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BLACK AGAINST EMPIRE

**THE HISTORY AND POLITICS
OF THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY**

JOSHUA BLOOM AND WALDO E. MARTIN, JR.

WITH A NEW PREFACE

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The History and Politics
of the Black Panther Party

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**Joshua Bloom
and Waldo E. Martin, Jr.**



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To

*Hana, Mikhayla, Julius, Theodore, Eva, Emila, and Kian;
Jetta, Coral, and Kayla*

and

*Che Patrice Lumumba, Darryl, Dassine, Dorian, Ericka,
Fred Jr., Jaime, Joju Younghi, Maceo, Mai, Malik Nkrumah
Stagolee, Patrice, Romaine, Tupac, and all the cubs (here
and gone)*

and

young revolutionaries everywhere.

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's god entitled them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; *that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.*

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. *But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.*

—Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, as excerpted in the Black Panther Party's original Ten Point Program, *Black Panther*, May 15, 1967

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Preface to the 2016 Edition

How do you fight white supremacy in the era of "color blindness"?

In the early morning of April 1, in North Richmond, California, Deputy Sheriff Mel Brunkhorst shot Denzil Dowell, black and unarmed, in the back and head as he ran away. Dowell was left bleeding without medical attention and died lying in the street. His mother proclaimed, "The police murdered my son." After thirty minutes of deliberation the coroner's inquest found "justifiable homicide," and the state declined to investigate further or to try Brunkhorst for any crime. The year was 1967. We would not know Denzil Dowell's name if not for the Black Panther Party.

By the time of Dowell's death, the Civil Rights Movement had valiantly dismantled legal segregation. But whites maintained many forms of racial privilege. Most black people continued to live impoverished, in segregated communities, excluded from the middle class. Black people enjoyed little electoral representation, little access to elite higher education. And black communities were mostly policed by whites—often brutally. Politicians worked within, and sometimes intentionally leveraged, these institutionalized racial divides to win and maintain power.

Traditional civil rights organizations had little to offer Dowell's family. Many movement activists had come to recognize the limits of civil rights politics three years earlier when President Lyndon Johnson had tricked his "allies" from the movement into participating in a faux

negotiation while he seated the exclusionary white Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. As with many politicians, Johnson's power rested, in part, on racist political institutions immune to the pressures of civil rights action. With redress unavailable from traditional civil rights organizations, the Dowell family sought assistance from the Black Panther Party.

Soon, hundreds of black people were joining Black Panther Party rallies in North Richmond demanding justice for Denzil Dowell. At that time still a small group of young activists based in nearby Oakland, the Black Panther Party frontally challenged containment policing and the legitimacy of the American state with its anti-imperialist politics and armed self-defense against the police. The virulent repression it drew exposed the brutality of American rule in black communities. In the late 1960s the Party grew exponentially, catalyzing a wide movement for black liberation and eclipsing traditional civil rights organizations in activity, influence, funding, and notoriety.

We wrote this book because we wanted to learn how the Black Panther Party mobilized so many people to take severe personal risks to fight racism. Like Max Weber, we believe the questions that motivate social research are always informed by social and political commitments and that the objectivity of social science inheres in the rigor of research and analysis. Some would prefer we had instead produced a study of the personalities of the Party leaders and their flawed judgments or the crimes of the small remnants of the Party in Oakland after it unraveled in the 1970s. Those stories have been told before, and we recount them here. But first and foremost, this book is dedicated to making sense of the politics of the Black Panther Party.

Our analysis shows how the Black Panther Party mobilized so many people to fight white supremacy and capitalist exploitation. The Party generated an escalating cycle of insurgency by linking disruptive actions to community programs as part of a coherent anti-imperialist politics. In the late 1960s this politics forged common cause with a wide array of domestic and international constituencies. The Black Panther Party sustained disruption as a source of power by leveraging broad political cleavages to draw widespread black, antiwar, and international support in resistance to repression. The Party became repressible only once the state made sweeping concessions to its allies—namely affirmative action, repeal of the draft, and international diplomatic reconciliation.

We see our findings as especially important in the contrasts and similarities they illuminate with the political practices of the Civil Rights

Movement. These suggest important lessons about the fight against white supremacy today.

As racial progress has proceeded in the fifty years since the formation of the Black Panther Party, so have the forces of racial retrenchment. Whites have fought mightily to maintain their racial advantages. Political leaders—from Richard Nixon in the Panther era to Bill Clinton in the 1990s and Donald Trump today—have used racial division as a source of power. Despite the absence of formal racial subordination, the election of a black president, and broad proclamations of a postracial era, racial inequality has expanded in recent decades. Since 1970 the prison population of the United States has quintupled. Black people suffer seven times the rate of incarceration of whites. Young black men are twenty-one times more likely than young white men to be killed by police. As Michelle Alexander observes in *The New Jim Crow*, there are more black people under carceral control today than there were slaves in 1850. By 2000 the median white family owned ten times the assets of the median black family. Today, a decade and a half later, the median white family owns almost twenty times the assets of the median black family.

In the past several years, graphic video footage of police killings of unarmed black people has called attention to the persistent inhumanity of “color-blind” racism. Activists have rallied around these cases to some effect. Like the Black Panther Party, #BlackLivesMatter and other contemporary activists have coupled confrontational tactics with community organizing and sought to challenge racism by mobilizing against police brutality. And again, today antiracist activists face repression including state surveillance, arrests, and coordinated public vilification. As in the 1960s, the forces of racial retrenchment are eager to move on without disturbing the basic arrangements of white privilege.

