Little Red Book to UC Berkeley students, making it the BPP’s basic revolutionary lexicon. Newton even made a little profit from it, which he spent on further building his movement.

Frantz Fanon, a French-Algerian revolutionary, philosopher and writer, formed another major inspiration. In his famous book *The Wretched of the Earth* the author explains his theory of anticolonial struggle, which consists of using violence to fight the oppressor, just like the Black Panthers advocated violence against their oppressor; the police who represented the white power structure. Fanon wrote: “violence frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect”. Black Panther member Earl Anthony claimed: “Fanon was to us the apostle of violence. For us *The Wretched Earth* was like a roadmap to revolution”. The whole involvement of the ‘brother off the block’ in the revolutionary struggle was directly taken from Fanon. Eldridge Cleaver later said: “Every brother on a rooftop can quote Fanon”. The book also inspired Newton to turn away from strict black nationalism. It expanded his revolutionary scope to an international arena. He tried to develop an anti-colonist analysis with which he tried to make sense of the urban black ghettos (forms of colonization too, in his eyes) in his home country.

Another fascination of Newton and Seale was the book *Negroes with Guns* by Robert F. Williams, local chairman of the NAACP in Monroe. In his writing, the rebelling Williams explained the legitimacy of self-defense for black people as a basic human right. The Black Panthers imported this into their own philosophy and tried to transform all they had learned into principles and methods acceptable and understandable to the brothers on the block. Abstract concepts such as equality of law and economic justice were translated into more concrete methods such as stopping police brutality, attacking the racist criminal justice system and expressing the need for community action. Or, as stated in the Ten Points Program, their goals can be summarized by: “We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.”

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37 J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 109
39 H. Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther* (Cambridge, 1994) p. 113
41 F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York, 1963) p. 94
42 J.A. Courtright, ‘Rhetoric of the Gun’, p. 253
43 H. Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther* (Cambridge, 1994) p. 95
46 H. Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther* (Cambridge, 1994) p. 28
Chapter 2: Foundation, personalities, policies & politics

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, as the organization was originally named, was founded in Oakland on October 22, 1966. It originated from the frustration of the black community, the high crime rate, the situation of dispossession and the existing police brutality in Oakland. The city had a 44 percent black population but African Americans were hardly represented in the town’s politics, which made it almost impossible to influence the city government in any way. The BPP’s founders were Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, two men with modest backgrounds who met each other in Merritt College. They joined various militant Black Power organizations before deciding to start their own, since they did not really feel properly represented in any of those groups. Their first act of significance was writing the Ten Point Platform and Program, “What We Want, What We Believe”, a statement of principles that came to form the core ideology of the movement. It was called a “combination of a Bill of Rights and a Declaration of Independence” but was mostly just a list of concrete requirements. The program basically just highlighted what the Black Panthers wanted to achieve for the black community. In order to understand the direction and goals of the Black Panther Party it is important to acknowledge these points, which were, since their publication on May 15, 1967, included in every edition of the Black Panther newspaper.

Some of the points the program included: freedom to determine the destiny of the black community, full employment for black people, an end to the robbery by capitalists of the black community, decent housing fit for shelter of human beings, education for black people including focus on black history, exemption from military service for all black men, an end to police brutality and the murder of black people, and the right for blacks to be tried in front of a jury of their peers (as opposed to all-white juries as was common back then). All points are easy to understand and straightforward so every black man in the ghetto was able to comprehend the Ten Point Program. The deeper philosophy behind the Black Panther Party can be found in their other writings, their speeches and their deeds.

Writing the Ten Point Program was a start, but implementing it was quite something else. When the BPP was founded its first goal was to stop police brutality in their local communities. The ghettos in Oakland, where most black inhabitants lived, were infamous for their high crime rates and poverty, which is something Seale and Newton tried to come to understand. They came to the conclusion that all the violence and chaos present in the black communities was caused by oppression. White institutions and white rulers controlled most in society and in order to keep blacks

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49 J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 108
51 R. Major, The Panther is a Black Cat (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 4 & 16
54 Y. Williams, ‘Some Abstract Thing Called Freedom’, p. 19
55 R. Major, The Panther is a Black Cat (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 61
56 J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 105
down they tried to keep power out of the hands of African Americans. The method to do so was keeping the people poor and sending police into the ghettos to intimidate blacks and in that way display their white authority. And this is exactly why the BPP’s initial main focus was on police brutality; they believed the American police structure was the most immediate representation of racist aggression. The police was seen as an evil force occupying black communities. The Panthers reasoned that in order to bring about social change and set their black brothers to action, they had to reduce police brutality within their own communities. Of course, matters were not that simple but at least it was a start.

Their aim was therefore to empower young inner city youth by creating a feeling of confidence and bravado among them. So the Panthers started patrolling their neighborhoods, monitoring the police while the police was monitoring them. This behavior of flashing guns in front of the cops while advising black citizens on their rights when being arrested quickly gained the BPP notoriety in the streets and beyond. The organization’s use of violence, its aggressive approach and its hostile attitude towards the ‘racist police’ eventually did decrease police brutality in the ghetto but mostly locally and on a short term. In the long run police brutality proved to be hard to eradicate which will be shown and discussed later in this thesis. A positive effect the toughness displayed by the Panthers created was a sense of black pride and solidarity within the poor neighborhoods. The Black Panthers confronted power with power. The police was definitely not the only worry of the BPP though, which is often wrongfully suggested. But since they did form the forefront of white supremacy and the larger white power structure, the police force simply stood in the line of fire of the BPP’s dynamism to bring social change. It was seen as a start, not as an ultimate goal, but it is still something they are remembered for, especially since it is such a hot topic again today.

The BPP’s aggressive and militant approach was similar to the method of Malcolm X, who died a few years before the foundation of the Black Panther Party. This was another reason for Newton and Seale to start their own organization. They wanted to continue in the spirit of the murdered radical black activist – calling themselves “the heirs of Malcolm” and tried to carry on his original program. The Black Panthers started to strongly evoke the white power structure too, and, like their example, other Black Power movements did not really know how to deal with them. Should they be ignored since they were just a bunch of troublemakers, or should they be welcomed warmly into the Black Power movement as their popularity among blacks increased? Also like Malcolm, the BPP started to advocate black separatism, made territorial claims, and wanted nationhood, identity

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57 R. Major, *The Panther is a Black Cat* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 32, 39 & 52
60 J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 111
63 R. Major, *The Panther is a Black Cat* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 66
and determination to self-defense. Most of those aims might quite obviously form the basic building blocks for political freedom anyway.\(^\text{66}\) That Malcolm X especially inspired them follows from the claim Seale made: “if Malcolm had not been killed the BPP would probably not even have existed”.\(^\text{67}\) Hereby suggesting that in that case there would not have been a need for a Party such as the Black Panthers.

Subsequently the Nation of Islam advocated black pride, articulated anti-white rhetoric (Malcolm X called whites “greedy, irredeemable devils”)\(^\text{68}\), and called for self-defense (“by any means necessary”).\(^\text{69}\) All this largely attracted the founders of the Panthers although their ideology differed slightly.\(^\text{70}\) Malcolm X was never specifically violent while the Panther swore to their guns (and used them). In that sense, the Panthers displayed an even bolder form of militancy and bravado than Malcolm X, unmatched on that scale before.\(^\text{71}\) Simultaneously, the Nation of Islam was strongly anti-white, advocating separation of the races and a homeland for black people in designated areas in the United States. The BPP did not go as far, claiming they did not hate white people they just hated the white power structure.\(^\text{72}\) Actively cooperating with white allies, such as the BPP did at times, did lose them some credibility in the black community though, especially among African Americans strictly focusing on black nationalism but the Panthers decided to take this for granted.\(^\text{73}\) To them, their struggle was not only a race thing but a class thing as well. They wanted to transform American society into some form of socialism.

