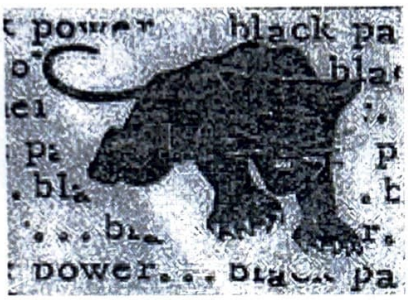
Black Power in White America:
The Black Panther Party in Oakland



By Elizabeth Malcolm
Under the Supervision of Dr. Alice O'Connor
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BLACK POWER IN WHITE AMERICA

"The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, -- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."

---W.E.B. DuBois, 1903[1]

In 1903, the words of W.E.B. DuBois captured the great paradox of the black American experience and the inevitable challenge that black Americans faced in the struggle for liberation. "To be both a Negro and an American" – two ideals that had never been fully reconciled within American society – became as much a challenge as a prevailing vision among black peoples of the United States. The larger society had never fully accepted blackness as a natural component of American heritage. Black peoples themselves were widely regarded by the white majority as subordinates and even at times as inherently inferior. In a nation that condemned them on little basis other than the color of their skin, black Americans were left to construct their own path toward freedom, justice, and opportunity. Without sacrificing either side of their own divided identity, without abandoning their ties either to Africa or to the United States, black Americans have engaged in a centuries-long struggle to transcend their own subordinate status and to create a place for themselves in the predominantly white society of America. While the

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[1] W.E.B. Dubois, "The Souls of Black Folk," in *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 215.

struggle for black liberation has assumed countless forms throughout the centuries, it has ultimately been guided by a single and shared goal, the goal of racial equality.

During the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party presented a unique solution to the problem of racial oppression and inequality. As the vanguard organization of the Black Power movement, the Black Panther Party represented a much larger and more deeply rooted tradition of black radicalism and in the later part of the twentieth century set forth a critique of America's political and economic framework that was far more coherent and comprehensive than most historians have recognized.

Black Power in Context

Most historical discussion situates the Black Power Movement within the larger context of the civil rights movement and treats Black Power ideology primarily as a reactive response to the failures of more moderate integrationist efforts by the mid-1960s. This story typically traces the evolution of the black freedom struggle as it assumed increasingly radical forms in order to combat the unyielding resistance of white racism and the status quo. Historians draw attention to black Americans' ever-persistent hope for racial equality and emphasize the powerful role of increasingly violent racist opposition in shaping blacks' approach to civil rights. From the passive nonviolence of the Montgomery bus boycott, to the aggressive civil disobedience of the sit-in movement, to even more vigorous forms of direct-action protest such as the Freedom Rides and the 1967 "Freedom Summer," historians have constructed a visible trajectory of

integrationist tactics and have drawn a clear progression toward the radicalization of the movement. Notwithstanding the eventual passage of civil rights legislation, civil rights historiography makes clear that racial discrimination and violence continued to intensify throughout the 1960s.[2]

Civil rights historians have pointed especially to northern and urban regions of the United States in order to demonstrate the heightening of racial tensions by the late sixties and the subsequent development of the civil rights movement. According to most historical observation, many northern blacks understood the severe limitations of civil rights legislation and its ineffectiveness in the *de facto* reality of American society. Harvard Sitkoff has helped to explain the causes of black frustration in northern cities, that "none of the marches, pickets, rallies or other forms of peaceful protest abolished filthy dope-ridden streets or inferior segregated schools." Nor did any "lawful strategy of social change" manage to dent "the hostility of police departments or the discrimination of labor unions." Confined to deteriorating living conditions, driven out of the job market by rising competition and continued discrimination, targeted by vigilant law enforcement officials as threats to social order, and lacking sufficient means of effecting political decisions or social change, working-class black citizens in American cities quickly became disillusioned by the reality of what Malcolm X termed the "American nightmare."[3] In the light of mounting black frustrations, and by the time seething racial tensions exploded into race riots in major cities throughout the nation during the mid-1960s, historians highlight the emergence of a new and distinct urban- and working-class-oriented movement. After being given its name by Stokely Carmichael, leader of

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[2] Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (Toronto: Collins Publishers, 1981), Chap. 1-5.

[3] Malcolm X, qtd. in Sitkoff, 211.

the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Black Power seized the helm of the civil rights movement and became both a goal and a means among a radicalized coalition of black activists. Most importantly according to civil rights historians, however, is that by advocating the use of violence against violence and calling for revolution and black self-determination, Black Power manifested a "reaction against nonviolence as a tactic and integration as a goal."[4]

While this story provides a useful understanding of the radicalization of the black liberation struggle and of the way that Black Power emerged out of a succession of failed attempts to end racism and discrimination, it falls short of explaining the nature of Black Power as a movement in itself. Considering that the development of Black Power ideology was driven in many ways by blacks' feelings of desperation and frustration with the unresolved racial crisis, was it also primarily these feelings of desperation and frustration that composed the character of Black Power as a movement in practice? Or were there more practical elements built into the foundation and goals of Black Power? What did these radical Black Power militants want? Given that they were fighting *against* continued racism and violent discrimination, what exactly were they fighting *for*? Why did they claim to be so revolutionary? Were they in fact as revolutionary as they claimed to be in their rhetoric?

Black Power as Ideology

In an effort to answer some of these questions, historians have pointed to the problem of the actual ambiguity that surrounds Black Power ideology. It is important to

[4] Sitkoff, 208-216.

note that Black Power itself has never been articulated as "a coherent ideology, and never developed a unitary program which was commonly supported by a majority of its proponents." Manning Marable points out that it was in many ways "transmitted to all strata of society" not through a single or clear set of ideas and strategies but rather "as a contradictory set of dogmas, platitudes, political beliefs, and cultural activities."[5] These vague and seemingly "contradictory" projections of Black Power that Marable has illuminated not only cloud subsequent interpretation but also complicate efforts to define Black Power as both an ideology and a movement.

During the late sixties and early seventies, Harold Cruse took up this issue of ambiguity within Black Power ideology and interpreted it as a deficiency of any true revolutionary thrust. Cruse has argued, in spite of its advocates' claims for Black Power as a movement toward "Negro Revolution," that the lack of any real consensus as to what that revolution would mean for America's economic and political framework actually reduced the Black Power movement to a "*social reformist* ideology." He pointed to certain holes in the program set forth by the movement's leading ideologues and highlighted especially the discrepancy between the passionate anti-capitalist sentiment that inflamed their rhetoric and the absence of any specific program for either overthrowing or replacing capitalism as an institution. According to his interpretation, this particular discrepancy signaled that the Black Power movement actually worked within the institutional framework of American capitalism and had little to offer in the way of actual revolution. Ultimately, as Cruse perceived, the only "revolutionary implication" of the Black Power movement was "the 'defensive violence' upheld and

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[5] Manning Marable, *Race Reform and Rebellion: the Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson, Miss: Univerity Press of Mississippi, 1991), 99.

practiced by its ultra-nationalist-urban-guerilla wing," which resembled something of a "revolutionary anarchist tendency."[6]

Together with the characteristic ambiguity of Black Power, this violent tendency that Cruse has described as "revolutionary anarchism" has become another point of historical discussion. In the eyes of many historians, Black Power's explicit advocacy and overt demonstration of violence has served to discredit a perception of the movement as having any social, economic, or political program at all. In recent years, Black Power has also come under the criticism of neoconservative historians and political thinkers who classify it as little more than a formula of exaggerated rhetoric and irresponsible violence. For instance, among the most prominent of this neoconservative school, David Horowitz and Peter Collier have concentrated on the militant and often excessively violent actions by Black Power radicals, and by the Black Panther Party specifically. They have, in turn, regarded the Black Power movement as more socially destructive than politically tactical and more emotionally impulsive than ideologically cohesive. Contending that the civil rights movement actually achieved its goals by 1965 with the passage of both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, and that black activists after that point were fighting for nothing but self-serving delusion, these neoconservative thinkers regard Black Power as "political utopianism" and as an "emotional exaggeration" of problems that had already been resolved. The perspective set forth by this analysis, therefore, is one that understands Black Power as unthinking and irresponsible as well as ultimately subversive to broader efforts for civil rights.[7]

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[6] Harold Cruse, qtd. in Marable, 98.
[7] Julius Lester, "Whatever Happened to the Civil Rights Movement" in *Second Thoughts About Race in America*, ed. Collier, Peter and David Horowitz (New York: Madison Books) 3-9.

There is still a great deal of controversy surrounding the issue of Black Power as an ideology. In order to sort through these interpretations and to develop a fuller understanding of Black Power as an ideology, it is necessary to consider the roots of Black Power not only in the civil rights movement but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the context of postwar urban transformation and in older traditions of black radicalism.

Black Power and Postwar Urban Transformation

Historiography that examines the transformation of American cities after World War II helps both to illuminate the political and economic climate that gave rise to Black Power and also to situate Black Power in the midst of the major structural and demographic changes that took place by the late 1960s. Central to the discussion of postwar urban development are analyses of the simultaneous migrations of Southern and rural blacks into northern cities and of white urban dwellers into new suburban neighborhoods just outside of the city. Historians who have examined these postwar racial and spatial transitions have widely acknowledged the geographic division that these migrations created between black and white populations and have called attention to the role of racial discrimination in postwar urban planning and metropolitan development. According to one study by historian Raymond Mohl, suburbanization was largely "a racial response on the part of Whites" – not only of those white citizens who sought "to escape what was perceived as a Black 'invasion of central-city residential neighborhoods" but also of white-dominated institutions that strove to uphold segregation

and to contain "unharmonious racial groups."[8] Long after the Supreme Court's *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917) decision called for an end to racial zoning, and even after the more recent enactment of civil rights legislation, urban historians have shown that continued racism and "legally defensible" discriminatory practices facilitated the ongoing segregation and oppression of black peoples in American cities.[9] Furthermore, by highlighting the devastating impact wrought upon the inner-city black community by federal policies and projects, urban historians have helped to convey postwar urban development as a foundation for growing racial inequality and heightening racial tensions throughout the 1950s and 1960s. These historians discuss the ways in which programs such as urban renewal, public housing, and highway construction were carried out at the expense of "blighted" and predominantly black residential districts. They also emphasize the failure of the federal government to reverse the deterioration of the inner city through the War on Poverty and President Johnson's Model Cities program.[10] By exposing both racial and spatial dynamics of postwar urban transformation, these discussions provide an important context for the examination of Black Power.