Unfortunately, antiracist activists today cannot dismantle the new Jim Crow by emulating the specific practices of the Civil Rights Movement. The law now purports to protect black people's citizenship rights. Unlike segregated lunch counters in 1960, police brutality cannot be directly defied with a sit-in. Bodily integrating public institutions is no longer illegal. Neither can antiracist activists today dismantle the new Jim Crow by emulating the specific practices of the Black Panther Party. Armed resistance to police brutality would be broadly construed as terrorist activity.

Indeed, each generation must make its own history, under new conditions, in new ways. Rather than emulating the specifics, we believe that developing effective antiracist practices today requires emulating

the general political dynamic common to both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party. History shows how difficult it is to frontally challenge white supremacy in the face of coordinated repression. Yet it also reveals important lessons about how contemporary antiracist activists might sustain such a challenge.

Our findings suggest that dismantling the new Jim Crow will require insurgent practices that not only make business as usual impossible but do so in a way that is difficult to repress. Historically, antiracist insurgents have built followings and influence by drawing wide support in resistance to repression. In particular, antiracist insurgents sustained disruption as a source of power by advancing practices whose repression graphically exposed the brutality of racism. This was true of the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, Selma, and the other civil rights campaigns in the early 1960s. This was true of Ferguson in 2014. And perhaps especially, this was true of the practices of the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s analyzed in this book.

In our view, only by developing such practices will contemporary activists drive the dynamics of mobilization rather than simply respond to external events. Only then will #BlackLivesMatter draw the breadth of allied support in resistance to repression achieved by the Black Panther Party. Only then will the movement command, rather than being held subject to, the media's inclinations. Only then will contemporary activists be able to sustain disruption as a source of power. Such insurgent practices are the source of democracy, the best hope for dismantling white supremacy, and the pathway toward creating an egalitarian society.

Joshua Bloom, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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Introduction

The Panthers shut out the pack of zealous reporters and kept the door locked all day, but now the hallway was empty. Huey Newton and two comrades casually walked from the luxury suite down to the lobby and slipped out of the Hong Kong Hilton. Their official escort took them straight across the border, and after a short flight, they exited the plane in Beijing, where they were greeted by cheering throngs.¹

It was late September 1971, and U.S. national security adviser Henry Kissinger had just visited China a couple months earlier. The United States was proposing a visit to China by President Nixon himself and looking toward normalization of diplomatic relations. The Chinese leaders held varied views of these prospects and had not yet revealed whether they would accept a visit from Nixon.

But the Chinese government had been in frequent communication with the Black Panther Party, had hosted a Panther delegation a year earlier, and had personally invited Huey Newton, the Party's leader, to visit. With Nixon attempting to arrange a visit, Newton decided to accept the invitation and beat Nixon to China.²

When Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, greeted Newton in Beijing, Newton took Zhou's right hand between both his own hands. Zhou clasped Newton's wrist with his left hand, and the two men looked deeply into each other's eyes. Newton presented a formal petition requesting that China "negotiate with . . . Nixon for the freedom of the oppressed peoples of the world." Then the two sat down for a pri-

vate meeting.³ On National Day, the October 1 anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Premier Zhou honored the Panthers as national guests. Tens of thousands of Chinese gathered in Tiananmen Square, waving red flags and applauding the Panthers. Revolutionary theater groups, folk dancers, acrobats, and the revolutionary ballet performed. Huge red banners declared, "Peoples of the World, Unite to destroy the American aggressors and their lackeys."⁴ At the official state dinner, first lady Jiang Qing sat with the Panthers.⁵ A *New York Times* editorial encouraged Nixon "to think positively about Communist China and to ignore such potential sources of friction as the honors shown to Black Panther leader Huey Newton."⁶

FORBIDDEN HISTORY

In Oakland, California, in late 1966, community college students Bobby Seale and Huey Newton took up arms and declared themselves part of a global revolution against American imperialism. Unlike civil rights activists who advocated for full citizenship rights within the United States, their Black Panther Party rejected the legitimacy of the U.S. government. The Panthers saw black communities in the United States as a colony and the police as an occupying army. In a foundational 1967 essay, Newton wrote, "Because black people desire to determine their own destiny, they are constantly inflicted with brutality from the occupying army, embodied in the police department. There is a great similarity between the occupying army in Southeast Asia and the occupation of our communities by the racist police."⁷

As late as February 1968, the Black Panther Party was still a small local organization. But that year, everything changed. By December, the Party had opened offices in twenty cities, from Los Angeles to New York. In the face of numerous armed conflicts with police and virulent direct repression by the state, young black people embraced the revolutionary vision of the Party, and by 1970, the Party had opened offices in sixty-eight cities from Winston-Salem to Omaha and Seattle.⁸ The Black Panther Party had become the center of a revolutionary movement in the United States.⁹

Readers today may have difficulty imagining a revolution in the United States. But in the late 1960s, many thousands of young black people, despite the potentially fatal outcome of their actions, joined the Black Panther Party and dedicated their lives to revolutionary struggle. Many more approved of their efforts. A joint report by the Federal

Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Committee, and National Security Agency expressed grave concern about wide support for the Party among young blacks, noting that "43 per cent of blacks under 21 years of age [have] . . . a great respect for the [Black Panther Party]."¹⁰ Students for a Democratic Society, the leading antiwar and draft resistance organization, declared the Black Panther Party the "vanguard in our common struggles against capitalism and imperialism."¹¹ FBI director J. Edgar Hoover famously declared, "The Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to the internal security of the country."¹²

As the Black Panthers drew young blacks to their revolutionary program, the Party became the strongest link between the domestic Black Liberation Struggle and global opponents of American imperialism. The North Vietnamese—at war with the United States—sent letters home to the families of American prisoners of war (POWs) through the Black Panther Party and discussed releasing POWs in exchange for the release of Panthers from U.S. jails. Cuba offered political asylum to Black Panthers and began developing a military training ground for them. Algeria—then the center of Pan-Africanism and a world hub of anti-imperialism that hosted embassies for most postcolonial governments and independence movements—granted the Panthers national diplomatic status and an embassy building of their own, where the Panthers headquartered their International Section under the leadership of Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver.