The BPP’s strong belief in violence and armed resistance, and their encouragement to use it against the system made them stand out from other Black Power organizations. The Panther leadership believed black political power could only be executed from the barrel of a gun.\(^\text{74}\) David Hilliard, Chief of Staff of the BPP, advocated “the very direct overthrow of the government by way of force and violence. By picking up guns and moving against it.” A radical, revolutionary approach like that hardly ever succeeds but at least the Panthers were able to finally get the attention of the white American power structure. Impoverished blacks were now heard and could no longer simply be ignored as if they did not exist. According to Hilliard “the only solution is armed struggle.”\(^\text{75}\) Huey Newton took this very literally when he shot and killed officer John Frey on October 18 1967, after being stopped by the police for reasons he found ridiculous.\(^\text{76}\) Things escalated quickly, eventually leaving Frey dead and Newton and another police officer seriously wounded.

\(^{66}\) R. Major, *The Panther is a Black Cat* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 65
\(^{67}\) “All Power to the People”
\(^{68}\) H. Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther* (Cambridge, 1994) p. 23
\(^{69}\) J.A. Courtright, ‘Rhetoric of the Gun’, p. 253
\(^{74}\) R. Major, *The Panther is a Black Cat* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 1
\(^{75}\) D.J. Garrow, ‘Picking up the Books’, p. 655
Even with their leader in jail, the BPP did not sit still. The incarceration of Newton created major attention throughout the country. The Panthers became the new black heroes in African American communities, mixing the inherited calmness and self-assurance of Malcolm X with their pride and street toughness, inspiring urban youth nationwide.\textsuperscript{77} All this led to an enormous growth of the Party, its popularity, and its fame.\textsuperscript{78} While prominent leader Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information of the BPP, tried to control the whole media circus suddenly surrounding the organization, Panthers from the lower ranks undertook serious, concrete action.\textsuperscript{79} Besides patrolling the community on a daily basis in order to protect inhabitants from the police, they were teaching black history classes, promoting welfare and tenants rights, founding health care clinics, establishing their famous Free Breakfast for Children program, their Free Clothing for Children program, and they were investigating incidents of police brutality. The Panthers also initiated the Seniors Against a Fearful Environment (S.A.F.E.) program.\textsuperscript{80} Unfortunately, these community-building aspects were hardly ever noticed. In contrast to all the violent shoot-outs and events, the positive elements of the Party did not receive any serious media attention at all.\textsuperscript{81}

So despite all these positive initiatives the Black Panther Party remained surrounded by an aura of violence and extremism. Whether the BPP was a sincere Black Power movement trying to accomplish equality and a voice for black people, or just a bunch of thugs using violence to get their way,\textsuperscript{82} is still subject of an ongoing debate today. Opinions vary widely. Depending on the books one reads the BPP is either pictured one way or the other, which makes it hard to uncover the real story.\textsuperscript{83} Fact is that the Party has always been surrounded by controversy. Their own leader – dubbed “the baddest motherfucker ever to set foot in history” by Cleaver – shot and killed a man and was locked up in prison for almost three years. Besides that there is a long list of other events referring to the violent and sometimes criminal nature of the Party. The Panthers used provocative slogans such as “Guns, baby, guns” and “off the pig”,\textsuperscript{84} and acted and lived accordingly.

The BPP probably contained segments of both a criminal and a political militant organization. There were people involved in the Party with nothing but bad intentions, but at the same time violence was simply the method the Panthers believed in, and basically the only method they knew. To them, it was the way to declare their manhood and their freedom from the white oppressor.\textsuperscript{85} In their eyes the non-violent path had already been tried by Martin Luther King and failed miserably. And they were probably right about that, not much had really changed since. The Black Panthers were now

\textsuperscript{77} J. Lazerow & Y. Williams, \textit{In Search of the Black Panther Party} (London, 2006) p. 38
\textsuperscript{78} J. Lazerow & Y. Williams, \textit{In Search of the Black Panther Party} (London, 2006) p. 335
\textsuperscript{79} Y. Williams, ‘Some Abstract Thing Called Freedom’, p. 19
\textsuperscript{80} J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 110
\textsuperscript{82} J. Street, ‘The Historiography of the Black Panther Party’, p. 360
\textsuperscript{83} J. Lazerow & Y. Williams, \textit{In Search of the Black Panther Party} (London, 2006) p. 6
\textsuperscript{84} R. Major, \textit{The Panther is a Black Cat} (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 61 & 71
\textsuperscript{85} J.A. Courtright, ‘Rhetoric of the Gun’, p. 249
fighting to reclaim their culture, their dignity, their humanity and their history. They advocated that only blacks should make decisions for blacks, which is why they wanted to bring the “Power to the People”, another famous Panther slogan. And they did so in their own way, which was basically from the barrel of a gun. Violence was simply used to emphasize their point. The Party probably evoked so much restraint because of their aggressive style rather than their demands, and because of that style they were, as Grace put it, “forever skirting the border between radical politics and illegal activity”. So both sides need to be taken into consideration when analyzing the BPP, but it would be a shortcoming to label them either only the first of the latter.

Their radical behavior quickly made them a prime focus of the FBI and the Oakland Police Department. The BPP evoked major police attention with their provocative activities, and Edgar J. Hoover, Director of the FBI, even declared: “the Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to internal security of the country.” With law enforcement putting the Party under immense pressure the BPP struggled with their public image of being an organization of criminals. Just when reaching great height and national fame, their most important leaders, Newton and Seale (charged with conspiracy and inciting to riot), were locked up and being portrayed as ordinary hoodlums. At the same time the Panthers were proud of their intimidating status. It created a black identity and black confidence among members, proponents and sympathizers of the Party. It taught them not to be scared of the white power structure but instead just to fight back.

The Black Panthers not only gave a voice to the dissatisfactions of African Americans – like many Black Power movements before them – they also responded to the actual fear of fascism that existed within certain parts of the black community. They did so by taking immediate action in the form of aggressive activities in the ghetto. Since equality was denied to them, they simply took matters into their own hands. They showed no fear for police and demanded change in an aggressive manner such as was stated in The Black Panther Paper in June, 1967: “Bad roads, dilapidated housing, rampant unemployment, inferior education, brutal cops – cop cars with a dog behind the steering wheel and a dog behind the screen – bad sewers, bad lighting, no drainage system, no say-so over the decisions that control our lives – this is a portrait of the horrible inhuman conditions that the white power structure forces black people to live under”. The Ten Point Platform and Program served the same purpose. According to Newton it was “nothing more than the 400-year-old crying demands of us Black Americans”. These things were denied to them thus far, and it was time to claim them aggressively and immediately.