This historiography on American urban development has served as a basis for a number of historians who look beyond the movement's association with violence and who have come to understand Black Power as a cohesive political program. An example of this type of analysis can be found in the work of historian Robert Self. Reframing Black Power by looking beyond its traditional context within the civil rights movement,

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[8] Raymond A. Mohl, "The Second Ghetto and the 'Infiltration Theory' in Urban Real Estate, 1940-1960," in *Urban Planning and the African American Community,* ed. June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1977) 58-64.

[9] Christopher Silver, "The Racial Origins of Zoning in American Cities, " in *Urban Planning and the African American Community*, 24-25.

[10] June Manning Thomas, "Model Cities Revisited," in *Urban Planning and the African American Community*, 143-147.

Self has examined the Black Power movement as a programmatic response to the postwar urban geography in Oakland, and particularly in the rapidly disintegrating and predominantly black community of West Oakland. His work presents Black Power as a highly developed critique that addressed specific "spatial contradictions" that existed in "late-twentieth-century capitalism and urbanity." Among these were "poverty amid wealth, state violence interconnected with the urban landscape, a declining tax base inside of comparatively affluent suburbs, and the legacies of a 'colonized' black nation living within an imperial country." Considering this critique as it applied to Oakland, Black Power became a movement to reorganize and revitalize the West Oakland region that had been alienated by the city's white political monopoly. West Oakland's Black Power activists sought to reconstruct their existing community as a "power base" and as an operational center within an even larger project for international Black Power revolution, or "intercommunalism" as they called it. By illuminating the specific ideological critique and project of Black Power activists in West Oakland, Self has presented an important and innovative interpretation of Black Power as a coherent and revolutionary program.[11]

Black Power and Black Radical Thought

While American urban historiography connects Black Power with the major political and structural changes of the postwar era, broader discussions of the black radical tradition help to convey Black Power as part of a more sweeping trajectory of

[11] Robert Self "To Plan Our Liberation: Black Power and the Politics of Place in Oakland, California, 1965-1977" in *Journal of Urban History* 14, no. 6 (2000): 759-792.

black radical thought and activism. Perhaps the best resource for understanding the black radical tradition exists in the work of Cedric J. Robinson. By tracing the course of black radical movements across the African Diaspora and throughout the history of Western civilization, Robinson has examined the nature of black radicalism as an intellectual and ideological heritage. According to Robinson, the origins of black radicalism extend into the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and can be linked with the formation of medieval European "'blood' and racial beliefs and legends" and with the beginnings "racial ordering in European society." The development of the black radical tradition thereafter, as Robinson has conveyed, can be best understood not as a resistance to any particular enemy or institution per se but as a dialectical opposition to the condition of oppression and to racism as a material force. Robinson contends that the active resistance of black radicals throughout history "was not inspired by an external object, it was not understood as a part of an attack on a system, or an engagement with an abstraction of oppressive structures and relations." Rather, he explains, black radicals' historical struggle against oppression should be viewed as a "renunciation of actual being for historical being" -- as the "preservation of the ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system that had never allowed for property in either the physical, philosophical, temporal, legal, social, or psychic senses."[12]

Growing out of this black radical tradition, and acknowledging Black Power as part of their own intellectual heritage, a new school of critical race theorists has treated Black Power as part of a powerful and revolutionary political movement. According to such scholars as Derrick Bell, Jr., Kimberlé Crenshaw, and George Peller, Black Power "embodied a profound rejection of the reigning ideology for understanding the

[12] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 4-5.

distribution of power and privilege in American society." Their argument is based on the idea that Black Power ideologues identified racism as a social and historical construct that had been built into America's economic and political framework and also perpetuated certain racial hierarchies within American society. In this sense, critical race theorists contend that the Black Power movement sought not only to understand the racial lines along which society had been organized but also to transform the very framework that supported America's liberal institutions and racial hierarchies. George Peller has explained that because Black Power rejected the "integrationist principle of transcending race-consciousness," and because it claimed that "power, rather than reason or merit, determined the distribution of social resources and opportunities," the Black Power movement posed a fundamental threat to the "reigning liberal idea of progress through reasoned discussion and deliberation." Critical racial theorists have thus identified Black Power as a rejection of and a threat to the very foundation of America's liberal order. Like Self, critical race theorists would reclaim Black Power from its critics by emphasizing its essential coherence and legitimate radicalism.[13]

While the existing historiography on Black Power has approached the movement in a number of different ways, there are still some important questions to consider. First, considering the ambiguity that surrounds Black Power ideology, but also considering the Black Panther Party as a manifestation of Black Power in practice, what can we learn from the Party in terms of Black Power's vision of a reconstructed political economy? Considering not only the political activities but also the humanitarian and community

[13] George Peller, "Race-Consciousness" in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement,* ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 135-137.

service programs implemented by the Party, what be said of Black Power's vision for American economic and political order? Also, by what means did the Oakland Panthers seek to achieve their vision and to what extent were they successful? For that matter also, what factors led to the demise of the Black Panthers in Oakland and to the ultimate failure of their vision for America?

With these considerations in mind and building upon the work of other historians and scholars, my research will explore the ideological and intellectual roots of Black Power through an examination of the Oakland chapter of the Black Panther Party. Through my examination I will seek to create a better understanding of Black Power as both an ideology and a political strategy.

The Black Panther Party: A Brief History

Before examining the ideology and program of the Black Panthers in Oakland, it is important to take a brief look at the history of the Black Panther Party and its relation to the larger civil rights movement. The Black Panthers emerged in a moment of turbulence not only for the country at large but also within the civil rights movement itself. During the mid- to late 1960s, civil rights activists and organizations began to splinter amongst themselves and to direct the movement toward a state of fragmentation and even perhaps, as some blacks feared, to the brink of dissolution. Bitter disputes over the course and tactics of the movement first drove the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to abandon notions of nonviolence and integration that had long been championed by more mainstream organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

(NAACP), the National Urban League, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). SNCC and CORE invoked the disdain of more moderate black integrationists as they began to pursue a confrontational agenda for black enfranchisement and political power, but there were still more radical factions both within and outside of these organizations who insisted that more aggressive steps be taken to secure racial justice. In spite of the passage of major civil rights legislation during the middle of the decade (namely the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965), a number of blacks recognized a need for effective economic policy in order to eliminate *de facto* segregation and discrimination and to achieve real opportunity for black people in areas of housing in labor. However, while most organizations began to incorporate their various economic concerns into something that resembled a liberal social welfare agenda, a much smaller and highly radicalized coalition of black activists began planning for much deeper social, political, and economic transformation. The outbreak of urban race riots between 1965 and 1967, first in Watts and then throughout the country, only intensified the internal discord of the civil rights movement as well as the sense of urgency among more radical black activists who no longer believed that civil rights might be won through negotiation rather than violence. It was from within this context that the Black Power movement began to develop, and it was through the Black Panther Party that Black Power would achieve its full form as a radical ideology.[14]

Founded in 1966 in Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party created a new chapter in the civil rights struggle. As Party founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale sat down to draw up the Party's Ten Point Platform, they traced the objectives of the Party

[14] Sitkoff, Chap. 7; Marable, 103-109.

and the most basic tenets of Black Panther ideology. Among their demands were freedom and self-determination, full employment, an end to police brutality, as well as land, bread housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace.[15] While these goals were, in essence, very similar to those of most black activist organizations during this period, the Black Panthers could be distinguished from other black groups by their refusal to accept nonviolence and liberal reform measures as adequate means for achieving them. Guided by the thought and teachings of Karl Marx, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon, the Black Panthers in Oakland claimed to be revolutionaries in pursuit of black self-determination within the United States, and they declared themselves willing to use violence to achieve their ends.

Best known for their violent raids against the police forces of the San Francisco Bay Area, the Oakland Panthers became both feared and loathed by other members of the black community and especially by black integrationists, who believed that the Panthers had turned civil rights on its head. The Panthers also stirred controversy within the black community by instituting a number of concrete and nonviolent programs – an agenda that included a free breakfast program, grocery and clothing giveaways, a free medical clinic, and several black-oriented schools, which they referred to as "Liberation Schools" – all of which they declared to be a foundation for achieving black self-determination. Just as the Oakland Party attracted the disdain of more moderate black activists and organizations, it also became a target of the U.S. government, which viewed the Panthers as a subversive enemy and a threat to American domestic security. When the federal government constructed its counterintelligence project (COINTELPRO) against the

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[15] "What We Want, What We Believe," Appendix A in *The Black Panther Party: Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones, (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 474.

Party, the arrest of several Panthers including Minister of Defense Huey Newton weakened the Party dramatically and eventually led to the Panthers' demise.

Still, the legacy of the Black Panthers in Oakland lives on in contemporary discussions of Black Power and racial politics. Although the Panthers' ideology and program are often overshadowed by the sensationalism of their violent campaign against the police, it is important to examine the Black Panther Party as a part of a much larger black radical tradition. A closer examination reveals that the Black Panther Party in fact held a much more profound and cohesive significance than previously understood.

Domestic Colonialism and American Political Economy

The Black Panthers' critique of the nation's political economy was grounded in their conception of colonialism within American society. Far from rhetorical exaggeration, the Party's "domestic colonial" analogy was actually a highly perceptive interpretation that drew out both racial and socioeconomic implications of postwar metropolitanization. It was an interpretation, moreover, that was based upon a careful analysis of the process by which urban and suburban communities had developed by the late 1960s as well as upon the power dynamics between those communities. Most importantly, however, it was through the frame of domestic colonialism that the Black Panther Party came to understand the economic exploitation that occurred between urban and suburban communities as a form of racial exploitation and subordination.