But by the time of Newton's trip to China, the Black Panther Party had begun to unravel. In the early 1970s, the Party rapidly declined. By mid-1972, it was basically a local Oakland community organization once again. An award-winning elementary school and a brief local renaissance in the mid-1970s notwithstanding, the Party suffered a long and painful demise, formally closing its last office in 1982.

Not since the Civil War almost a hundred and fifty years ago have so many people taken up arms in revolutionary struggle in the United States. Of course, the number of people who took up arms for the Union and Confederate causes and the number of people killed in the Civil War are orders of magnitude larger than the numbers who have engaged in any armed political struggle in the United States since. Some political organizations that embraced revolutionary ideologies yet eschewed armed confrontation with the state may have garnered larger followings than the Black Panther Party did. But in the general absence of armed revolution in the United States since 1865, the thou-

sands of Black Panthers—who dedicated their lives to a political program involving armed resistance to state authority—stand alone.

Why in the late 1960s—in contrast to the Civil Rights Movement’s nonviolent action and demands for African Americans’ full participation in U.S. society and despite severe personal risks—did so many young people dedicate their lives to the Black Panther Party and embrace armed revolution? Why, after a few years of explosive growth, did the Party so quickly unravel? And why has no similar movement developed since?

Most obvious explanations do not stand up to the evidence. Some believe the Party was a creation of the media. But most of the media attention came after the Party’s rapid spread. Some assert that the Party’s success was just a product of the times. But many other black political organizations, some with similar ideologies, sought to mobilize people at the same time, and none succeeded like the Panthers. Others contend that this or that Panther leader was an unrivaled organizer and that by the force of his or her efforts, the Party was able to recruit its vast following. But most of the new recruits to the Black Panthers came to the Party asking to join, not the other way around. One common view is that the Party collapsed because it could not withstand the government’s repression, but the year of greatest repression, 1969, was also the year of the Party’s greatest growth.¹³

While much has been written on aspects of the Black Panther Party, none of the accounts to date have offered a rigorous overarching analysis of the Party’s evolution and impact. Most writers have looked at a small slice of the Party’s temporal and geographic scope, providing limited historical context. Party sympathizers are as guilty of such reduction as its detractors are. Commentators reduce the Party to its community service programs or to armed confrontation with the police. They claim the Panthers espoused narrowly Marxist or black nationalist ideology. They maintain that Huey Newton was a genius or that he was overly philosophical, or that he was a criminal. They say the Party’s power came from organizing young blacks from the urban ghettos or that its influence stemmed from its ability to draw broad support from a range of allies. To some people, the Party was a locus of cutting-edge debate on gender politics, and they applaud its embrace of women’s and gay liberation; to others, it was sexist and patriarchal.

Occasionally, commentators have even suggested that the Black Panther Party was all of these things. But no one has made sense of the relationship among the parts, situated the varying practices of the

Party in time and place, and adequately traced the evolution of the Party’s politics. As Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Garrow recently pointed out in an extensive review of historical works on the Panthers, no one has yet offered a serious analysis of how the political practices of the Black Panther Party changed during its history or why people were drawn to participate at each juncture of its evolution. “Panther scholarship,” Garrow observes, “would benefit immensely from a detailed and comprehensive narrative history that gives special care to how rapidly the [Black Panther Party] evolved through a succession of extremely fundamental changes. . . . Far too much of what has been written about the [Party] fails to specify expressly which period of Panther history is being addressed or characterized, and interpretive clarity, and accuracy, will benefit greatly from a far more explicit appreciation and identification of the major turning points in the [Black Panther Party’s] eventually tragic evolution.”¹⁴

Writing in the *New York Times* in 1994, sociologist Robert Blauner commented, “Because of the political mine fields,” the “complex and textured social history that the Panthers deserve” has not yet been written and “may be 10 or 15 years in the future.”¹⁵ More than forty years have passed since the heyday of the Black Panther Party, and almost twenty years have passed since Blauner’s writing, but to date, despite comment by a diversity of writers, no one has presented an adequate or comprehensive history.¹⁶

As a popular adage suggests, “History is written by the victors.”¹⁷ Writing a history that transcends preconceptions is challenging. It takes time and perspective and endless sifting through often-contradictory evidence to test competing explanations and weigh the importance of divergent forces. But the lack of an overarching history of the Panthers and their politics, despite the abundance of writing on various aspects of the Party, is unusual. We suspect that the long absence of an adequate history is due, in part, to the character of state repression of the Party. Aimed specifically at vilifying the Black Panther Party, state repression powerfully shaped public understandings and blurred the outlines of the history.