86 R. Major, The Panther is a Black Cat (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 33, 60 & 96
89 D.J. Garrow, ‘Picking up the Books’, p. 655
90 D.J. Garrow, ‘Picking up the Books’, p. 656
91 R. Major, The Panther is a Black Cat (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 20, 59 & 72
92 R. Major, The Panther is a Black Cat (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 76
93 J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 108
But even though the armed struggle had always been a strong belief of Newton, this suddenly changed when he was released from prison in May 1970. He then realized radicalism and violence was not the way to accomplish his goals. He stated: “We’ve rejected the rhetoric of the gun; it got about forty of us killed and sent hundreds of us to prison.” In another interview he even denied the BPP was ever about violence and guns: “We have never advocated violence.” Newton claimed the Panthers just wanted “a democratic, socialist society free of racism”. The infamous BPP leader reckoned his Party needed to change in order to survive so he shifted his attention from black nationalism to revolutionary nationalism, thereby putting a strong emphasis on socialism. His focus started to concentrate more on class division rather than just being race-based, and he upgraded his vision to an international scale. This shifted the BPP’s focus from revolutionary nationalism to revolutionary internationalism, later followed by revolutionary intercommunalism (those last two evolvements being beyond the scope of this strictly national-based thesis). By then, many fellow BPP members started to have trouble following Newton’s complex thoughts since his ideological shifts were not accompanied by sufficient political education for many rank-and-file Panthers. Their released leader who had grown to mythic proportions with infinite qualities during his incarceration disappointed them. Also, during his absence people such as David Hilliard and Eldridge Cleaver had been trying to take over Party leadership, and with Newton back on the streets a feud ignited. This internal struggle and the ongoing FBI interference soon made the Black Panther Party start to lose momentum only a few years after coming into existence.

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95 J.A. Courtright, ‘Rhetoric of the Gun’, p. 251
96 D.J. Garrow, ‘Picking up the Books’, p. 657
97 J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 112
100 R. Major, *The Panther is a Black Cat* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 101
Chapter 3: Effects of the BPP’s approach

Much has been said and written about the Black Panther Party in the past decades but several questions about their legacy remain unanswered until today. The historical debate is still ongoing for issues such as: was the BPP just a mass media phenomenon that has been made bigger than it really was? In other words, was it just a small-time local organization consisting of a bunch of angry and violent thugs that received too much attention?102 Was the BPP a romanticized and overrated movement?103 Were the Panthers just a gang of troublemakers or were they actual game changers? Did the BPP only count as an angry reaction to the peaceful and slow pace of the Civil Rights Movement of were they more relevant than that?104 We hope to answer some of these questions below, or, in short, how effective was the BPP and how far did their influence eventually reach?

Whether the ever-present aura of violence and criminality surrounding the Black Panthers was well deserved or part of a persistent myth, on the long run it did have both positive and negative effects on the influence and effect of the organization. The BPP’s image proved to be two-sided. The Panthers’ supposed emphasis on violence on one hand increased their popularity among young angry blacks that were mostly from impoverished neighborhoods.105 The powerful attitude the Panthers advocated returned to them their pride, their manhood and their dignity. The BPP’s style and language was not at all condescending or paternalistic, which made them one with the people and provided them strong ties with the communities that supported them throughout the US.106 They also brought some long needed attention to the ignored ghettos in the country and in that way empowered many black Americans.107 On the other hand though, the BPP’s violent approach and its strong affiliation with the hood alienated many moderate blacks from the organization. Those mostly higher-educated African Americans did not believe aggressiveness was the way to get rid of the white power structure and they did not approve of the BPP’s glorification of drinking, profanity, violence, drugs and criminality. Many black people were simply not as revolutionary and leftist as the BPP was.108 Eventually, the lack of support from this group of people destabilized the Party.109 Because without it, it was hard to really change something in society since they missed influence on a higher level.

The violent image of the Black Panthers also attracted major police attention.110 Since their foundation they almost immediately became a priority target of state and local law enforcement,

102 J. Street, ‘The Historiography of the Black Panther Party’, p. 373
103 D.J. Garrow, ‘Picking up the Books’, p. 663
104 Y. Williams, ‘Some Abstract Thing Called Freedom’, p. 16 & 18
105 D.J. Garrow, ‘Picking up the Books’, p. 662
107 Y. Williams, ‘Some Abstract Thing Called Freedom’, p. 16
110 Y. Williams, ‘Some Abstract Thing Called Freedom’, p. 16
and soon after also of national law enforcement, namely the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). Over the years the BPP was infiltrated by many FBI agents, which damaged its aims and accomplishments due to internal struggle and confusion. At the same time though, the striking police attention also had a positive effect on the Black Power organization: even moderate African Americans started to support the movement because they saw with their own eyes how many BPP leaders became victims of police brutality. The Oakland police department literally responded with guerilla warfare on almost all Panther activities. During their existence, the police and the FBI killed over forty Black Panthers, among them the famous cases of Bobby Hutton, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. Together with the many arrests, this almost robbed the BPP of its entire leadership, wounding the Party severely. So even when the conclusion would be that the Panther Party consisted mostly of a group of hoodlums, the same could probably be argued about the police and the FBI. Their sometimes-exaggerated actions and aggressively discrediting propaganda were partly counterproductive, adding popularity and apprehension to the Panther Party now that they were under serious attack.

The national media was also quickly triggered by the controversial, Oakland based group of young blacks dressed in leather jackets and berets. Since the violent encounters with the police, the many arrests of Panther members and the radical, obscene language used by the Party leadership made for a good story; most journalists portrayed the BPP in a predominantly negative way. From the beginning on, the positive aspects of the BPP were therefore severely underexposed. The general public was initially not yet familiar with the Black Panther phenomenon, its first acquaintance with the Party through mass media coverage immediately put them in a bad light. This definitely damaged their image and therefore also their ultimate success. In the press the organization was often simplified as just a violent group of black militants, not doing justice to their actual influence, political impact and especially the strong symbol they represented to the black community.

Moreover, due to the overwrought reaction of the FBI and the highly controversial assassination of Fred Hampton, BPP leader in Chicago, some media started to acknowledge the pressure the Panthers were put under by the ‘feds’. The media then slowly started to acknowledge the Panthers were not always the initial aggressors, and their rage might even be explained by the excessive police violence used to decrease the Panther’s influence and danger. Some media were then able to expand their

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113 “All Power to the People”
115 “All Power to the People”
116 C.J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall* (University of Arkansas, 2006) p. xi
118 C.J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall* (University of Arkansas, 2006) p. xvi
119 R. Major, *The Panther is a Black Cat* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 75
view and form a more balanced opinion about the BPP. They partly shifted their focus to the underexposed – because less interesting – positive aspects of the Panther Party, such as their community survival programs. The same happened today with the many cases of African American deaths by the hand of the (white) police. Since it is no longer possible to ignore the pattern of the situation, media slowly start to cover the incidents more from a black perspective, instead of playing the blame game, labeling whites as the actual victims of black aggressive behavior.

The national media attention of the Panthers was always going to be a double-edged sword. Besides being portrayed as a criminal organization the Black Panther Party definitely benefitted from all the press exposure as well. The BPP were smart enough to exploit the whole media circus that started to appear due to the violent police encounters, the killings on both sides and the arrest of its leader Huey Newton, after he fatally wounded police officer Frey.\textsuperscript{121} Especially the latter case received a lot of mass media coverage. Minister of Information Cleaver Eldridge used this to the Party’s advantage by starting a ‘Free Huey’ campaign, which was extremely successful.\textsuperscript{122} The campaign largely increased the BPP’s size and popularity, undeniably replacing the SNCC as the national symbol of black militancy.\textsuperscript{123} Moderate blacks, radical whites and even famous white movie actors such as Marlon Brando and Jane Fonda supported the ignited campaign. The smart marketing act included bumper stickers, posters, buttons, hats, and the famous photograph of Newton sitting in a wicker chair wearing the Panther’s uniform – a leather jacket and a black beret – holding a rifle in one hand and a spear in the other. This picture is now considered an icon of the Black Power movement. At the time it made some sort of a mythical rock star out of the BPP’s controversial leader.\textsuperscript{124} An image he could eventually not fulfill, leading him to a bitter end.