Of course, the Panthers were not the only ones during the postwar era who described the country's domestic landscape in terms of colonialism. By the late 1960s, a

number of scholars and political leaders referred to the term "colonialism" in order to address the exploitative nature of inner- and outer-city relations. Especially after 1968, when the Kerner Commission Report drew national attention to the sharp inequities that divided "separate and unequal" urban and suburban communities, the concept of colonialism in a domestic context became central to American intellectual and political discourse.[16] H.V. Savitch has helped to illuminate the ways in which this so-called "colonial analogy" captured the exploitation of the inner city by the suburban periphery. According to Savitch, many of the white citizens who had moved into new homes in suburbia actually continued to hold jobs, mostly managerial positions, in the inner city. These suburban "commuters" controlled "much of the wealth and resources of the urban core" and displaced "a disproportionate amount" of inner-city income into the suburban periphery.[17] In this respect, and as most popular references to colonialism sought to convey, the development of suburbia rested largely upon the extraction of resources from the interior urban community. Thus, domestic colonialism became a useful analogous concept that helped to explain inner- and outer-city relations.

For members of the Black Panther Party, however, colonialism applied not merely to the relationship between inner- and outer-city districts but also, and more importantly, to the relationship between black peoples and the larger white American society. Their interpretation carried out the racial implications of urban transformation in the postwar era. One article that appeared in the Party's official newspaper in June of 1967 helped to convey the Black Panthers' perspective regarding postwar domestic colonialism. Written by Oakland Party member Earl Anthony, the article explained that suburbanization had

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[16] *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 1.
[17] H.V. Savitch, "Black Cities/White Suburbs: Domestic Colonialism as an Interpretive Idea," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 439 (Sept., 1978): 124-125.

led "white people, and a minute number of black people," to new homes in the outskirts of the city and had left older districts at "the core of the city" to become characteristically "black communities" or "communities of other minorities."[18] By drawing attention to the racial attributes that distinguished inner city and outer city regions, Anthony pointed to a boundary that not only separated the city's core from its suburban periphery but also separated black citizens from the larger and overwhelmingly white population. Thus, as metropolitan changes and suburbanization in the postwar era created a realignment of community boundaries, so too did they also create a clear territorial distinction between black and white peoples. The Panthers' recognition of these corresponding racial and spatial distinctions was crucial to their concept of colonialism.

Even more significant, however, was the Panthers' understanding of the power dynamics between these two communities. For the Black Panthers, the biggest problem with postwar urban change was not in the separation of the races but rather in the exploitation of the minority race by the majority. According to Earl Anthony's 1967 article, public policy during the postwar era had drawn a "clear line of demarcation" between the city's core community and its political leadership. He explained that "white people who live outside" not only utilized "the resources of the people [in the core]" but that they also controlled "the political institutions of the people in the core city." The result, as Anthony identified explicitly, was a unique institution of "domestic colonialism."[19] Through his analysis, Anthony depicted white society as an external force, a dominant and colonizing force, which imposed order and controlled the black community from the outside. He maintained that by monopolizing the economic

[18] Earl Anthony, "Core City Politics," *The Black Panther*, 20 June 1967, 6.
[19] Ibid., 6.

resources and political institutions of the inner city, the surrounding white community had managed to gain control over the black population and to subordinate them as a colonized people. Anthony's use of the term "domestic colonialism" thus rested on a conception of urban and suburban relations not merely as a matter of economic or political exploitation but more fundamentally as a system of white racial dominance and black racial subordination.

References to domestic colonialism appeared throughout the Black Panthers' official newspaper. Members of the Black Panther Party widely regarded the deteriorating social and economic conditions of the ghetto, the "bad roads, dilapidated housing, rampant unemployment, inferior education," as an immediate result of colonialism within American society. The black community, in their eyes, had been reduced to an "abject, colonial status" at the hands of a white and imperialist government administration that "tax[ed] them while allowing them no representation . . . no one to speak for them on the city council, nobody [to take] their needs, desires, and dreams into consideration."[20] Editors of the Oakland Party's *Black Panther* newspaper published numerous articles that decried the degenerative impact of colonial exploitation on the black community and that called attention to gross imbalances in the amount of economic resources and political power that were distributed between inner- and outer-city populations. *Black Panther* articles consistently highlighted the "enormous percentage of the city's white workforce that lived outside of Oakland," which Party members sometimes estimated at "more than 50 percent." While the Party's newspaper frequently attacked this white commuting population for absorbing wealth from the city and for slashing the amount of jobs left available for blacks, other articles criticized the city's

[20] "Panthers Demand Independence for N. Richmond Area," *The Black Panther*, 20 June 1967, p. 1.

white-dominated governing institutions and held local white administrators accountable for the inequitable distribution of property taxes between downtown and neighborhood districts as well as for redevelopment programs that brought physical destruction to West Oakland and other predominantly black communities of the East Bay. As aggressive and inflammatory as it often became, the Black Panther Party's critique of domestic colonialism presented a coherent analysis of postwar metropolitan development and provided a conceptual basis for further critique of American political and economic power.[21]

The Panthers' explanation of inner- and outer-city relations in terms of colonialism and racial exploitation was similar in many ways to analyses that were drawn by other, more moderate civil rights organizations during the same period. The National Urban League, for instance, also became highly sensitive to the plight of black ghetto residents and to the devastating impact of suburbanization on the black community. Whitney Young, head of the Urban League during the mid-1960s, constructed his "domestic Marshall Plan" with the goal of reviving the black ghetto community, correcting the economic imbalance that existed between the inner and outer city, and providing black American citizens with equal opportunity in labor and the American economy. However, unlike Young and other members of the Urban League, the Black Panthers did not believe that the exploitation of black people in America could ever be eliminated through liberal reforms. By treating militancy and separatism as the only viable solutions to the problem of domestic colonial oppression, the Black Panthers

[21] Self, "To Plan Our Liberation," 770-772.

represented a radical departure from more mainstream analyses of political and economic power in the United States.[22]

The Oakland Panthers and the American Power Structure

While their ideas regarding colonialism and black subordination often centered on contemporary developments in American cities, the Black Panther Party treated these problems as fundamentally tied to the larger problem of American racism on a national scale. During his campaign for presidency in 1968, Eldridge Cleaver declared it a "basic definition" that "black people in America are a colonized people in every sense of the term and that white America is an organized Imperialist force holding black people in colonial bondage."[23] Cleaver's words epitomized the Panthers' conception of American national political power as an active and aggressive force of racial oppression. The America that Cleaver referred to as a characteristically "white America" had been founded, administered, and dominated by white peoples. He portrayed whiteness in America as a hegemonic and destructive quality, an "organized Imperial force," which sought to sustain economic and political power within the state by extending control over minority races and most specifically black peoples. His attack on white American racial power reflected the influence of Frantz Fanon, Mao Tse-Tung, Kim Il-Sung, and other prominent revolutionary figures who became involved in international struggles against colonial oppression. Cleaver's language also called up notions regarding the impenetrable

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[22] Dona Cooper Hamilton and Charles V. Hamilton, *The Dual Agenda* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1997) 128-129.

[23] Flyer with transcription of Cleaver's speech to the Peace and Freedom Founding Convention (March 16, 1968)

racism and oppressive tendency of white society, which had been embraced by Malcolm X and adherents to Black Islamic faith. However, unlike most black Muslims, the Panthers directed their criticism not against white people as a race but against white power as an organized and imperialistic force of black oppression.

The Black Panthers did not merely see racism at work in the nation's political and economic institutions but in fact believed that racism was rooted deeply within the foundation and infrastructure of American state and society. The Party's editorial magazine, *Black Power*, which took the name of Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton's influential book, published an article in 1967 that declared that "the American system has been built to contain black people," and furthermore that "Black People cannot be successful if they remain in the bonds of the white power structure."[24] Though charged with the angry and accusatory tone for which the Black Panthers are most commonly criticized, the article helped to reveal some of the Black Panthers' most powerful convictions regarding the nation's political economy. By drawing out the notion of a "system" at work in America, the article strove to explain the basic operational principles that governed the nation's organizational framework and institutions. In the context of the article, this alleged "American system" was constructed, presumably by whites, for the specific purpose of restricting black people to subordinate positions within society. The article suggested that racism had not only played an important role in the founding of the nation and the development of American institutions but that racism had also shaped the formation of American social hierarchies. In this respect, the article conveyed racial oppression not as an arbitrary occurrence in American society but as an objective and material force that was inextricably tied to the nation's founding ideology

[24] "Global Views," *Black Power!* 1 no. 2 (1967): 10.

and governing institutions. Moreover, by depicting the idea of a "white power structure" that prevented blacks from attaining success within American society, the article touched upon one of the Black Panthers' most important analyses regarding the role of racism in the organization of the state as well as in the distribution of both resources and power within the state. Black Panther Party members fashioned this idea of the "white power structure" as a succinct method of referring to American political and economic power as had been determined by the nation's grounding racist principles. The "white power structure," in this sense, referred to the inherently racist force that perpetuated white hegemony and black oppression in America. By linking the experience of racial oppression with notions of an "American system" and a reigning "white power structure," the article thus projected Black Panthers' understanding of racism as an inherent quality of the state's infrastructure and as an active and hegemonic force of black oppression.

In their ongoing effort to explain the role of racism in American society, the Black Panthers also constructed analyses regarding the relationship between racism and capitalism. Ultimately, in the eyes of the Black Panthers, capitalism compounded with American racism in a way that exploited blacks economically, kept them in a state of dependency, and thereby also sustained white power and white racial hegemony. An article that appeared in a 1967 issue of *Black Power!* presumed to speak for blacks collectively:

> We are being oppressed by a country, White America, which is in turn dominated by a few hundred white, monopolistic corporations. These corporations, owned, operated, and controlled by Big Chuck, control almost completely the entire economic life of North America, not to mention the world economy: this economic base forms the cornerstone for white power, which attempts to oppress all peoples of dark skin, in all

> parts of the world. Since the presence of economic monopolies can mean nothing else than that economic freedom has been whipped on its back, it follows that there ain't no such thing as free enterprise within the borders of the racist U.S.A.[25]

The article portrayed America's corporate power structure as the basis of white supremacy. It contended that whites not only monopolized economic and political power within the United States but that they sought to "oppress all peoples of dark skin, in all parts of the world." However, the article did not illustrate black American oppression as a product of white racism alone. By linking white American racial power with the nation's "economic base," the article merged its critique of the state with a critique of capitalism. It suggested that, just as racism in America determined whiteness as a prerequisite to power, the capitalistic economy both secured and expanded white prosperity within, and thus white dominion throughout, the state. The Black Panthers' examination of this intersection between racism and capitalism became central to their critique of the nation's political economy.