The federal government and local police forces across the nation responded to the Panthers with an unparalleled campaign of repression and vilification. They fed defamatory stories to the press. They wiretapped Panther offices around the country. They hired dozens of informants to infiltrate Panther chapters. Often, they put aside all pretense and simply raided Panther establishments, guns blazing. In one case, in

Chicago in December 1969, equipped with an informant's map of the apartment, police and federal agents assassinated a prominent Panther leader in his bed while he slept, shooting him in the head at point-blank range.¹⁸

In attacking the Black Panthers as enemies of the state, federal agents sought to repress not just the Party as an organization but the political possibility it represented. The FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) sought to vilify the Black Panthers and "prevent [the Party and similar] black nationalist groups and leaders from gaining respectability by discrediting them."¹⁹

FBI director J. Edgar Hoover emphasized time and again, in different ways, that "one of our primary aims in counterintelligence as it concerns the BPP is to keep this group isolated from the moderate black and white community which may support it."²⁰ Federal agents sought "to create factionalism" among Party leaders and between the Panthers and other black political organizations.²¹ FBI operatives forged documents and paid provocateurs to promote violent conflicts between Black Panther leaders—as well as between the Party and other black nationalist organizations—and congratulated themselves when these conflicts yielded the killing of Panthers. And COINTELPRO sought to lead the Party into unsupportable action, "creating opposition to the BPP on the part of the majority of the residents of the ghetto areas."²² For example, agent provocateurs on the government payroll supplied explosives to Panther members and sought to incite them to blow up public buildings, and they promoted kangaroo courts encouraging Panther members to torture suspected informants.²³

One school of commentators simply took up Hoover's program of vilification, portraying the Party as criminals and obscuring and minimizing its politics. In an influential article in 1978, Kate Coleman and Paul Avery made a series of allegations about personal misdeeds and criminal actions by Panthers in the 1970s, after the Party had lost influence as a national and international political organization: "Black Panthers have committed a series of violent crimes over the last several years. . . . There appears to be no political explanation for it; the Party is no longer under siege by the police, and this is not self-defense. It seems to be nothing but senseless criminality, directed in most cases at other blacks."²⁴

David Horowitz wrote a series of essays in 1994 building on these allegations, treating them as the totality of what was important or interesting about the Panthers and describing the Black Panthers as "an

organized street gang."²⁵ Hugh Pearson, in consultation with Horowitz, then wrote *The Shadow of the Panther*, a full-length book version of the story Horowitz had developed, telling the history of the Black Panther Party through the alleged crimes and personal misdeeds of Huey Newton.²⁶ The major newspapers celebrated the book as a respectable history of the Party and its politics. The *New York Times* called the book "a richly detailed portrait of a movement" and named it one of its Notable Books of the Year 1994.²⁷

The storm of criminal allegations touted as movement history effectively advanced J. Edgar Hoover's program of vilifying the Party and shrouding its politics. While many of the criminal allegations that Horowitz and his colleagues made about Huey Newton and other Panther leaders were thinly supported and almost none were verified in court, these treatments also omit and obscure the thousands of people who dedicated their lives to the Panther revolution, their reasons for doing so, and the political dynamics of their participation, their actions, and the consequences.

Hoover's program aimed to drive a wedge between the Party and its nonblack allies. Today, the popular misconception persists that the Black Panther Party was separatist, or antiwhite. Many current internet postings mischaracterize the Party in this way.²⁸ In fact, the Party was deeply antiracist and strongly committed to interracial coalitions. Even some newspapers got the basic story wrong, such as the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, whose editorial board characterized the Party as an "organization based on racial hostility . . . a mirror image of the Ku Klux Klan."²⁹ Such misconceptions have also taken root among some of today's young activists seeking to emulate the historical example of the Black Panthers, such as the so-called New Black Panther Party, darling of Fox News, which while claiming to carry on the legacy of the original Black Panthers, preaches separatism and racial hate.

Another influential line of attack—the argument that the Panthers primarily advanced "black macho" rather than a broader liberation politics—has also done more to obscure than to illuminate the history of the Party. Michelle Wallace first popularized this argument in her influential 1978 book *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*, in which she denigrates the role of Angela Davis and other revolutionary black women as "do-it-for-your-man" selfless subservience to misogyny in the name of black liberation.³⁰ As June Jordan commented in a 1979 review, *Black Macho* is "a divisive, fractious tract devoid of hope and dream, devoid even of competent scholarship for the sub-

ject so glibly undertaken.”³¹ Yet the argument gained traction, perhaps in part because it built upon a kernel of truth. Stewarding a predominantly male organization in the beginning, some Black Panthers indeed asserted an aggressive black masculinity. But by misrepresenting this black masculinism as the totality of the Party’s politics, Wallace and her ilk distorted and defamed the Party. They erased the women who soon constituted a majority of the Panther membership and devalued the considerable struggles Panther women and men undertook to advance gender and sexual liberation within and through the Party, often progressing well in advance of the wider society.

If J. Edgar Hoover were alive today, he would undoubtedly take great pride in the persistence of the factionalism he sought to create among the Panthers. Fights that erupted between Panther factions as the Party lost its national and international political influence in the 1970s have long outlived the organization. Decades later, former Black Panther leaders continue to condemn each other virulently in public. These disputes distract from the politics of the Black Panthers in their heyday and sustain the Party’s public vilification.