Last but not least, the BPP also simply profited from being on the right place at the right time. The circumstances seemed to be just perfect; King’s influence was declining and most blacks no longer believed in his methods. At the same time the popularity of Black Power reached its peak, anti-Vietnam protest groups thrived and connected with the anti-American colonist ideas of the BPP,\textsuperscript{125} and many African Americans were already in an optimistic mind state of possible political and social change.\textsuperscript{126} Therefore, the organization could only happen in the time frame of the 1960’s, an era of hope and change. The Panthers demanded attention from white America in a strong way: we are here, we are troublesome and you can no longer ignore us! Because being ignored might be even worse as opposed to being oppressed or kicked down. Their rise against the authorities made them a product of their time, just as the hippies and anti-war demonstrations were.

\textsuperscript{121} J. Lazerow & Y. Williams, \textit{In Search of the Black Panther Party} (London, 2006) p. 329
\textsuperscript{122} C.E. Jones, \textit{The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]} (Baltimore, 1998) p. 419
\textsuperscript{123} H. Pearson, \textit{The Shadow of the Panther} (Cambridge, 1994) p. 104
\textsuperscript{125} “All Power to the People”
Furthermore, the masculine aggressiveness, the swagger and the violent attitude the Panthers advocated fitted perfectly with the ongoing black struggle in the turbulent sixties. Everybody suddenly wanted to cooperate with the Panthers, most prominently the SNCC.\textsuperscript{127} In a way then, the BPP was just riding the waves of the time.\textsuperscript{128} The successes and the impact of the BPP were mostly accomplished in only a short period of time, when they were operating nationwide. In the early 1970s their relevance started fading already. Newton was released from prison, which fragmented the BPP and caused tension and eventually an internal struggle between him and Party leaders Elmer “Geronimo” Pratt and Eldridge Cleaver.\textsuperscript{129} Also, under Newton’s guidance the organization became insignificant when it started to focus on reform instead of revolution,\textsuperscript{130} taking off the radical edges that made them successful in the first place. And even though the Party survived for another decade they never again retrieved the momentum they had in the first few years of their existence.\textsuperscript{131} When Newton tried to take over the drug trade in Oakland, Seale decided to close the Party down. Newton never really became himself again and was eventually assassinated in 1989 in a drug related feud.\textsuperscript{132}

In reflection, the BPP’s cultural legacy and its symbolism are probably more significant than its political legacy. Even though the Panthers’ political goals were most sincere and relevant, the movement is especially remembered because of their aggressive and intimidating style. This makes the Black Panther Party, as David Hilliard emphasizes, one of the most misunderstood organizations of twentieth century America.\textsuperscript{133} Plenty of journalists and authors writing about the Black Panther legacy today maintain this biased perspective of the Panthers as a violent gang of hoodlums.\textsuperscript{134} In a way the movement is frozen “between culture and politics”, forced to be a cultural phenomenon that is still often wrongly perceived, both positively and negatively. Because except being reduced to a gang of ignorant thugs by some they are also idealized and romanticized by others.\textsuperscript{135}

A good example of a case of misunderstanding is the predominantly negative but highly influential book \textit{The Shadow of the Panther} by Hugh Pearson. Pearson mostly focuses on Huey P. Newton and all the controversy surrounding the BPP, claiming the small time organization of thugs only became significant due to all the media attention. This view is then challenged by ex-Panthers, journalists and scholars, such as the work on the Panthers called \textit{The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]}. Here, the negative account of Pearson and others is questioned with the danger of over-romanticizing the Party, creating a perspective that might be too positive. In this way the debate keeps going on forever and the objective truth is almost impossible to distract. The answer is probably both: violent but influential, criminalized but relevant. Seale, as a reaction on Pearson’s account on the BPP,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[127] \textit{“All Power to the People”}
\item[131] D.J. Garrow, ‘Picking up the Books’, p. 657-658
\item[132] \textit{“All Power to the People”}
\item[133] Y. Williams, ‘Some Abstract Thing Called Freedom’, p. 17-18
\item[134] C.E. Jones, \textit{The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]} (Baltimore, 1998) p. 39
\end{footnotes}
claimed: “Our legacy is one of social-change activism that was probably one of the most profound grassroots anti-institutionalized racism messages. The Black Panthers represented that phase of Black Power that believed black people should be armed and defend themselves and turn away from the nonviolent resistance movement”.136 So Seale too, partly acknowledged that the symbolic legacy or the Party is probably more relevant than the Panther’s actual achievements.

Despite the fact that the BPP’s political heritage might be underexposed, as argued above, their cultural impact is still very much noticeable today. In contrast to the legacy of say a Martin Luther King, the confident attitude of the BPP and the aggressive way in which they dared to oppose the police, still inspires and empowers many African Americans today. By them, the Black Panthers are still hailed as certified heroes of the long black struggle of the Civil Rights era.137 This in itself can be celebrated as a big achievement considering, as Jones and Clemons remarked as well, that: “a small black nationalist organization from the slums of west-Oakland, California, with fewer than fifty members, developed into one of the most significant actors of the global insurgency of the late 1960s”.138 Even 1983 Oakland mayor Lionel Wilson eventually judged the Panthers in a positive manner: “I think the Panthers, as leaders in an activist program, brought to the attention of many people many of the inadequacies in terms of race relations and how minorities had been treated. That is their real legacy.”139 They might not have achieved all that much but they created awareness.

Still though, the violence and criminality that will always surround the BPP largely influences the way people look back at them and it is safe to say that the negative aspects of that image transcend the positive ones. In the end, the violent aspect alienated the BPP from large parts of the black community, as their radicalism was often mistaken for militarism. This eventually withheld them from being even more influential than they already were.140 On the other hand, despite the negative stereotyping, it is also true that the BPP’s legacy went way beyond that of just violence and self-defense. This legacy can only be truly appreciated when one fully understands the Black Power era, which the Panthers, and with them the Nation of Islam, were the most important components of. The BPP, in its own way, has tried to transform American society both culturally and politically.141 And even though they did not fully succeed, especially not in the latter one, they dared to dream big, which makes their legacy big as well.142

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136 Y. Williams, ‘Some Abstract Thing Called Freedom’, p. 16-17
137 D.J. Garrow, ‘Picking up the Books’, p. 662
138 R. Major, The Panther is a Black Cat (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 115
139 Y. Williams, ‘Some Abstract Thing Called Freedom’, p. 18
142 Y. Williams, ‘Some Abstract Thing Called Freedom’, p. 19
Chapter 4: Relevance of the Black Panther philosophy today

In retrospective the Black Panther Party was the center of the Black Power movement in the United States in the late sixties and early seventies of the last century. Even though scholars and historians do not always acknowledge the importance of the organization, or underestimate its influence, the Black Panthers are still a strong symbol to the black American population today.\textsuperscript{143} If one gets to the core of what the BPP was really about – especially in the beginning – it is that they defined a strong response to police brutality and the white power structure, which is why the organization was called the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in full. One of their most important demands, number seven in the Ten Point Program, was ‘an immediate end to police brutality and the murder of black people’.\textsuperscript{144} Besides some other relevant points of the BPP’s philosophy, this is exactly the issue the black community is still struggling with today.

On April 25 2015 more than two thousand people demonstrated in the streets of Baltimore against the mistreatment of a black man by the police a week earlier. The man – 25-year old Freddie Gray – later died of his injuries, apparently inflicted upon him by the police after he was arrested for carrying a Stanley knife (which is not illegal in the State of Maryland). Police officers allegedly shattered his larynx and broke three bones in his neck by driving him around in a van in a rough way, handcuffed and without a seatbelt. The Baltimore police force later admitted they might not have helped Gray in time when he needed medical attention. The protests against police brutality proceeded peacefully at first but on April 25 a group of people were fed up and started railing against the police. They kicked in police cars, shattered windows, and battered against barricades in the streets. Roads were blocked and objects were thrown at the police. Stores were looted, which caused many indignant reactions, both outside and within the community. The National Guard moved in to take control again over the impoverished inner city of Baltimore.