It is important to understand, however, that the anti-capitalist charge that imbued parts of the Black Panthers' critique was in fact very different from other forms of anti-capitalism most commonly associated with Marxism and other socialist doctrines. In spite of the influence of communist and socialist movements on the formation of the Black Panther Party, the Black Panthers themselves did not reject capitalism as an institution, nor were they at all opposed to notions of free enterprise. In fact, as demonstrated in the aforementioned *Black Power!* article, members of the Black Panther Party directed their critique not against the institution of capitalism per se but more specifically against the

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[25] "Black Business: Its Role in the Liberation Struggle," *Black Power!* 1 no 2 (1967): 7-8.

influence of racism in American capitalism. Their critique avowed that so long as American capitalism was dominated by a racist white monopoly, there could be "no such thing as free enterprise" and thus no opportunity for black Americans to escape their own oppression.[26] It was this distinction that separated the Black Panthers from other, socialist organizations and connected them with the larger black radical tradition. Like other ideologues and activists who grew out of the black radical tradition, the Black Panther Party represented a dialectical opposition to racism and racial oppression. Because they viewed capitalism primarily as a means through which racial thought materialized in the form of racial hierarchy and social structures, the Black Panthers and other black radical activists resisted capitalism only indirectly.[27] In this respect, the Panthers did not seek to end capitalism in America but only strove to break up the white corporate monopoly that controlled American capitalism and to create an equitable stake for blacks within the nation's free market economy. Like many of their more moderate contemporaries, the Black Panthers embraced notions of free enterprise and hoped to transform American capitalism so that it could work to the advantage of black citizens rather than to their disadvantage. However, the Panthers did not believe that the economic exploitation of black Americans could ever be eliminated through liberal and integrationist strategies for antipoverty reform, such as those which had been carried out in the 1967 Freedom Budget.[28] The Panthers contended that white-dominated capitalism was an inherently flawed economic system and an inevitable force of racial oppression. Furthermore, they believed that an end to poverty and black oppression would actually require a radical

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[26] Ibid., 7-8.
[27] Robinson, 62-68.
[28] Hamilton and Hamilton, *The Duel Agenda,* 147-149.

departure from liberal politics and the development of a separate and independent system of black capitalism.

Social Welfare Reform and the Turn to Self-Determination

In order to free black Americans from domestic colonial bondage and to achieve civil justice and racial equality, the Black Panthers believed that it was necessary to institute a program for self-determination. Within a nation that they viewed as inherently racist and deliberately exploitative, the Black Panthers maintained that existing white political and economic leadership could not possibly meet the needs of the black community. Party founder Huey Newton, contended that "the black ghetto area has political dynamics and social problems unique to itself" and that for this reason "it might be necessary in some instances to institute certain laws that will reflect the conditions and welfare of the people there."[29] Newton's analysis regarded the black ghetto as a separate and distinct political entity within the United States. Newton called attention not only to the intrinsic uniqueness of social and economic needs within the black community but also to the importance of specific policy measures that could be appropriately sensitive to those needs. It was for this reason that members of the Black Panther Party consistently emphasized the need for an indigenous source of governance over the black community. In a 1968 *Playboy* interview, Eldridge Cleaver explained the Party's "basic demand" that black people obtain "proportionate participation in the real power that runs this country" and "part of the decision-making power concerning all legislation."[30] However, Cleaver

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[29] "Huey Newton Speaks," *Black Panthers*, special award edition (1969).
[30] Eldridge Cleaver, interviewed in *Playboy* (HMH Publishing Co, Inc.:1968), 90.

also argued that any reforms enacted by the existing white elite could never "go far enough and deep enough to give the masses of black people real community control of all their institutions."[31] Cleaver's lack of faith in the existing political establishment reflected the Black Panthers' conception of the white corporate power structure as a fundamentally racist and hegemonic force of black oppression in America and as an inadequate administrative structure for the black community.

In many ways, the Oakland Panthers' rejection of liberal reform tactics was based on the experience of ghetto life in the late 1960s and on the failure of legislative attempts to restore the nation's urban black communities through reform policy. Although legal reforms had brought some important victories to black integrationists of the South, similar policy measures had very little impact on the type of discrimination and oppression that occurred in northern cities. Landmark reform projects such as President Johnson's War on Poverty and the Model Cities program failed to provide real jobs to the black residents of West Oakland and to correct many of the problems that they faced on a daily basis such as poor housing, unemployment, workplace discrimination, and inferior education.[32] The Panthers' observations of these failed reform efforts contributed to their own loss of faith in the capacity of the white establishment to respond effectively to the needs of black ghetto residents. As they grew increasingly skeptical of the white government's ability and willingness to improve conditions in the ghetto, the Panthers abandoned reformism altogether and adopted a more radical agenda that called for separatism and black self-determination. Although major civil rights organizations such

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[31] Ibid, 90.
[32] Robert Self, "Negro Leadership and Negro Money:" African American Political Organizing in Oakland before the Panthers," in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 109-112.

as the Urban League and NAACP continued to push for integration and to cooperate with white liberals under the hope of reviving the ghetto through social welfare reform, the Panthers had come to believe that integrationists were only chasing a lost cause.[33]

The Black Panther Party often portrayed reform efforts initiated by the existing white political establishment as harmful to the status of the black community and as a part of some larger effort to keep blacks in a state of dependency. In the 1968 interview with *Playboy*, Eldridge Cleaver referred to white reform measures as "palliatives" that were designed by "the establishment" in order to "keep a certain number of the most militant black people in each community pacified."[34] Cleaver's assertion characterized public policy as a deceitful mechanism through which white city administrators hoped to quell political opposition and to keep blacks in a subordinate and colonized status. Cleaver sensed that by keeping blacks "pacified" the white citizens who monopolized American economic and political power only perpetuated the black racial inequality and exploitation. One article published by the Party's *Black Panther* newspaper further addressed the destructive impact of white reforms within the black community by explaining that, so long as "white people controll[ed] the political institutions of the core city," public policy and antipoverty programs "at best carr[ied] black people toward a state of welfare capitalism."[35] Through this idea of "welfare capitalism" the Panthers imagined that black people in America had grown hopelessly dependent upon a political institution that only sought to exploit them in return. The Panthers thus characterized public policy under the white power structure as a vicious cycle of exploitation and

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[33] David Ray Papke, "The Black Panther Party: A Study in Legal Cynicism," Chap. 5 in *Heretics in the Temple: Americans Who Reject the Nation's Legal Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 125-126.
[34] Eldridge Cleaver, interviewed in *Playboy*, 91.
[35] Anthony, "Core City Politics," 6.

subordination. Furthermore, by refusing to accept the white government's reforms as part of a genuine effort to improve the lives of black people in the ghetto, the Panthers' analysis carried out their overriding skepticism toward white liberal politics and their rejection of integrationists' faith in reform.

The nation's welfare program in particular became a target of criticism among members of the Oakland Black Panther Party. In December of 1972, the *Black Panther* published an editorial independent of its regular newspaper that decried welfare in America as a "vehicle by which the federal, state, and city governments attempt to degrade, dehumanize, and further impoverish the poor." The editorial portrayed black recipients of federal aid as "welfare victims" who were subjected to the degrading stereotypes imposed by the American public. It explained that "because a large number of Black people are on welfare, we have been labeled 'lazy, immoral, slovenly, welfare cheats."[36] The system that the editorial described was not one designed for the genuine purpose of assisting black Americans in their efforts to climb the nation's social ladder but was rather a means of upholding traditional racist stereotypes. The editorial thus portrayed welfare aid not as any true form of aid at all but as a warrant for castigation and alienation by a racist and predominantly white American public. But *Black Panther* editors also criticized the welfare system in practice. The same 1972 editorial avowed that welfare deliberately kept black people in "menial jobs" that offered little or "no pay" and forced them to "crawl on [their] knees to [the white government], in submission, for the most basic of life's essentials."[37] By characterizing welfare as a system that perpetuated black subjugation and dependency in the face of white political leadership,

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[36] "Welfare or Work-Fare," *The Black Panther*, 7 December 1972.
[37] Ibid.

the editorial thus treated welfare as insufficient and even counterproductive to the goal of resolving social and economic inequities between the races. Rather than collaborate with white government officials and try to reform the nation's welfare program as black integrationists strove to do, the Oakland Panthers believed that the goal of economic parity would require a much more radical, separatist program and the development of black enterprise. Even though their ideas were widely regarded by contemporary black integrationists as both impractical and politically subversive, the Panthers' critique of the reformism and the welfare program did present a coherent explanation for the permanence of racial equality in America. Ultimately, the Black Panthers' analysis treated racial inequality as an inevitable feature of American society so long as black citizens remained under the jurisdiction of a racist white monopoly.

From Local Black Self-Determination to Global Intercommunalism

Hoping to achieve political and economic justice for the black community as well as equitable treatment and opportunity for the nation's black citizens, the Black Panther Party turned to a program of self-determination. The Panthers' program for black self-determination held profound implications for the nation's prevailing liberal order that have often been overlooked by historians. Harold Cruse, for instance, has insisted that the goals of Black Power militants never actually transcended reformism or traditional notions of self-help. He has argued that only the "revolutionary vanity" of the 1960s mesmerized Black Power advocates into declaring themselves part of some revolutionary movement, when in fact the Black Power movement represented little more than

pragmatic "sloganeering" and a vague set of "goals" that never fully developed into a real program "because they could not be conceptualized."[38] While very few historians deny the rhetorical excesses of the Black Panther Party, many have overlooked the more substantial character of the Oakland Panthers' self-determination program. A closer examination of their program reveals that the Black Panthers actually held a more profound and revolutionary significance than previously conceived.

It was through self-determination that the Black Panthers strove to redistribute the bases for both power and privilege in America and also to transform the political and economic framework that upheld American racial hierarchies. Central to the Panthers' program was a call for the restoration of power to citizens who resided within the geographic boundaries of the region being governed. A 1967 issue of the *Black Panther* announced that "Black people have to start addressing themselves to the politics of the core city. Black people have to move to positions where the people of the core city control the politics of the core city."[39] The article identified black people with the geographic region that they inhabited and expressed self-governance of that region as an inherent right. The "core city," according to the article, appeared to have a natural obligation to cast off the shackles of white colonial domination and to develop an entirely new system of governance from the ground up, a system that would be capable of both understanding and fulfilling the specific needs that were unique to the core city population. Although members of the Party never fully articulated the type of governance that they expected to take place within the core city, the significance of their program

[38] Harold Cruse, "The Little Rock Black National Convention," in William Jelani Cobb, ed. *The Essential Harold Cruse: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 129-131.
[39] Anthony, "Core City Politics," 6.

stemmed from their rejection of national electoral politics and their call for indigenous local control for the black racial community.