But in recent decades, the history of the Black Panther Party has proven irrepressible. Memoirs by former Black Panthers, as well as scholarly books, edited collections, articles, doctoral dissertations, and master’s theses, have chipped away at public fallacies, clearing obscurity and uncovering the history of the Party piece by piece. Memoirs by, and biographies of, Black Panther activists who served in various parts of the country, and some who were national leaders—including David Hilliard, Elbert “Big Man” Howard, Assata Shakur, Geronimo Pratt, Elaine Brown, Safiya Bukhari, Stokely Carmichael, Marshall “Eddie” Conway, Flores Forbes, Evans Hopkins, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Steve McCutchen, Robert Hillary King, Huey P. Newton, Afeni Shakur, and Johnny Spain—provide personal perspectives and rich accounts of life in the Party. Edited collections by Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, Judson Jeffries, Charles Jones, Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow, and countless journal articles, fill out the story of local chapters in cities across the country and develop thematic insights across them. Books on the Panthers by Paul Alkebulan, Curtis Austin, Christian Davenport, Donna Murch, Jane Rhodes, as well as more general recent books that contain significant discussions of the Panthers, build analytic perspective.³² A new generation of scholars has provided rigorous treatments of myriad facets of the Party’s history, producing the extraordinary number of ninety dissertations and master’s the-

ses—most written in the last decade—analyzing specific aspects of the Party’s history, such as the sickle-cell-anemia programs, the multiracial alliances of the Chicago Panthers, or the artwork of Black Panther minister of culture Emory Douglas.³³

These previous treatments are invaluable, and the depth of our analysis is much richer for them. But despite the strength of many of these contributions, none has presented a complete picture of the Black Panther Party, or an adequate analysis of its politics. Pinning down history is always complex. The vociferous efforts of the federal government to vilify the Panthers, and the legacy of factional dispute, made the history of the Black Panther Party nearly impenetrable.

HOW WE WROTE THIS BOOK

What is unique and historically important about the Black Panther Party is specifically its politics. So in seeking to uncover the history of the Black Panther Party, we have sought to analyze the Party’s *political* history. In an early proposal for the book in 2000, we elaborated a method of “strategic genealogy” to conduct this analysis. Rather than center our analysis on particular individuals or on dissection of the Party’s organization, we uncovered the political dynamics of the Party by studying the evolution of its political practices.³⁴

We could not have written this book without the insight we gained talking with former Panthers, especially David Hilliard, former Black Panther chief of staff, and Kathleen Cleaver, former Black Panther communications secretary. We also benefited from getting to know almost all of the other living former leaders of the Black Panther Party, and together with our students, we spoke with many regional leaders, rank-and-file members of the Party, and important Party allies, including Bobby Seale, Elaine Brown, Ericka Huggins, Angela Davis, Emory Douglas, Billy X Jennings, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt), Richard Aoki, Kumasi Aguila, Alex Papillon, Melvin Newton, John Seale, Tom Hayden, and dozens of others. The hundreds of hours we spent talking about the Party and working with former members on related historical projects provided invaluable insight into life inside the Party and the crucial concerns of the leadership at various junctures.

When we began the project in the late 1990s, we conducted formal interviews with Bobby Seale and a range of others, expecting that these conversations would be the main source of data for the project. But the more interviews we conducted, the clearer the limits of that medium

became. Retrospective accounts decades after the fact—with memories shaped by intervening events, interests, and hearsay—are highly contradictory. So although we did rely extensively on conversations with historical actors to test our analysis and push our understanding, we have avoided using retrospective interviews as a principal source of evidence, preferring to consult documentary or recorded evidence that was temporally proximate to the events. In the end, what made it possible to uncover this history was a vast wealth of primary sources, including many thousands of firsthand accounts of historical events offered by participants shortly after they occurred.

We conducted much of the research through the Social Movements Project at the Institute for the Study of Social Change at the University of California, Berkeley, which we codirected from 2000 to 2005. We benefited greatly from the assistance of dozens of graduate and undergraduate research assistants. Several of our graduate research assistants and advisees have gone on to complete dissertations and publish their own books on aspects of the Party history (see our acknowledgments). We early consulted the range of primary sources on the Party already available in archives at Stanford University, the University of California, Berkeley, Howard University, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New Haven Museum and Historical Society, and the Oakland Public Library; in articles in the black press, underground press, and mainstream press; and in government documents. In addition, we developed two new archival sources in the course of producing this book.

In our first major archival project, we assembled the only near-complete collection of the Party's own newspaper, the *Black Panther*. This collection includes every issue published during the Party's heyday from 1967 to 1971, and 520 of the 537 issues published overall. Chock-full of Party members' firsthand accounts of unfolding events and programmatic statements by Party leaders, the *Black Panther* offers the most comprehensive documentation of the ideas, actions, and projections of the Party day to day, week to week. Under our editorial direction, the Alexander Street Press digitized this collection, made the text searchable, and published the documents online as part of its Black Thought and Culture collection, in collaboration with Huey Newton's widow, Fredrika Newton, and the Huey P. Newton Foundation.³⁵

In our second major archival project, we collaborated with the H.K. Yuen family to recover, preserve, and index (a good portion of) the H.K. Yuen collection, which contains thousands of fliers and pamphlets and

over thirty thousand hours of audio recordings on the Panthers and other social movements in the Bay Area from the 1960s and 1970s. As a doctoral student at Berkeley, in 1964, H.K. Yuen began collecting every movement flier and pamphlet circulated on the Berkeley campus, and he recorded every meeting and rally in the Bay Area that he could. Yuen dropped out of school and made a career of this collection for almost two decades. He also set up an apparatus to record almost all shows about social movements broadcast on Bay Area radio stations. Working with his son, Eddie Yuen, we recovered this extensive collection from boxes overflowing the Yuen family basement and then preserved and indexed the contents and facilitated donation of the collection, which auditors value at several million dollars, to the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

This collaborative work thus resulted from a series of joint scholarly projects led by Bloom. As first author, Bloom did the lion's share of the research, writing, and analysis. As coauthor, Martin contributed substantially to the research, writing, and analysis. In the end, each author contributed crucially to all phases of the making of this book.