This latest incident of police brutality is just one in a long list of incidents. On this list the Michael Brown case of August 2014 might have been the most infamous – it ignited a huge wave of protests throughout the whole country – but it is definitely not a rare case at all. Every black man in the United States has a story to tell about disturbing police encounters. African Americans are stopped, searched, incriminated, suspected and arrested more often than their fellow white citizens. The list of blacks that are killed by the police for no obvious reason is endless. It did not start with Michael Brown, or end there. The outrage that followed the deadly event in Ferguson and now also Baltimore is reminiscent of the circumstances during the Black Panther era when riots and rebellious acts often started with a police incident as well.\textsuperscript{145} The Panthers used these events to encourage urban black people to take action, trying to start a revolution. The same situation appeared in Ferguson last year.

\textsuperscript{145} H. Pearson, The Shadow of the Panther (Cambridge, 1994) p. 86
in a less organized, more spontaneous way. Is the situation today similar to the events back in the late 1960s and early 70s? Is the response method of the BPP still useful in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century? And are they still used? And what are the differences and similarities between the responses of the people and the police force now and then?

Although police brutality never disappeared from the scene since the Black Panthers tried to banish it in their time with mixed results, the high amount of incidents in the last years has shaken the black community to its core and brought the subject back in the media spotlights.\textsuperscript{146} People were furious in 2012 when white militia George Zimmerman shot and killed the unarmed Trayvon Martin (17) in Sanford, Florida. This occurrence led to a national debate on racial profiling and self-defense, demonstrations throughout the US, and a petition to prosecute Zimmerman, which received 2.2 million signatures. Even President Obama called for an extensive investigation, remarking: “If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon”. Zimmerman was acquitted from all charges. The Trayvon Martin case was followed by the death of Jonathan Ferrell (24) who crashed his car on 14 September 2014 in Charlotte, North Carolina. When police arrived at the scene white officer Randall Kerrick felt intimidated and shot Ferrell ten times. Kerrick was indicted for manslaughter but only a second jury decided to prosecute him. Some demonstrations took place in North Carolina and prominent Civil Rights activist Al Sharpton spoke on the matter. In 2014 many more incidents followed. White officer Daniel Panteleo suffocated Eric Garner (43) in New York. Garner repeatedly uttered: “I can’t breathe” before he lost conscience and died on his way to the hospital. The incident was recorded on film and caused a lot of commotion. Hundreds of demonstrations followed and many famous athletes wore shirts with the print ‘I can’t breathe’. Obama commented with the words: “This is an American problem, not just a black problem.” The question is whether he is right about that. Being black seems to be strongly connected with the repeating events. A jury decided Panteleo would not be prosecuted. After Garner there was the Michael Brown (18) case, followed by the death of Tamir Rice (12). On November 22 officers in Cleveland, Ohio, received a dispatch call about someone pointing a gun on by-passers. This appeared to be Rice, who was playing with a toy gun. White officer Timothy Loehmann almost immediately shot the boy. The shooting led to outrage, both nationally and internationally. It is not yet known whether or not Loehmann will be persecuted.

These are only the more famous cases of police brutality going fatally wrong. Akai Gurley, John Crawford III, Walter Scott Jr., Rumain Brisbon, Kajieme Powell, Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, Tyree Woodson, Jordan Baker and many more are not even mentioned here but they were all African Americans that are killed in 2014 by the hands of the police, under suspicious circumstances. Not since the Rodney King riots in 1992 have protests been so massive as today. The question remains whether these protests actually help the black community advance in any way or that when the storm dies down everything just stays the same. Below we investigate if the situation today is

\textsuperscript{146} “The Black Panthers Revisited”
comparable to the one during the Black Panther era and whether or not adopting some BPP methods could help black America forward in contemporary times. Because even though police brutality unfortunately never totally vanished from the American streets, the Black Panthers definitely created awareness for the problem and achieved some results with their aggressive methods of patrolling.\(^{147}\)

The concept of Black Power and the strong, inspiring symbol the BPP and some of its leaders remain to be today to many, mostly impoverished, African Americans is still used to attract, educate, and unite angry blacks from the inner cities. This is often done through popular black youth culture such as hiphop, language and fashion.\(^{148}\) The Panthers did not try to fit into white society – as the NAACP and Dr. King tried to do – but they made it cool to be black. Today this still applies, many people are still proud to be black.\(^{149}\) So the approach and the methods of the BPP are still known and partly used today. Since many similarities can be found between contemporary and historical times this is probably rightfully so. Police brutality continues, the relationship between urban blacks and the police is still problematic,\(^ {150}\) people from the black community are recognizing the problems with the police force (again) and they are (again) seeking confrontation in order to defend themselves.\(^ {151}\) As said before, most urban rebellions are still ignited by acts of police brutality, racism and harassment, just as they were in Panther times.\(^ {152}\) The whole Ferguson protest started after the use of unnecessary violence by the police. Unfortunately law enforcement overreacted, as it did too with the whole Black Panther situation, by sending a major police force in military gear to the small suburban town in Missouri. They tried to intimidate the inhabitants with tear gas, weapons and manpower.\(^ {153}\) Again, blacks experienced that their own neighborhood turned into a warzone because an occupying army moved in by force.\(^ {154}\)

Another link with the late 60s and early 70s of the last century can be seen in the very recent events in Baltimore, Maryland. Here, after the untimely death of Freddie Gray that is still surrounded with controversy and unanswered questions, major riots broke lose. African American men are looting, roaming the streets, destroying shops, cars and windows, and seriously threatening the police. It already seems like the death of the young black man was just the straw that breaks the camel. The root cause seems to lie much deeper. Just as the Black Panthers acknowledged during the development of their philosophy that the existing problems in the black community were not only

\(^{147}\) J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 111

\(^{148}\) R. Major, The Panther is a Black Cat (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 3


\(^{150}\) R. Major, The Panther is a Black Cat (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 87

\(^{151}\) “The Black Panthers, Revisited”


rational-based (black nationalism) but were also class-based (revolutionary nationalism/socialism). It was a matter of the haves against the have-nots, but this just often coincides – as is the case in Baltimore – with a black versus white thing. Not exclusively though, since many government officials, prosecutors, judges, and police officers are black in Baltimore, which is quite different from the Black Power era. Still, communities that are predominantly black are often impoverished while white neighborhood flourish. This reality can be explosive when the have-nots decide to act upon their situation.

Although contemporary issues of the black community seem to be very much comparable to the ones in the BPP era, there are also some important differences to consider. First of all, black people seem to be less organized today, especially in the urban ghetto. There are no more Black Power movements, no calls for revolution, no organized groups, and no shootouts. Black leaders still exist of course; today we have Baptist minister and White House adviser Al Sharpton, and Baptist minister and Civil Rights activist Jesse Jackson. But like Martin Luther King, they are highly educated and they do not have their roots in the ghetto. While in reality, trouble with the police occurs mostly in those impoverished areas and a strong connection to that background was – as already stated in this thesis – one of the main success factors of the BPP. This is also one of the reasons they are still influential and relevant today. It makes them real and respected in the black community where pride and manhood are important aspects since people do not have much else to vouch for in society.

Still, while it goes beyond the scope of this research to try and explain why there is a lack of black leaders with a ghetto background today, it might not even matter that much. Because a very important factor to consider, which differs from the Black Power era, is the existence of social media today. Thanks to this relatively new phenomenon organization from above is not always necessary anymore since it became so easy to organize oneself through Twitter or Facebook. We have seen it with the demonstrations that led to the fall of the dictators of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and the so-called Arabic spring, and we see it now in the United States, where huge protest movements were formed in a matter of days or even hours. People are easily brought together through Twitter tags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #HandsUpDon’tShoot’.