But the Panthers did not intend for their program to end at a local level. Oakland Party members envisioned self-determination as a program that would reach far beyond the limits of West Oakland and produce a national and even international political and economic revolution. By first gaining control over West Oakland, the Panthers planned to incorporate their local community into a wholly independent "peoples' city," a city whose political and economic institutions as well as its social organization would be both organized and operated by black citizens from within the community. The Panthers imagined that West Oakland would then serve as a "power base," or a "base of operation," as well as "an example" to other black and oppressed peoples across the United States and around the world. Oakland would be the starting point from which Party members hoped to launch their larger project for something they referred to as "intercommunalism," that is, for the development of a global network of independent black communities, which would be capable of holding the balance of power between white and non-white peoples on an international scale.[40] "Intercommunalism," in this respect, became the Panthers' ultimate vision for achieving international black self-determination and for creating real political and economic opportunity for black peoples of the world. Far-reaching though it was, the Panthers' vision of "intercommunalism" represented a cohesive program through which Party members hoped to challenge America's white corporate power structure as well as the larger forces of racial imperialism and oppression. Their program drew upon a much longer tradition of black radical thought and carried out many of the ideas that were touted by other black

[40] Robert Self, "To Plan Our Liberation," 770.

nationalist and separatist groups in earlier decades. It was a creative program, moreover, that proved to be at the same time both practical, in the sense that it began with an immediate project that applied specifically to Oakland, and also very idealistic, because it overestimated the willingness of other blacks to accept separatism as both a viable and preferable alternative to integration.[41] Although it ultimately attracted far more scorn than support from the larger black community, the Panthers' program for self-determination and intercommunalism provided a tactical foundation for their activities in the East Bay.

The profound political and economic implications of the Black Panthers' program became especially clear as they strove to put self-determination into practice in the rapidly deteriorating black communities of the East Bay. In the summer of 1967, the *Black Panther* ran a front page article under the bold headline, "Panthers Demand Liberation for N. Richmond Area," which helped to bring the Party's program to light. As the title suggested, the article covered the details surrounding the Panthers' plan to "incorporate the area [of North Richmond] into an independent city that will not be at the cruel mercy" of the city's outlying white administration. The article declared to members of the North Richmond community that "if we black people get together in this community, our black community, and incorporate as a six class city . . . we can have our own police department, our own court, our own city council . . . We can make jobs for our people, elect our own mayor. . ." The article included a detailed map of the North Richmond black community within the existing city limits of Richmond. The map took into account the locations of prominent landmarks in the area including two major creeks and also the local Southern Pacific Railroad line. It traced all the streets that made up the

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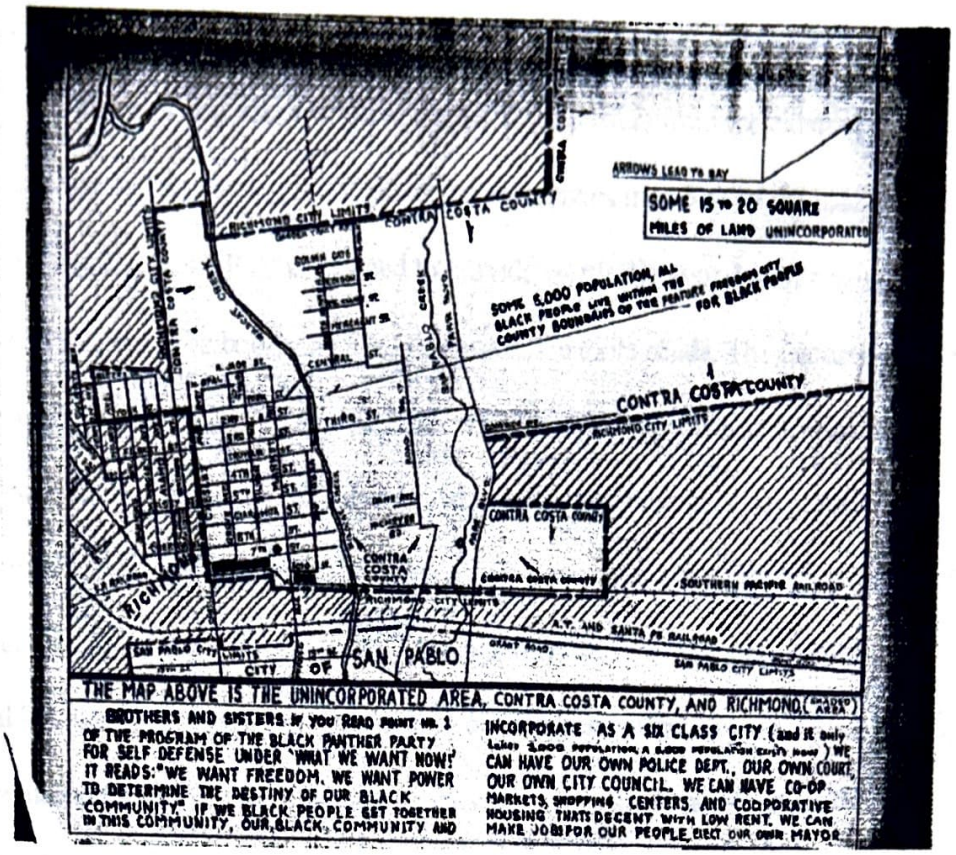
[41] Ibid, 770.



Black Panther newspaper article, "Panthers Demand Liberation for N. Richmond Area"[42]

predominantly black Richmond ghetto area and marked off that area along with surrounding undeveloped land within the Contra Costa County boundary, a region that Panther editors estimated at somewhere between 15 and 20 square miles. A caption within the boundaries of this newly drawn territory read, "Some 5,000 population, all black people, live within the county boundries of the feature FREEDOM CITY FOR BLACK PEOPLE."[43] The article epitomized the Black Panthers' conception of the ghetto as a distinct geographical territory and an independent political entity. It not only defined the geographic boundary that separated the black inhabitants of North Richmond from the white government that presided over them but also identified a need to shift the locus of

[42] "Panthers Demand Liberation for N. Richmond Area," 2
[43] Ibid., 1-2.

power over the community into the borders of North Richmond itself. According to the article, it was by removing administrative and political powers from the existing white government and by transferring those powers to indigenous members of the black community that the Black Panthers hoped to provide North Richmond with a new government that could be both receptive and responsive to its needs. The featured project, moreover, not only challenged the process by which political power was distributed among local government bodies but also posed a much larger threat to the organization of racial power within the United States. Linking their own struggle with that of foreign and colonized peoples of the third world, the Black Panthers imagined that by achieving political independence and self-determination for the black community they would actually manage to liberate the black community from colonial bondage under the nation's white corporate power structure. Theoretically then, they could proceed to incorporate North Richmond into their larger project for developing an intercommunal network of black cities, a network that would ultimately span the entire country and sustain Black Power as a strong and influential presence in both domestic and global affairs.[44] Self-determination, in this respect, was a program through which the Oakland Panthers strove to counter the forces of white racial imperialism and to shift the balance of racial power in America.

Just as political self-determination became a central component of the Black Panthers' quest for racial justice, so too did it become a basis for their integral goal of economic self-determination, and more specifically the development of black capitalism. In a 1967 issue of *Black Power!*, Party member and editor Mwaka Wa Kuratibisha discussed the role of black capitalism in the liberation struggle. According to Kuratibisha,

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[44] Self, "To Plan Our Liberation," 770.

an independent capitalistic system within the black community would not only "help to strengthen the national consciousness of Black Americans by giving them confidence and pride in the enterprises which they themselves control" but would also provide blacks with "the control of their own destinies."[45] Kuratibisha's article portrayed black enterprise as a basis of black opportunity in the United States. It suggested that independent control over the resources and capital of the black community would not only provide blacks with the confidence, willingness, and internal sense of capability to participate in national commerce but that it was also the only means of restoring true free enterprise in American economic relations. However, Kuratibishi also insisted that black enterprise should "not be looked upon as an end in itself," that "its primary role is to provide coin for the larger liberation movement." He explained that the "MONEY" obtained through local independent black economic institutions could be used "to put into operation our programs for survival and national liberation." In this respect, although Kuratibisha regarded confidence and opportunity as the more immediate benefits of black enterprise for members of the local black community, he also emphasized that black enterprise be used to achieve much broader ends. The economic power yielded by black capitalist enterprise, in the context of the article, could in fact be used to finance the larger goals of the Black Panther Party, to nationalize the struggle for black liberation and to facilitate the development of black global intercommunalism. While they imagined Oakland as a starting point, as a "revolutionary base" so to speak, the Panthers ultimately strove to channel their local program toward their much larger program for international black self-determination and intercommunal Black Power revolution.[46] It was thus

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[45] "Black Business," 7.
[46] Self, "To Plan Our Liberation," 770.

through their integral goals of political and economic independence for the local black community that the Black Panthers ultimately hoped to break up the monopoly of white racial dominance in America and to create a place for blacks within the land of opportunity.

Interestingly, members of the Black Panther Party never seemed to fully grasp what Robert Self refers to as the "central irony" of their own program. Although the Black Panthers imagined self-determination as a program for black liberation, the majority of black Americans viewed self-determination as a constricting agenda and a threat to more mainstream integrationist notions of racial equality. Civil rights advocates attacked the Party for constructing a program that appeared only to reinforce segregation and to harden the color line that divided black and white peoples within the United States. In their eyes, Black Power ultimately signaled a retreat from the progress of the civil rights movement by the late 1960s. According to a 1967 report by the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, most black people in the region "feel the 'establishment,' private as well as political, can make decisions to solve their problem." The report revealed that most blacks actually "prefer . . . to work with the 'establishment,' rather than with the extremist groups to solve this problem."[47] As the report clearly demonstrated, self-determination was not a vision that was widely held among black Americans during the late 1960s. Nor did it ever become so. As most black people in the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as in the nation at large, held fast to a vision of racial integration and to the promise of liberal reform, they largely rejected the program drawn by the Oakland Black Panther Party. The Panthers' failure to attract widespread support for their self-determination program ultimately contributed to the demise of the Party.