BLACK AGAINST EMPIRE

Civil rights activists nonviolently defied Jim Crow, demanding full citizenship rights. Their insurgent Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s dismantled legal segregation and expanded black enfranchisement in the United States. The 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act codified their inspiring victories. But once there was little legal segregation left to defy, the insurgent Civil Rights Movement fell apart.³⁶

In the late 1960s, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Congress of Racial Equality, two organizations that led much of the nonviolent civil disobedience, imploded. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference declined. But the broader vision of black liberation that had motivated civil rights activists remained salient. Many black people, having won a measure of political incorporation, organized to win electoral political power. Many sought economic advancement. Moderate civil rights organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League, turned their attention to the hard work of civil rights enforcement. Countless activists continued to chip away at racial discrimination in jobs, education, and housing.

For many blacks, the Civil Rights Movement's victories proved lim-

ited, even illusory. Especially for young urban blacks in the North and West, little improved. The wartime jobs that drew the black migration had ended, much remaining industry fled to the suburbs along with white residents, and many blacks lived isolated in poor urban ghettos with little access to decent employment or higher education and with minimal political influence. Municipal police and fire departments in cities with large black populations employed few if any blacks. And many cities developed containment policing practices—designed to isolate violence in black ghettos rather than to keep ghetto residents safe. Although black people were formally full citizens, most remained ghettoized, impoverished, and politically subordinated, with few channels for redress.

Starting in 1966, young blacks in cities across the country took up the call for “Black Power!” The Black Power ferment posed a question: how would black people in America win not only formal citizenship rights but actual economic and political power? Dozens of organizations sprang up seeking to attain Black Power in different ways. More a question than an answer, *Black Power* meant widely different things to different people. Despite the belief among many young blacks that their mobilization as black people was the key, no one knew *how* to mobilize effectively.³⁷

Into this vacuum, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale advanced a black anti-imperialist politics that powerfully challenged the status quo yet was difficult to repress. Drawing on the nationalist ideas of Malcolm X, Newton and Seale declared the Black Panther Party steward of the black community—its legitimate political representative—standing in revolutionary opposition to the oppressive “power structure.” But unlike many black nationalists, the Panthers made common cause with the domestic antiwar movement and anti-imperialist movements abroad. The Panthers argued that black people constituted a “colony in the mother country.” With an unpopular imperial war under way in Vietnam, popular anti-imperialist movements agitating internationally, and a crisis of legitimacy brewing in the Democratic Party, they posited a single worldwide struggle against imperialism encompassing Vietnamese resistance against the United States, draft resistance against military service, and their own struggle to liberate the black community. In the face of brutal repression, the Black Panther Party forged powerful alliances, drawing widespread support not only from moderate blacks but also from many nonblacks, as well as from anti-imperialist governments and movements around the globe.

The Black Panthers’ crucial political innovation was not only ideological but practical. At the center of their politics was the practice of armed self-defense against the police. While revolutionary ideas could be easily ignored, widespread confrontations between young armed black people and the police could not. The Panthers’ politics of armed self-defense gave them political leverage, forcibly contesting the legitimacy of the American political regime. In late 1968, Bobby Seale and David Hilliard shifted the Party’s focus to organizing community programs such as free breakfasts for children. In 1969, every Panther chapter organized community services, and these programs soon became the staple activity for Party members nationwide. By that summer, the Party estimated it was feeding ten thousand children free breakfast every day. The Black Panther Party’s community programs gave members meaningful daily activities, strengthened black community support, burnished Party credibility in the eyes of allies, and vividly exposed the inadequacy of the federal government’s concurrent War on Poverty. Community programs concretely advanced the politics the Panthers stood for: they were feeding hungry children when the vastly wealthier and more powerful U.S. government was allowing children to starve. The more the state sought to repress the Panthers, the more the Party’s allies mobilized in its defense. The Black Panther Party quickly became a major national and international political force.

Individuals created the Black Panther Party. Without their specific efforts and actions, the Party would not have come about, and there is little reason to believe that a powerful black anti-imperialist movement would have developed in the late 1960s. Yet the Black Panther Party was also specific to its times. The times did not make the Black Panther Party, but the specific practices of the Black Panthers became influential precisely because of the political context. Without the success of the insurgent Civil Rights Movement, and without its limitations, the Black Power ferment from which the Black Panther Party emerged would not have existed. Without widespread exclusion of black people from political representation, good jobs, government employment, quality education, and the middle class, most black people would have opposed the Panthers’ politics. Without the Vietnam War draft and the crisis of legitimacy in the Democratic Party, few nonblack allies would have mobilized resistance to state repression of the Party. Without powerful anti-imperialist allies abroad, the Panthers would have been deprived of both resources and credibility.

It was not simply what the Black Panthers did—but what they did in

the conditions in which they found themselves—that proved so consequential. They created a movement with the power to challenge established social relations and yet—given the political context—very difficult to repress. Once the Black Panther Party developed, until the conditions under which it thrived abated, some form of revolutionary anti-imperialism would necessarily persist. Had government hiring and university enrollment remained inaccessible to blacks, had black electoral representation not expanded, had affirmative action programs never proliferated, had the military draft not been scaled back and then repealed, and had revolutionary governments abroad not normalized relations with the United States, revolutionary black anti-imperialism would still be a powerful force in the United States today. While the Black Panther Party might have been repressible as an organization, the politics the Panthers created were irrepressible so long as the conditions in which they thrived persisted.