Another difference is that police brutality is much more visible today since the smart phone made its appearance and assures that everyone carries a phone camera with them. This enables people to be their own freelance journalist and a reliable witness at once. As soon as a police officer misbehaves there is a chance it is caught on camera by a by-stander and uploaded to YouTube in minutes for the whole world to see. This known fact much sooner results in a national outcry since

155 J.A. Tyner, ‘Defend the Ghetto’, p. 112
156 “The Black Panthers, Revisited”
pictures usually speak louder than words. During BPP times people could blame law enforcement for police brutality but it was always difficult to prove, hence the reason why Panthers decided to actively patrol the streets of their own community with rifles and law books, trying to catch officers red-handed. In a way one could say the camera is the contemporary alternative of the shotgun the Panthers used to openly carry around. If seen in that manner, using a camera to patrol police is similar to openly carrying guns so this is actually directly derived from the Black Panther tactics of five decades ago. It is just a less dangerous and less aggressive way to try and keep law enforcement under control.\textsuperscript{160}

Besides citizens carrying phone cameras around, police departments start to equip their own officers with cameras too. Precisely because the police are often distrusted and still cause so much controversy with their sometimes-doubtful actions, they want to increase their own transparency. So more and more police units have body cameras installed when being on duty, in order to film their encounters with the public. In that way they try to reestablish the basis of trust of – especially – African Americans. Research has shown that the people demand openness and transparency from the police.\textsuperscript{161} They want to be heard and they want to be respected. So in contrast with the Black Panther era, the police no longer only respond with violence. They are now sometimes actively trying to build a relationship of trust with the black community by holding public meetings, letting inhabitants voice their anger, starting a dialogue with protesters, hiring more black officers (the question remains whether or not this makes a difference), and raising money to buy body cameras.\textsuperscript{162} These are of course all very positive signals that are partly initiated by the police itself and partly by politicians who are trying to reorganize American law enforcement under the pressure of the people and the media. At the same time though, as all the racial tension and deadly confrontations between police officers and African Americans prove, things still go wrong way too often. Racial profiling, prejudice and discrimination unfortunately are still far from gone in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

Maybe things even got worse since the times of the BPP. The Black Power era, besides all the violence, was also an era of hope and positivism. Many African Americans believed change was possible, that new times were going to arrive soon. Nowadays, many impoverished youth in the ghetto feel hopeless because their economic and social situation kept declining since the 1960s, and society turns towards individualism more and more. Blacks hardly believe in a better future anymore, they lost hope in America and in themselves. This has resulted in frustration, mounting rage and alarming figures of black-on-black-crime. The black community seems to have turned to self-destruction; drug wars and gang violence are an everyday reality and American society is indifferent.


\textsuperscript{162} T. Hays & B. Draper (2014), “In Wake of Ferguson, Police Try to Build Trust”
to their increasing impoverishment. Besides fighting police brutality during recent events, other positive Panther goals such as education, survival programs, and transformation of society have vanished from today’s time frame.\footnote{C.E. Jones, \textit{The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]} (Baltimore, 1998) p. 157-158, 418}

When viewed in this rather negative perspective it is probably not wrong to conclude that an organization such as the Black Panthers might be able to help organize the black community again. Especially since the American ghetto seems to be in a status of chaos right now.\footnote{J.O.G. Ogbar, \textit{Black Power} (The John Hopkins University Press, 2004) p. 94} It is therefore not surprising that a few movements modeled (and sometimes even named) after the BPP have popped up in recent years. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin the Black Panther Militia emerged, in Dallas, Texas we find the New Black Panther Party, and Los Angeles, California has the New African American Vanguard Movement.\footnote{C.E. Jones, \textit{The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]} (Baltimore, 1998) p. 47} Dallas also has the Huey P. Newton Gun Club, which consist of a group of black people that marched the streets in August 2014 chanting the name of Michael Brown, and – like the BPP in their time – openly displayed guns.\footnote{C.W. Cooke (2014), “Do Black People Have Equal Gun Rights?”, URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/opinion/sunday/do-black-people-have-equal-gun-rights.html (Accessed: 18 April, 2015)\footnote{“The Black Panthers Revisited”}} Of course, first of all, these organizations are in no way as big or influential as the original Black Panthers (yet). And secondly, most ex-members of the BPP have openly disassociated themselves from these mostly aggressive movements. But still though, we should think about what it means exactly that Panther-like parties are still needed in contemporary America. Apparently we can conclude that in five decades, opportunities for poor black people are still scarce, and not much has really changed at all since then.

Things can be seen in a more positive light as well though. Unfortunately we are nowhere near ending police brutality today yet. But maybe, considering recent events, we are on a certain crossroad. Since Ferguson and the subsequent demonstrations throughout the country, the problem again has the full attention of the media, politicians and the people. The window of opportunity might open (again) and there might be a new chance of transformation within society. Maybe a chance for real changes this time, which is still very much needed. In a way, one could say that today the problems are maybe still the same but the way of protesting is different. Young protesters are not walking around with guns but with cameras, they are not shouting ‘off the pigs’ but ‘hands up don’t shoot’. And more importantly, they are waiting to see if government officials and police are more responsive to the demands that are made this time. In order to really accomplish this the American mindset needs to change, which is a very difficult task. Law enforcement should then be able to give up the violent methods they have been using way too long against their own black citizens, and finally start to listen to and cooperate with the people.\footnote{\footnote{”The Black Panthers Revisited”}} Since the Black Panther era things might not have changed as much as they had once hoped for. Therefore, we could still learn a lot from their methods and approach today. Besides the many similarities between then and now
there are also some important differences to consider. This makes it wise to not copy the slightly outdated methods of the BPP one on one, but rather learn from them and then use them in an adjusted and sensible way.
Chapter 5: Race relations in the United States today

In the previous chapters of this thesis we painted a picture of the Black Panther Party, considering its philosophy, its origins, its effect, its approach, and its influence today. We also investigated whether or not the BPP’s methods are still relevant and useful in contemporary society, where police brutality and the racial struggle are hot topics again since the many incidents between blacks and the police lately. We might now wonder – in a broader sense – if anything has really changed at all in terms of race relations over the passed decades in the United States. And also, did the Panthers contribute to these changes? And how does Martin Luther King fit into the picture?

Since the Black Power era of five decades ago, of course, many things have changed. The times have changed, the black community has changed, law enforcement has changed and the composition of American politics has changed. The Oval Office is even occupied by a black President now, which was not thought to be possible back in the 1960s. Police brutality, as described in the previous chapter, is still a common thing in contemporary society, but even that is reduced a little in comparison with – and probably thanks to – the times of the BPP. In some situations and areas law enforcement now tries to cooperate with the black community and attempt to build a relationship of trust, instead of simply marching in to occupy the area and show their power. Unfortunately it was not reduced nearly enough to be satisfied with it today, as was proved by the many recent events concerning police brutality nationwide.\(^\text{168}\)

According to Ogbar, a lot of other things concerning the lives and opportunities of African Americans have changed for the better but it remains rather vague what exactly those things are.\(^\text{169}\) At least we can ascertain that blacks have a lot more influence on American politics today. Besides the President being black there are also many more black judges, prosecutors, congressmen, ministers etc. compared to half a century ago. Black voting is a regular thing now and many more police officers are black. So the impact of African Americans on the United States increased by a landslide. The question remains though, to what extent this actually helps impoverished inner-city blacks improve their everyday lives? Many scholars even argue that the situation of the black community only worsened in the last couple of decades, as is also cited in the previous chapter.