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[47] Third Annual Report, Human Rights Commission of San Francisco (Sept 1996 – Sept. 1967) 2.

Waging the Battle: Self-Determination and the Anti-police Campaign

The Oakland Party's most direct effort to confront the forces of colonial oppression and to realize their goal of self-determination was through their campaign against the white police force. Widely known for its openly aggressive and often violent character, the Party's anti-police campaign has provoked a great deal of criticism from both contemporary observers and scholars alike. Perhaps the most anxious critics of the Oakland Panthers' anti-police campaign were more moderate black activists who favored integration. Black members of the NAACP and the National Urban League took the front line in criticizing the Panthers' excessive use of violence. Fearing that what they viewed as "anti-white" violence could only lead to destructive "white backlash," these organizations eagerly denounced the Black Panther Party as a subversive threat to the progress of the larger civil rights movement.[48] Local government officials were also quick to criticize the Black Panthers as a threat to the security of the local community. Responding to violence that erupted between members of the Black Panther Party and the San Francisco police force, San Francisco's Mayor Joseph Alioto referred to the Party as "a small mob of malcontents" and as "hate mongers who "in no way represent San Francisco's black community."[49] Most black citizens would have agreed with Alioto's charge that "[the Panthers] preach violence and they train in violence," that ultimately

[48] Jeffrey Ogbanna Green Ogbar, "From the Bottom Up: Popular Black Reactions to the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party, 1955-1975," Dissertation: Indiana University, December 1997 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 1998) 212-213.
[49] Letter from Mayor Joseph L. Alioto, 26 November 1968.

"the Panthers don't represent constructive change. They don't represent the black community."[50]

Just as public perceptions of the Black Panthers during the 1960s were dominated by the violent nature of the Party's anti-police campaign, the issue of violence has also preoccupied more recent discussions of the Black Panther Party within intellectual circles. In their efforts to explain the Panthers' use of violence, scholars have often associated the anti-police campaign with irrationality and exaggerated frustrations that developed among poor blacks in response to their own situation.[51] Historians have treated the Oakland Panthers as an angry and reckless band of "gangsters,"[52] whose "pathological behavior" and "criminal" activities can be seen as little more than a bout of "radical looniness" and "black paranoia."[53] These criticisms however, largely designed by neoconservative scholars for the purpose of tarnishing liberals' "romanticized" conceptions of the Black Power movement,[54] provide an interpretation of the Panthers' anti-police campaign that can at best be described as incomplete.

In order to fully understand the nature and purpose of the Oakland Panthers' anti-police campaign, it is important to first consider the factors that drove them to embrace violence as a form of resistance. In many ways, the Panthers' reliance on violent tactics can be explained as a response to the shortcomings of the larger civil rights movement and to the limitations of nonviolent resistance in the postwar ghetto. For members of the Oakland Black Panther Party, the experience of life in the ghetto during the 1960s had

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[50] Statement by Mayor Joseph L. Alioto, 29 April 1969.
[51] Lester, 3-9.
[52] Kate Coleman, "A Death in Berkeley," *The RaceCard: White Guilt, Black Resentment, and the Assault on Truth and Justice* (Rocklin, Calif.: Prima Publishing, 1997) 50.
[53] Joe Klein, "Race: The Issue," in *Second Thoughts about Race in America,* 43.
[54] Ibid, 42.

served as an ongoing radicalization process. Like most urban blacks during the postwar era, the Panthers were not only highly aware of the struggles and successes of civil rights organizations in the South but were also highly sensitive to the failure of those organizations to correct to problems of the ghetto through similar nonviolent tactics.[55] As historian Harvard Sitkoff relates,

> None of the marches, pickets, rallies, or other forms of peaceful protest abolished filthy dope-ridden streets or inferior segregated schools. No lawful strategy of social change dented the hostility of police departments or the discrimination of labor unions. All the tactics that had worked in the South miscarried against greedy slumlords and their intransigent political allies.[56]

For many black citizens in West Oakland in particular, institutional racism and racial violence became a very real and even inescapable part of everyday life. The rate of unemployment among Oakland's black citizens was over four times the national average. Black citizens had little voice in the political affairs of the city and, when confronted with discrimination and brutality by the local police, were given "little recourse besides filing law suits in white courts with white judges, juries and lawyers who were often apathetic to [their] complaints."[57] Events such as the repeal of California's Fair Housing law in 1964,[58] as well as the outbreak of the Watts Rebellion in 1965,[59] not only compounded the frustrations of black citizens in the East Bay but they also served as a sign to some of the region's more radical black activists, such as Party leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, that the conditions and discrimination that they faced on a daily basis might never be changed without the use of violence. Notwithstanding the ongoing nonviolent

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[55] Sitkoff, 208.
[56] Ibid, 208.
[57] Ogbar, 113.
[58] Self, "Negro Leadership and Negro Money," 109.
[59] Ogbar, 218.

activities of major organizations such as the Urban League and NAACP, the black radicals who formed Oakland's Black Panther Party during the late 1960s had come to reject nonviolence as an effective form of political resistance. In the eyes of Oakland Party members, the construction of a more radical agenda and the adoption of violent tactics were necessary measures for self-defense as well as for the pursuit of racial equality. The Panthers' anti-police campaign, in this respect, can be viewed as part of the Party reaction against nonviolence.

Still, the anti-police campaign held an even deeper political significance that can only be understood by contextualizing the campaign in the anti-colonial logic of the Black Panther Party. Party founder Huey Newton, referred to the local police as an "occupying army." He explained that "the black community is patrolled and the security force are outsiders. They do not live in the black community. They are controlled by the Establishment, reflecting the aspirations of the Establishment."[60] Newton's depiction of the local police force portrayed white officers within the boundaries of the ghetto as an imperializing army and an instrument of the state. White policemen, in the terms of Newton's explanation, crossed into the black community not to secure and uphold justice but to enforce the law and order of an allegedly racist and imperialistic white power structure. Newton's explanation thus reflected a notion of the local police as an intrusive and aggressive force that was dispatched by the state to impose white order on the black community and to hold blacks in subordination, and even more fundamentally, to uphold white power and perpetuate black powerlessness. This analysis of the local white police provided a theoretical basis for the construction of the Black Panthers' anti-police campaign in Oakland.

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[60] "Huey Newton Speaks," *Black Panthers*, special award edition (1969).

As agents of the so-called "Establishment," the police were regarded by Oakland Party members as part of a much larger plot by the white American power structure to suppress racial minorities and to secure white racial hegemony across the continent and the world. It is important that the Panthers' analysis emphasized that white power had been both secured and sustained through the use of violence. One article that appeared in the Party's political editorial, *Black Politics,* in 1968 conveyed the idea that "the United States . . . has always been a nation of violence." The article went on to describe the establishment and development of the nation as a history of violent racial warfare:

> The early colonists murdered the Indian in order to steal his land and the overwhelming majority of the top leaders of the American War for independence were racist slaveowners who maintained their position with merciless force. The entire [institution of slavery], economic system [of slavery] and later industrialization was based upon the forced labor of kidnapped Africans. This was made possible only by force and violence. The "winning of the West" was made possible only by force and violence. The domination of the rest of the country by the northeastern industrialists was made possible only by force and violence.[61]

The article regarded the use of violence, and particularly the use of racial violence, as a fundamental means of nation-building within the United States. It held that white European colonists, and later white American political and economic leadership, had seized power over the North American continent by first exploiting and even vanquishing other, non-white populations. Still, as the article contended, white Americans did not confine their violent racial conquest within the borders of the United States. *Black Politics* editors explained further:

> The imperialist theft of Hawaii was made possible only by force and violence (the Hawaiian monarchy was overthrown after the Hawaiian people were all but wiped out). The imperialist theft of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and other Spanish possessions was made possible only by force and violence (the Spanish-American War of 1898). The descendents of the "freed slaves," the Indians that survived the

[61] Editorial published in *Black Politics*, 1 no. 6-8 (Summer 1968): 4.

> three hundred year genocidal war against them, and the Mexican-Americans (whose forefathers were robbed of over half of Mexico in the Mexican War of 1845) have been kept as an internal colony for purposes of exploitation by force and violence. The false imprisonment of Japanese-American s in Nazi-type concentration camps 1942-1945 was accomplished by force and violence. The continued bigotry and repression of other Americans of oriental ancestry and of those of Puerto Rican ancestry persists through force and violence. Since the beginning of European colonization here all of this force and violence has been perpetrated by the white ruling class and its lackeys.[62]

Violence, in this regard, was portrayed in the article as a means of imperial racial conquest on an international scale. By tracing patterns of racial violence throughout the nation's history and development, the article suggested that the white elite who dominated the country had not only constructed the United States through a Darwinian process of racial subjugation, but that they also sought to extend their influence and dominion by conquering non-white peoples throughout the world. As the Panthers perceived this violent and imperializing tendency of the white power structure in the body of the white police force, members of the Party actually constructed their anti-police campaign as a means of challenging white racial hegemony and the existing racial order. By confronting the white police at a local level, therefore, the Panthers actually envisioned themselves to be challenging forces of racism and racial oppression both within the United States and throughout the world.

Having witnessed the effects of racial violence as well as the failures of nonviolence in the ghetto, and perceiving violence as the primary means through which white racial hegemony had taken hold in the United States, the Oakland Panthers also came to regard violence as a necessary and justifiable measure of self-defense and political resistance. Building upon the ideas of such prominent figures as Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon, the Panthers glorified their own struggle against the white American

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[62] Ibid, 4.

political establishment as part of some courageous effort to liberate oppressed peoples of the world. Party militants who engaged in shootouts and raids against the local police force, the white power structure's "occupying army" within the ghetto[63], actually imagined themselves as defenders of the black community as well as combatants in a valiant struggle to achieve black self-determination and racial justice. In October of 1968, one *Black Panther* newspaper article declared:

> We must rise up in the name of all our departed brothers and sisters who have suffered at their hands, in the name of all black, brown, and yellow people yet to be their victims and move to defend ourselves from their crimes, by removing them from a position of control over us. These pigs are only in this position because we allow them to stay there . . .[64]

The article invoked a sense of urgency in the need for defensive action against the police. It suggested that by removing local white police officers from power over the black community the Black Panthers hoped to release themselves and other non-white peoples from colonial bondage and to bring an end to "their crimes," that is, the crimes of racial oppression.