From 1968 through 1970, the Black Panther Party made it impossible for the U.S. government to maintain business as usual, and it helped create a far-reaching crisis in U.S. society. The state responded to the destabilizing crisis with social concessions such as municipal hiring of blacks and the repeal of the military draft. Because history is so complex, we cannot isolate all influences and precisely predict what would have happened if Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and many others had not created the Black Panther Party. But we do know that without the Black Panther Party, we would now live in a very different world.

The parts of this book analyze in turn the major phases of the political development of the Black Panther Party. Part 1, “Organizing Rage,” analyzes the period through May of 1967, tracing the Party’s development of its ideology of black anti-imperialism and its preliminary tactic of policing the police. Part 2, “Baptism in Blood,” analyzes the Party’s rise to national influence through 1968, during which time it reinvented the politics of armed self-defense, championed black community self-determination, and promoted armed resistance to the state.

Part 3, “Resilience,” and part 4, “Revolution Has Come!” analyze the period through 1969 and 1970 when the Party was at the height of its power, proliferating community service programs and continuing to expand armed resistance in the face of the state’s intensified repression. We unpack the dynamics of repression and response in three cities—Los Angeles, Chicago, and New Haven—showing how the Panthers attracted support from multiracial allies at home and from revolution-

ary movements and governments abroad and explaining why Black Panther insurgent practices were irrepressible.

Part 5, “Concessions and Unraveling,” analyzes the demise of the Black Panther Party in the 1970s, showing how state concessions and broad political transformations undercut the Party’s resilience. During this period, the Black Panthers divided along ideological lines, with neither side able to sustain the politics that had driven the Party’s development.

The concluding chapter sums up our findings and explores their implications for three broader contemporary debates about the history of the Black Liberation Struggle and about social movements generally. Finally, we consider the history of the Black Panther Party in light of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of revolution, illuminating the political dynamics by which social movements become revolutionary and explaining why there is no revolutionary movement in the United States today.

Conclusion

When Civil Rights practices proved incapable of redressing the grievances of young urban blacks in the late 1960s, the Black Panthers armed themselves and promised to overcome poverty and oppression through revolution. They organized the rage of ghetto youth by confronting the police and resisted repression by winning the support of moderate black, antiwar, and international allies. These allies, like the Party, recognized the limited recourse available for real change through traditional political channels. But as blacks won greater electoral representation, government employment, affirmative action opportunities, as well as elite college and university access; the Vietnam War and military draft wound down; and the United States normalized relations with revolutionary governments abroad, it became impossible for the Panthers to continue advocating armed confrontation with the state and still maintain allied support. The Party, racked by external repression and internal fissures, quickly and disastrously unraveled.

There can be no doubt that individual and organizational contingencies—not least the personal flaws of Newton and Cleaver and the power struggle between them—contributed to the demise of the Black Panthers. But the Black Panther Party was not the only group to die out in the 1970s. All revolutionary black organizations in the United States declined at the same time.

These revolutionary nationalist organizations drew on deep roots. Without the Universal Negro Improvement Association of the 1920s,

the Nation of Islam, or the Communist Party, it is hard to imagine the emergence of the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Republic of New Afrika, or the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, let alone the Black Panther Party. And yet widespread mobilization along revolutionary black nationalist lines was unique to the late 1960s. In every city with a significant black population, hundreds of young blacks took up arms and committed their lives to revolutionary struggle. That had never happened in the United States before. And it has not happened since.

To this day, small cadres in the United States dedicate their lives to a revolutionary vision. Not unlike the tenets of a religion, a secular revolutionary vision provides these communities with purpose and a moral compass. Some of these revolutionary communities publish periodicals, maintain websites, collectively feed and school their children, and share housing. But none wields the power to disrupt the status quo on a national scale. None is viewed as a serious threat by the federal government. And none today compares in scope or political influence to the Black Panther Party during its heyday.

The power the Black Panthers achieved grew out of their politics of armed self-defense. While they had little economic capital or institutionalized political power, they were able to forcibly assert their political agenda through their armed confrontations with the state. They obstructed the customary (and brutal) policing of black ghettos, creating a social crisis. Drawing broad legal, political, and financial support from allies, the Party was difficult to repress. The Black Panthers' capacity to sustain disruption legitimized their revolutionary vision and attracted members looking to make a real impact.

The Black Panther Party did not spring onto the historical stage fully formed; it grew in stages. Newton and Seale wove together their revolutionary vision from disparate strands. By standing up to police, they found they could organize the rage of young blacks fueled by brutal containment policing and persistent ghettoization. Through their tactic of deploying armed patrols of the police, they generated a local base of support in the Bay Area by May 1967. When the California Assembly outlawed these tactics, the Panthers reconceived themselves as a vanguard party and began advocating violent confrontation with the state. The Detroit and Newark rebellions revealed the depth of rage at ghetto conditions and showed that many young blacks were ready to pick up arms against the state to redress them. The Panthers had the pulse of the streets. When Newton was arrested on charges of killing

a police officer in a late-night confrontation in October 1967, the call to Free Huey! became a national and eventually international cause. When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated the following spring, young people from around the country flooded the Black Panther Party with requests to open new chapters.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Justice Department, and the House Committee on Internal Security all saw the Black Panther Party as a serious threat to "internal security." Starting in late 1968, the federal government, in coordination with local police departments throughout the country, waged a campaign of brutal repression against the Party.