Socio-economic conditions are worse than during the 1960’s and 1970’s and the black struggle is therefore mostly accompanied by growing disillusionment, increasing hopelessness, intensifying meaninglessness and, still, mounting rage.\(^\text{170}\) White society chooses to look the other way. The US interferes with all kind of problems and situations worldwide but refuses to clean up its own backyard. Blacks are joining the armed forces fighting for their country in Afghanistan and Iraq, just


as they used to fight in Vietnam five decades ago. But when they return they still only find poverty, institutionalized racism and violence in their own communities.\textsuperscript{171} Sadly, Bobby Seale’s quote, uttered in 1968, still applies when one replaces Vietnam with any war zone of today: “As the aggression of the racist American government escalates in Vietnam the police agencies in America escalate the repression of black people throughout the ghettos of America. Vicious police dogs, cattle prods, and increased patrols have become familiar sights in black communities” (again).\textsuperscript{172} He might have said it a bit harsh but the police is indeed back in many ghettos in a rather militant way.

So that is something that certainly did not change. And it is almost disturbing to see what other aspects did not or hardly change since the late 60s and early 70s of the last century. Did we actually accomplish any progress concerning race relations in the United States or did almost everything stay painfully similar compared to half a century ago? We already concluded that police brutality is still happening on a scale way too wide. The police should be there to protect and serve but apparently this does not always apply when they exercise their jobs in the black community. Often, racism is at hand. Blacks are still being arrested, shot and killed in the streets for no reason,\textsuperscript{173} police still overreacts to black protesting therewith causing even bigger riots, people are still protesting in the streets because the need is still there, and the police still often acts as an occupying force in black communities.\textsuperscript{174}

Besides all that it was a rarity back in the days that a police officer was prosecuted for his aggressive actions against African Americans. In 1966 a 15-year-old black teen was killed by police fire and riots erupted in San Francisco. The responsible officer was defended and protected and eventually not prosecuted, just like officer Wilson in Ferguson, Pantaleo in New York, and many more white officers in similar events.\textsuperscript{175} So that obviously did not change either; police officers are hardly ever prosecuted for their doubtful deeds against blacks, which is one of the main reasons many peaceful demonstrations have gotten out of hand lately. “No justice, no peace” is one of the many slogans used during the protests. Another one is “Whose streets? Our streets!” But unfortunately, this slogan does not seem to be reflecting the truth. The streets still belong to the people in uniforms. Black people are still prey on the streets, which is painful proof that only little has changed throughout the years.\textsuperscript{176} Chief prosecutor Mosby, who is African American, is trying to make a change in Baltimore now by promising the protesters their slogans are being heard and the officers who assaulted Gray will be dealt with accordingly. In this city the mayor and the police chief are black too. They only seem to stand up now though, after things have escalated, and it still has to be seen what they can achieve and if they are able to keep their promises.

\textsuperscript{172} C.J. Austin, \textit{Up Against the Wall} (University of Arkansas, 2006) p. xv
\textsuperscript{173} R. Major, \textit{The Panther is a Black Cat} (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 26 & 34
\textsuperscript{174} The New Yorker (2014), “Slide Show: Ferguson in the Aftermath of Michael Brown’s Death”
\textsuperscript{175} R. Major, \textit{The Panther is a Black Cat} (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007 reprinted) p. 49
\textsuperscript{176} E. Danticat (2014), “Enough is Enough”
Another example is the death of Denzil Dowell in North Richmond in 1967, which the Black Panthers used to ignite a street rally and to create national attention for their organization. After his killing people were looting and burning down the city. The first Black Panther newspaper headline read: “Why did the police murder Denzil Dowell?” It is almost scary how easily this can be translated to 2014 and 2015, where the newspapers read: “Why did the police murder Michael Brown?” The question is still unanswered. The long sequence of unarmed blacks being killed in the streets by law enforcement still did not stop; the news from the past is hardly different from the news of today, which is quite disturbing.178

In terms of media portrayal not much has changed either. Just as during BPP times, America turns the conversation and tries to victimize whites. Richard Nixon used the ignorant and violent approach of the Black Panthers to label them a bunch of dangerous outlaws. They might have indeed been violent and ignorant, but they really could not help it. White America simply reaps what it sows. Violent and ignorant was all the Panthers could be considering their background and education, and they used it to evoke the system and attract attention to the poor black neighborhoods. The same is happening now with the victims of police brutality. The media are quick to share the fact that Michael Brown was a criminal, Eric Garner was selling illegal cigarettes, Freddie Gray was carrying a weapon and Walter Scott Junior had a criminal record. They forget to mention that Brown was probably trying to surrender, Garner saw no other options to make a living, Gray’s ‘weapon’ was a Stanley knife that is not illegal in the United States, and Gray’s criminal record consisted of small time deeds such as not paying child support and traffic fees. And besides that, even if they actually were big time criminals, nobody deserves to be gunned down because of that. Fortunately, after so many black deaths under suspicious circumstances last year the media starts to cover the other side of the story too. Just like what happened back then after the media realized the police was attacking and murdering many Panthers. It made the media reporting on the subject more positive. Today too, critical questions are being asked and many whites join in the protests. They start to acknowledge the pattern in blacks being killed by the police after months of repeating events and heavy media attention.

The (mostly) black protesters that are demonstrating against the useless deaths of African Americans by the hands of the police are pinned down as thugs as well. The media tends to use double standards in portraying black riots and white riots. When a group of white people starts rioting, taking over the streets, it often involves some kind of sports game or happening. The white vandals burning down cars and throwing rocks at the police are usually called ‘revelers’, ‘celebrants’ or ‘fans’, while black rioters are called ‘criminals’, ‘thugs’ and ‘pigs’, and are labeled as being violent. Usually

militarized police is quickly sent in, while whites are left raging until they finally decide to go home.\textsuperscript{179} In Baltimore for example the media now only focuses on the riots and the violence used by a minority, while most protesters are still acting peacefully. Even gang members laid aside their differences in order to march together for Freddie Gray and mediate tension between the police and the rioters.\textsuperscript{180} Of course, riots might not solve anything but people should try and understand the frustration about ever-existing and systematic police violence throughout the decades. The approach is probably wrong and does not stand a fair chance but at least it draws attention to the issue just like the acting up of the BPP was a cry for attention back in the 1960’s and 1970’s. People that do not understand what is happening in Baltimore probably suffer from white supremacy.

The Black Panthers did more to advance race relations in the United States than did Martin Luther King. Stokely Carmichael, then leader of the SNCC, already rejected King’s peaceful approach back in the 1960’s: “Dr. King’s non-violence method did not work because for it to work the opponent needs to feel compassion and have a conscience. The USA does not have one. The younger generation does not have the patience and forgiveness of Dr. King.”\textsuperscript{181} He was probably right – MLK’s message was slowly fading and his goals were never accomplished – and the same basically applies today. Just like the Panthers, ghetto youth do not have patience anymore; they do not want to wait until whites finally start treating them equally. They demand equality right now, hence the riots in the urban communities throughout the country. The BPP helped create this state of mind and gave the poor uneducated blacks confidence and pride. To many black youth Huey Newton and the Black Panther Party are therefore still heroes, important symbols of black resistance.\textsuperscript{182} At the same time, Martin Luther King is respected as an icon of the Civil Rights Movement but his ideas are outdated and his ideology is no longer followed in the inner-city streets of the United States.