In the context of Black Panther understanding, the ghetto became a battleground where the Panthers waged their fight for racial justice and self-determination. A double-page spread that appeared in the 1969 special edition magazine, *Black Panthers*, embodied the Party's conception of the white police force as the racist military enemy in a battle of racial warfare. In the collage of images that spanned the two pages, a young black girl screamed frantically in an effort to escape a white police officer who marched

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[63] "Huey Newton Speaks."
[64] *Black Panther,* 26 October 1968.

Black Panthers editorial rendering of racial warfare in the black ghetto[65]

closely after her. A black woman crouched in anguish before a line of armed white policemen, and a black man lay helpless on the cement, shirt torn and left eye swollen shut as he surrendered to the white officers who hovered over him with nightsticks in hand.[66] Together, the images projected the desperation and agony of black citizens who fell victim to the terrorist white police force. In this context, the black community resembled a battleground of racial warfare, a battle in which blacks held the defensive against a corps of aggressively racist state officials. The Panthers' depiction of ghetto violence, moreover, presented a sharp contrast to the type of optimism that was consistently displayed by integrationist groups. Rather than seek a peaceable solution to such problems as racial discrimination and police brutality, as most groups strove to do

[65] *Black Panthers*, special award edition (1969).
[66] Ibid.

during this period, the Panthers insisted that violence must be met with violence, that war must be waged not only against the police themselves but against the state they represented.

Although historians typically dismiss the Black Panther Party's anti-police campaign as part of an unthinking and exaggerated response to heightened racial tensions and inequality during the latter half of the 1960s, it is important to recognize the ways in which the campaign actually evolved out of the Panthers' larger critique of racial and power dynamics in America. The Panthers' anti-police campaign addressed their notion of domestic colonialism as well as the problems that they believed it created for black ghetto residents, especially disproportionate black poverty and racial oppression. By treating police brutality as a military offense on behalf of the nation's white corporate power structure, Oakland Party militants came to view their own use of violent resistance as a defensive measure and as part of a revolutionary struggle to liberate the local black community. Of course, the Panthers' ideas about militant defense were highly contentious among members of the larger black community, and ultimately served to intensify their opposition among both blacks and whites. By incurring the wrath of the black integrationists as well as the federal government, the Panthers' anti-police campaign ultimately weakened their position as a revolutionary political organization.

Serving the People

Although their anti-police campaign has proven to be the most prominent, the Black Panther Party also sought to reconstruct American political economy and to

implement their program for self-determination through other, nonviolent programs. Most commonly referred to as "serve-the-people" programs, these programs represented what was perhaps the Panthers' most constructive grassroots effort to secure black control over the resources of the black community, to eliminate black dependency on the white corporate power structure, and to implement self-determination on a local level. Even more importantly however, the programs also constituted what the Panthers regarded as a first step toward achieving their vision for "revolutionary intercommunalism."[67]

Though critics have often dismissed the Panthers' nonviolent programs as part of a relatively conservative reformist agenda and as a departure from the Party's proclaimed revolutionary objectives,[68] a closer look at the ideological basis and intended purpose of the programs reveals their true revolutionary significance. As Party leader Bobby Seale explained:

> A lot of people misunderstand the politics of these programs; some people have a tendency to call them reform programs. They're not reform programs; they're actually revolutionary community programs . . . set forth by revolutionaries, by those who want to change the existing system to a better system.[69]

When examining the Black Panthers' community programs, it is necessary to consider them not within the conventional framework of reformism or self-help but as an immediate outgrowth of the Panthers' larger program for self-determination. The programs represented a genuine and active effort by the Black Panther Party to bring

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[67] Floyd W. Hayes, III and Francis A Klein, III, "'All Power to the People:' The Political Thought of Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party," in *The Black Panther Party: Reconsidered*, 170.
[68] JoNina A. Abron, " 'Serving the People': The Survival Programs of the Black Panther Party," *The Black Panther Party: Reconsidered*, 118.
[69] Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (1970; reprint, Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991) 412-413.

constructive change to the black community[70] and, in the words of Bobby Seale, to "change the existing system to a better system."[71] A 1969 article from the Party's *Black Panther* newspaper helped to further elucidate the ideological underpinnings of the Party's serve-the-people-campaign. Presuming to speak on behalf of the black community, the article insisted that "we cannot depend on the present government to fill our wants and needs." Rather, it continued, "more and more programs shall be set up to suffice the desires of the people and destroy the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and its lackeys."[72] As the article helped to illuminate, the purpose of the Black Panthers' serve-the-people campaign was not only to meet the immediate needs of black citizens within the local community but also to build a foundation from which Oakland's black citizens might challenge the so-called "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie," or more explicitly, the existing white corporate power structure. Members of the Party imagined that by developing an independent and self-sufficient black community on a local level, they could use Oakland as a "base of operation" and as a foundation for their larger project to develop an intercommunal network of black cities and thereby to shift balance of racial power on a global scale.[73] The Panthers thus imagined their serve the-people campaign as vital both to the wellbeing of local black citizens as well as to the success of their ultimate goal for international black self-determination.

From distributions of free food and clothing to the construction of a free health-care clinic and several liberation schools throughout the East Bay, the Oakland Party's serve-the-people programs put the Panthers' ideas about social reconstruction and self-

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[70] "Serving the People," *The Black Panther*, 6 April 1969, 178.
[71] Seale, *Seize the Time*, 412-413.
[72] "Serving the People," *The Black Panther*, 14.
[73] Self, "To Plan Our Liberation," 772.

determination into practice. By dramatizing the importance of indigenous political activism and by encouraging the construction and governance of indigenous institutions, the programs set the groundwork for what the Panthers hoped would become a foundation for global intercommunalism. Perhaps the most popular of the Black Panthers' serve-the-people programs was their Free Breakfast for Children Program (FBCP). Beginning in 1968, the Panthers established several free breakfast programs around the San Francisco Bay region and later mandated the adoption of the program by all other Black Panther Party chapters throughout the country.[74] Members of the Party who directed the breakfast programs of the East Bay gathered each morning to provide the poor and hungry children of the ghetto with a hearty breakfast before school. The breakfasts typically consisted of grits, toast, bacon, and eggs, a combination the Panthers referred to as "soul food," and frequently served as many as 150 children in a given seating.[75] The most important feature of the breakfast program however, according to a 1969 issue of the *Black Panther*, was the fact "that THE PEOPLE RUN IT . . . rather than bureaucratic commissions [whose interests were] divorced from the people."[76] The Panthers believed that their own involvement in the FBCP as well as in other community welfare projects was necessary to provide adequate resources and sustenance to members of the local black community, without invoking the derision and stereotypes that were so commonly associated with the existing federal welfare system. Moreover, the construction and operation of these programs provided the Oakland Panthers with an opportunity to practice setting up their own, community-controlled institutions. It was a process that the Panthers imagined would actually allow them to displace some amount

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[74] Abron, 182.
[75] Abron, 182; "To Feed Our Children," *The Black Panther*, 27 April 1969, 3.
[76] "Free Breakfast for Children about to be Vamped On," *The Black Panther*, 19 July 1969, 16.

of power from the hands of white government officials and to restore that power to local black citizens within the boundaries of the ghetto.[77] Party members expected that these programs would ultimately lead to the development of larger black institutions and to the consolidation of an independent local black government, one that could operate outside the jurisdiction of white-dominated political and bureaucratic institutions and that could maintain correspondence with other black cities within the idealized intercommunal network.[78]

The FBCP was only the first of many nonviolent programs that the Oakland Panthers designed to serve the people and to consolidate black political power in the San Francisco Bay Area. After introducing the free breakfast program, the Panthers established similar programs to distribute free shoes and clothing and organized numerous grocery give-aways with the support of local supermarkets. Party members also took on ambitious projects to reconstruct health and medical care within the black community. They constructed a free local health clinic and appointed professional doctors to provide a wide range of free services including physical exams, first aid, prenatal care, and tests for high blood pressure, lead poisoning, and sickle-cell anemia.[79] Like the FBCP and other community projects, the Oakland Party's medical programs carried out the Panthers' efforts to establish black political and economic independence through indigenous community activism. An editorial published by the Black Panther Party in a special edition magazine addressed the basic idea that "health care is a right, not a privilege" and that "a high standard of health care must be made available to everyone." The article emphasized, however, that "an effective attack on health care is

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[77] Kim Kit Holder, qtd. in Abron, 178.
[78] Self, "To Plan Our Liberation," 772.
[79] Abron, 183-184.

impossible without a simultaneous attack on all the social and economic conditions which breed poverty and illness."[80] By treating health care as an issue that was rooted in the broader socio-economic conditions of the state, the article suggested that disproportionate illness among black ghetto residents was actually an indication of much deeper institutional failings. The Panthers linked the deteriorating health and status of the black community with the larger forces of white capitalist oppression, and as such, they viewed their own efforts to reconstruct health care in the ghetto as a practical step toward achieving black self-determination and eventually also global intercommunalism. An article that appeared in a 1969 issue of the *Black Panther* helped to illuminate the driving objective of Black Panther health cadre workers. According to the article, Oakland Party members were driven by the "goal of healing the sick, rescuing the dying and practicing revolutionary medicine in the tradition of Che Guevara, Norman Bethune and Frantz Fanon."[81] Just as the article likened Black Panther health cadres to international revolutionary figures, the Panthers imagined themselves as active revolutionaries and as important players in the movement for black power and racial justice in the world.

In addition to providing material resources and medical treatment to the local black community, members of the Oakland Black Panther Party also strove to provide black citizens with what they considered to be a proper political education. In their efforts to reconstruct what they viewed as a "biased and distorted" educational system,[82] one that they deemed as wholly "incapable of making a real contribution to the search for truth and understanding,"[83] the Oakland Panthers founded a number of liberation schools in the

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[80] "Policies of the Panther Party" *Black Panthers*, special award edition (1969).
[81] "Revolutionary Community Medical Corps Meets," *The Black Panther*, 23 August 1969, 25.
[82] Abron, 185.
[83] "Policies of the Panther Party."

Bay Area. The liberation schools were run by members of the Party and residents of the black community for the primary purpose of teaching black students "about the class struggle in terms of black history."[84] Based on a concept of education as "the raw material for new ideas,"[85] Oakland Party members who worked closely with the liberation schools established curriculum that aimed to provide students with the knowledge that would be necessary to develop new strategies for challenging the nation's white corporate power structure and the forces of racial oppression in the world. Lessons included a range of subjects but gave special attention to "presentations on Party activities, Black history, and current events."[86] Although it is possible to argue that the curriculum of the liberation schools was actually no less biased than that of the white-dominated institutions that they set out to change, the Panthers themselves imagined these schools to be an important foundation for sharing information and ideas that were otherwise largely ignored. The Panthers' paramount effort to secure power over the educational institutions of the black community was through their establishment of the Oakland Community Youth Institute. Founded in 1971, the Institute expanded on the achievements of Liberation Schools by providing free meals, free bus transportation to and from school, and free dental and medical appointment for black students.[87] The Institute as well as the liberation schools modeled the Black Panthers' efforts to accelerate grassroots mobilization and to inspire support for the achievement of black self-determination. Like other programs of their serve-the-people campaign, the Oakland Panthers' Youth Institute and liberation schools represented a substantial effort to

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[84] Bobby Seale, qtd. in Abron, 185.
[85] "San Jose Liberation School," *The Black Panther*, 9 August 1969, 19.
[86] Abron, 185.
[87] Abron 185-186.

develop independent black institutions within the local community and to reorganize West Oakland as a revolutionary base.

In some ways, the Panthers' serve-the-people programs helped to offset the stigma of violence that became inextricably tied to their anti-police campaign. By demonstrating Party members' genuine concern for the health and welfare of the black community and by exhibiting their capacity to approach certain issues of social injustice in a relatively peaceful manner, the Black Panthers' serve-the-people programs actually helped the Oakland Party to win support from some of their observers. One black citizen who witnessed the Panthers' nonviolent community programs was inspired by their efforts to join the Party. In his diary, he praised the Black Panthers for their valuable "contributions" to the wellbeing of the black community and for the "constructive things" yielded by their nonviolent programs. He noted that, as a result of the Panthers' serve-the-people campaign, "neighbors don't feel as distant as before. We seem to be more visible, more alive now."[88] According to a study by historian Chris Rhomberg, this type of appreciation for the Black Panthers' community programs was not uncommon among black Americans. In fact, Rhomberg has reported a significant increase by the late 1960s in the number of blacks who respected the Black Panthers for their programs as well as their persistent and active resistance to racial inequality.[89]

Ultimately however, the Panthers' serve-the-people campaign did very little to change perceptions of the Oakland Party by the American public at large. In spite of some blacks' growing appreciation for the Panthers' nonviolent initiatives, most attitudes toward the Black Panther Party were still dominated by fear and contempt. According to

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[88] Steve McCutchen, diary entry in *Black Panther Party: Reconsidered*, 118.
[89] Chris Rhomberg, *No There There: Race, Class, and Political Community in Oakland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 168.

surveys conducted between 1970 and 1971, during the period when many of the programs first launched by the Oakland Panthers began to spread to other Black Panther Party chapters across the country, about 60 percent of white citizens and roughly 20 percent of blacks still regarded the Black Panther Party as a "serious menace" and a threat to the stability of the nation.[90] Of course, these attitudes were shaped in part by news and media that consistently steered public attention away from the Panthers' nonviolent programs and toward the much bloodier and more sensational anti-police raids that had made the Party infamous. But there were also a number of critics who directly opposed the Panthers' serve-the-people programs as well as the ideological principles on which they stood. Because the programs were based on a fundamental rejection of the nation's existing political and economic order and because they were ultimately directed toward a goal of racial separation and self-determination, the programs presented a powerful threat to more mainstream visions of civil rights and integration. Integrationists scorned the Panthers for abandoning faith in the country's liberal institutions and for pursuing exclusionary policy measures that could only further isolate black Americans from the larger society. Thus, even though they lacked the type of violence that the Panthers carried out in their anti-police campaign, the programs stirred a great deal of controversy among members of the black community and challenged the ideals of equality that were embraced by more moderate black activists.

Regardless of popular criticism, members of the Black Panther Party in Oakland imagined the construction of their serve-the-people campaign as a necessary step to ensure the survival of black people in the ghetto as well as to restructure the ghetto as an

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[90] William J. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 159.

independent and self-sufficient political community. The serve-the-people programs represented an active effort by the Oakland Party to establish concrete and independent institutions as well as a foundation for self-determination and intercommunalism.

The Demise and Legacy of the Oakland Panthers

From the moment of its establishment in 1966 until its demise in the late 1970s, the Black Panther Party in Oakland had far more enemies than adherents. As a small and highly radical subset of the black American population, the Oakland Panthers failed to attract the level of support that would have been necessary to carry out their program and to realize their vision for black self-determination and intercommunalism. In many ways, the Panthers' efforts to reconstruct the city of Oakland and to incorporate the West Oakland ghetto into a revolutionary "power base" were driven by far-reaching and, in the words of Robert Self, "ambitiously utopian" ideals of black political and cultural unity that were simply unrealistic.[91] Although the Panthers consistently emphasized the need for black racial separation and the development of black political and economic self-determination, the majority of blacks vigorously opposed these ideals as contradictory to more mainstream visions of racial integration. Fearing that Black Power militancy could only taint public perceptions of the larger civil rights movement and isolate civil rights organizations from the much-needed political support of white liberals, black integrationists publicly condemned the Oakland Black Panther Party as well as the call for Black Power altogether. The Panthers' failure to attract the support of the larger black community contributed significantly to the Party's demise.

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[91] Self, "To Plan Our Liberation," 770.

Just as the Panthers were weakened in many ways by the opposition of black integrationists, the Party's ultimate dissolution was largely due to the work of the federal government. By the end of 1968, roughly two years after the Party's founding, the federal government targeted the Black Panther Party as a subversive political organization and, in the words of J. Edgar Hoover, as "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country."[92] Hoover and other government officials feared the Panthers not only because they represented an organization that "explicitly identified with anti-imperialism and internationalism" but even more importantly because they had "from the outset advanced a concrete program and were pursing it with considerable discipline."[93] Undoubtedly, the Panthers' violent and high-profile raids against the local police only served to intensify government opposition and to accelerate the speed with which government officials set out to destroy the Party.[94] Under Hoover's direction, the government developed specific counterintelligence operations (COINTELPRO) for the purpose of "crippl[ing] the BPP" and "destroy[ing] what the BPP stands for."[95] By secretly investigating and infiltrating the Black Panther Party, and after arresting and even assassinating some of the Panthers' most influential leaders, the COINTELPRO succeeded in its effort to undermine the influence of the Black Panther Party in national affairs. Riddled with dissension both internally and externally, the Black Panther Party disappeared from the forefront of American political affairs and effectively disbanded by the early 1980s.[96]

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[92] J. Edgar Hoover, qtd. in Ward Churchill, "'To Disrupt, Discredit, and Destroy:' The FBI's Secret War against the Black Panther Party," in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and their Legacy,* ed. Kathleen Cleaver and George Katasiaficas (New York: Routledge, 2001) 83.
[93] Ward Churchill, "To Disrupt, Discredit, and Destroy," 83.
[94] Ibid, 83.
[95] Ibid, 83.
[96] Charles E. Jones, "Reconsidering Panther History: The Untold Story," in *Black Panther Party: Reconsidered,* 1-2.

At the same time however, although the Oakland Panthers failed to achieve their ultimate vision for black self-determination and intercommunalism, they have nevertheless left an indelible impact on the discussion and development of racial politics since the late 1960s. By refusing to accept liberal notions for creating a color-blind society, by treating race as an objective, historical construct and as an active and material force in the development of American racial hierarchy, the Oakland Black Panther Party carried long-held notions of black radical thought to the center of American politics. Building on the ideas of W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, and other earlier black radicals, the Oakland Panthers treated racial inequality in the United States as a problem that could be traced not to any immediate source or circumstance, but rather to an ideology – the ideology of racism – which had developed over the course of centuries and which, in their eyes, had served as a foundation for the construction of American political and economic framework. It was through their pursuit of self-determination, and in their efforts to challenge the perceived forces of racism and racial oppression, that the Oakland Panthers carried out the tradition of black radical resistance and gave shape to black radicals' ideas about Black Power.

The Oakland Panthers' self-determination program has affected the shape of American political discourse and also the development of American social and economic policy in a number of important ways. First, by calling attention to contemporary social issues such as police brutality and also to the disproportionate levels of poverty that existed between black ghetto and white suburban residents, their program politicized some of the most significant problems that had emerged in postwar urban America. Some of the Panthers' nonviolent community programs were even incorporated later on, albeit

in a somewhat different format, by the federal government. The Oakland Party's Free Breakfast for Children Program, for instance, served as a precedent in some ways to subsequent policy for providing all underprivileged elementary and secondary schoolchildren with free breakfasts before class.[97] Similarly, the Party's liberation schools, and specifically the black-oriented curriculum that the Panthers designed for the schools, acted as a precursor for the development of black and ethnic studies curriculum in universities throughout the United States.[98] Furthermore, the Oakland Panthers' ideas regarding the historical construction of race and the victimization of black peoples by the larger white American society, ideas that had also been drawn out in earlier black radical movements, have provided a basis for many, more recent discussions regarding affirmative action policy and the issue of black reparations.[99]

The vanguard of the Black Power movement, and an embodiment of the long-standing tradition of black radicalism, the Black Panther Party has played an important role in the development of the black liberation struggle and the battle for racial equality. Although they never represented the larger black American population, the ideas and activities of the Oakland Black Panther Party were grounded in a coherent critique of American racial and power dynamics and represented a cohesive program for reconstructing American political economy. In the end, the Oakland Black Panther Party represented one solution to the ongoing struggle to "make it possible for a man to be both

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[97] Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 231.
[98] Abron, 887-888.
[99] Lewis M. Killian, "Black Power and White Reactions: The Revitalization of Race-Thinking in the United States," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 454 (March, 1981): 47-49.

a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."[100]

[100] Dubois, W.E.B., "The Souls of Black Folk," in *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 215.

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