Still though, neither the imagined world of the Black Panthers, nor King’s dream became true. The United States did not become this idyllic integrated place King believed in, or the racially separated utopia Huey Newton pursued.\textsuperscript{183} It seems like nothing really changed in terms of race relations and equality. Many issues that were relevant back then and were integrated in the ten-point program of the BPP are still relevant today: police brutality, substandard schools, substandard housing and the general condition of the country.\textsuperscript{184} According to black activist and rapper Talib Kweli all books on black activism are still painfully relevant because the issues basically did not change since back

\textsuperscript{182} C.E. Jones, The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered] (Baltimore, 1998) p. 418
then. To conclude, the organized state repression of the Black Panthers and the FBI campaign against Martin Luther King are among the most shameful and darkest acts of the American government in the history of large national protest movements. The question remains whether history is being repeated today with the protests being beaten down harshly is some cities. This would basically mean nothing really changed since the Black Power struggle of the 1960’s and race relations between black and white did not improve at all.

Conclusion
After a thorough investigation of the Black Panther Party, its origin, approach, philosophy, effect and influence, we are now able to answer the research questions stated in the introduction of this thesis.
The BPP was a standout organization due to its militant style, its aggressive approach and its roots that were firmly planted in the black community. In that they were the complete opposite of that other famous Civil Rights organization, namely Martin Luther King’s SCLC that focused on integration into white society and non-violence. King tried to find a black space within the system while the BPP wished to create a new system. Although definitely influenced by the SCLC and other Black Power groups, the Panthers did not believe in the peaceful method of King. Their aims were included in their concrete Ten-Point Program but can be summarized to drawing attention to the problems of impoverished African Americans, separation from white America, kicking up dust to try and break down the system and basically just finally being heard. Like Malcolm X, the Panthers have been accused of being good at pointing their finger at the problems of blacks, but not offering any kind of solution.\footnote{J.O.G. Ogbar, \textit{Black Power} (The John Hopkins University Press, 2004) p. 53} This might be true because they indeed simply sought recognition for their problems. They did so by, among other things, trying to ban police brutality from their communities by patrolling them, evoking them and answering force with force. They might have succeeded but only short-term and locally. In the long run they did not really stand a chance. Today, police brutality is still a major problem as we have seen in the Michael Brown case and many more. The BPP’s philosophy largely followed the ideas and approach of Malcolm X, who was assassinated a few years before the BPP’s foundation, and was admired by Black Panther leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. Malcolm X formed their largest inspiration and his death was one of the main reasons to start a new organization, in order to be able to continue his ideology.

The impact and effect of the Black Panther Party remains subject of an ongoing debate. The opinions vary from the organization being formed by a bunch of violent no-good criminals (as they were often portrayed in the press back in the day) to a highly influential, brilliant Black Power movement that had a large impact on contemporary American society. The answer is to be found somewhere in the middle. The Panthers are still considered heroes and role models to many poor black ghetto inhabitants, but the BPP’s attempt to break down the system and transform American society did not stand a chance. In order to really achieve that they had to change the mindset of the whole country, which proved to be a noble but impossible task. This change was simply too terrifying to make. Even non-radicals such as John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were killed because of this fear of change. Changing a persistent, long existing pattern concerning race relations is difficult and takes a lot of time. Only when this pattern finally does start changing there is a chance that the institutionalized racism that exists in the United States starts to disappear. It might take many more generations before we finally get there.
In reflection the Black Panther Party’s biggest legacy is probably not their politics, effect or concrete accomplishments, but the symbol they became to the black community. They were able to give those people back their pride and confidence, and provide them with hope and belief that change is possible and influence on the white power structure is within reach. The Panthers confronted conformity and represented a different voice that reflected a society that was ill at ease with its self. They rejected the social norms and the conservative nature of US society and represented a society that was beginning to challenge the issues of gender, sex, government, race and freedom. They liked to view themselves as the end result of the ideological transformation of black America.\textsuperscript{188} That might be a bit too much honor within that framework but at least they were able to create awareness for their problems, which were until then totally unperceived by society. They dreamed big by aiming to completely transform American society into a more social one. And even though they did not succeed in that and were sometimes overshadowed by their own negative image, their legacy is still rather impressive in a mostly cultural way.

As mentioned before, the Black Panther Party is still relevant today in a sense that they form an important symbol of black resistance to the impoverished black youth. The issues the Panthers struggled with in their time are still relevant today, the most eye-catching being the problem of police brutality that has been all over the news in the past year. The situation of today is therefore quite similar to the one in the 1960’s and 1970’s, although the police force contains much more black police officers now, black people are of course allowed to vote since decades, and are represented in all government components. The method the Panthers used to deal with these problems does hardly apply anymore today though. The BPP is a typical product of their time, they could have only happened in the 1960’s, a time of change, hope, solidarity and radicalism. Contemporary American society is an individualized one, where organized black activism hardly exists anymore. This does not mean we cannot learn from the BPP’s approach. The large protests happening in the past months are partly inspired by the ones organized by the Panthers a few decades ago. The difference being that people are organized through social media instead of a Black Power organization, and they are mostly using phones instead of guns to confront the police with their deeds. Another positive change is the fact that law enforcement starts to try and create transparency by equipping their own employees with body cameras, in order to record confrontations with the public.

Still, one could ask the question what good it does to the lower class blacks living in the ghetto that African Americans have more influence today, and that police officers are black more often. For them, not much has changed for the better. They are still being kept down and kept poor and police forces are still sent into their communities to intimidate and display white authority. The circumstances of today are even more hopeless than back then, with gangs controlling poor neighborhoods causing a lot of black-on-black crime, drugs being all around, and hardly any jobs available. Many ghetto blacks feel like there are no opportunities for them besides getting into illegal

activities. This is a depressing and demotivating thought, which makes many of them not even try. When viewed from that perspective, there would probably still be need for an organization like the Black Panthers today, fighting for opportunities and equality for impoverished blacks, with its roots firm in the ghetto. It should be something like the BPP but in an adjusted and updated form since the original Panthers are a product of their time and can therefore not simply be copied. How exactly this organization should look like goes beyond the scope of this thesis but is an interesting question to ask.

In terms of race relations in the United States, sadly not much seems to have changed since the 1960’s. Police brutality in black neighborhoods did not disappear, inequality is still an everyday thing, news coverage is still biased, and prejudice is still around. A rich black man with an expensive car is thought to be a drug dealer who the police will often stop to question and search, while a rich white man in a fancy vehicle is perceived as a successful businessman. Racism is institutionalized in the United States. In order to be able to change this America needs to change its entire mindset, which is not easily done. The way the country thinks about race has been around since slavery, which makes it part of the nation’s DNA. Rules and regulations do not change the way people think. When the Jim Crow laws were being abandoned it did not mean separation ceased to exist, and Johnson installed a noble law with the Civil Rights Act but it did not mean racism disappeared from the United States. The recent events in South Carolina form a good example of this mindset and the institutionalized racism. A debate about taking down the Confederate flag from government buildings (i.e. the City Hall) escalated into a heated feud between white extremists and African Americans who feel discriminated by that flag. To them it feels like an oppressing symbol from the Civil War era representing a pro-slavery attitude, while many white people fail to understand that and perceive the flag as a strong southern expression of pride and independence.

In the end, the Black Panther Party was right about Martin Luther King: his non-violence method did not work because when we look at today nothing really changed. The impact of the BPP was bigger than King’s because at least they made their people proud to be black and they made sure oppressed African Americans were finally heard. In BPP times the ghetto was underrepresented and it still is! What the Black Panthers did in their time was seek recognition; they simply wanted to be heard just like the ghetto still desperately needs to be heard today. Because discrimination, racial profiling, and prejudice are far from gone in the 21st century. Even more depressing, it might even have gotten worse.
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