In 1969, the Panthers made social service, notably feeding free breakfasts to children, the focus of their activities nationally. The Party's programs met real needs, strengthened community support, and gave members meaningful work. They exposed the failures of the federal War on Poverty and burnished the public image of the Party. In the face of repression, allied support for the Panthers increased.

Nixon won the White House on his Law and Order platform, inaugurating the year of the most intense direct repression of the Panthers. But the Party continued to grow in scope and influence. By 1970, it had opened offices in sixty-eight cities. That year, the *New York Times* published 1,217 articles on the Party, more than twice as many as in any other year.¹ The Party's annual budget reached about \$1.2 million (in 1970 dollars).² And circulation of the Party's newspaper, the *Black Panther*, reached 150,000.³

The resonance of Panther practices was specific to the times. Many blacks believed conventional methods were insufficient to redress persistent exclusion from municipal hiring, decent education, and political power. Inspired by civil rights victories, young blacks wanted to extend the Black Liberation Struggle to challenge black poverty and ghettoization. As Panthers, they could stand up to police brutality, economic exploitation, and political exclusion. As Panthers, they extended the struggle to break continuing patterns of racial submissiveness. Panthers would not kowtow to anyone, not even police. As a result, they inspired blacks' self-esteem. In an impressive show of racial unity and pride, most black political organizations fiercely opposed the brutal repression of the Panthers. Even mainstream organizations like the Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People mobilized against state repression of the Panthers.

Young men of every race, drafted to fight an unpopular war in Viet-

nam, found common purpose in the Panthers' global anti-imperialism. The Panthers drew a line dividing the world in two. They argued that the oppression of draft resisters by the National Guard was the same as oppression of blacks by the police and the same as the oppression of the Vietnamese by the marines. Forced to choose sides by the state, many young draftees chose the side of the oppressed. Alienated from the mainstream political leadership that had pursued the war despite popular opposition, many of their friends and family members supported their choice.

The Panthers helped foment a widespread radical challenge in the late 1960s. From riots in the streets to the closing of campuses, the questioning of traditional gender and sexual roles, and widespread defiance of the draft, radicals destabilized established rule. The Democratic Party responded by seeking to reconsolidate its liberal base by pushing initiatives advocating an end to the war and championing black electoral representation. The Nixon administration responded by attempting to repress the radicals, on the one hand, and making broad concessions to moderates, on the other. Nixon was the one who rolled back the draft, wound down the war, and advanced affirmative action. In the 1970s, black electoral representation and government hiring ballooned. As a result of these changes, the Panthers had difficulty sustaining broad support among blacks and antiwar activists.

By 1970, the Panthers had reached the pinnacle of their influence. The national headquarters worked hard to maintain the flow of allied support. What was once a scrappy local organization was now a major international political force, constantly in the news, with chapters in almost every major city. The thousands of recruits who flocked to the Party in 1968 and 1969 did not all share the national leadership's concern with Party discipline. The federal government infiltrated the Party with agent provocateurs, attempting to undermine Party discipline and alienate allies whenever it could. The countervailing pressures became ever more difficult for the national Party leadership to manage as the Party grew in influence. The eroding bases of allied support made managing these pressures untenable.

The hard-core right wing was not the main threat to the Party. Rather concessions to blacks and opponents of the war reestablished the credibility of liberalism to key constituencies.⁴ It was much easier for the parents of young adults to find Tom Wolfe's parody of Leonard and Felicia Bernstein's Panther fund-raiser funny when they believed their children would not be drafted to die in Vietnam. When the govern-

ment had pursued the war irrespective of the public will, killing countless young Americans, the Panthers' concerns were not so far afield. But when the Democratic Party began fighting to end the war, the Nixon administration rolled back the draft and created affirmative action programs, the United States normalized relations with revolutionary governments abroad, and black electoral representation ballooned, the Party had to work harder to maintain allied support. Eventually, the politics of armed self-defense became impossible to sustain.

Without the politics of armed self-defense that had driven the explosive growth of the Black Panther Party for three short years, from 1968 to 1970, dedicated revolutionaries in the Party were left with a creed and mission—to overthrow capitalism and advance self-governance in communities throughout the world—but they had no practical avenue to pursue these ends. Despite the heroism of their advocates, neither guerilla warfare nor social democratic practices provided a viable foundation for insurgent politics in the United States of the 1970s.

On the one hand, those who attempted to wage guerilla warfare were unrealistic politically. Unlike the Black Panther Party leadership during the peak years, they did not hold a coherent grasp of the political realities and possibilities of the times, nor practical means to build power. It is not difficult to see why some turned to guerilla warfare in the 1970s. The Panthers had built power and organization by standing up to the state and challenging the legitimacy of police violence. While the Party stopped advocating armed challenge of the police in 1971, most Panthers still considered the state and police to be brutal, unjust, and illegitimate oppressors. Many of them were still ready to die fighting for their liberation. As allies deserted the Panthers, the guerilla faction naively sought to advance its cause through armed struggle despite the slim chance of success. After several years of losses, most were either dead or in prison.

The social democratic practices of Elaine Brown and others were more realistic and more attuned to the political possibilities. In Oakland, the Panthers did succeed in using the political clout they had garnered in the Party's heyday to build local electoral power. But the Party no longer had any practical basis for building a broad insurgent movement. Unlike the viable insurgent politics of the Party's earlier days, the social democratic Panthers could deliver no consequence. They had limited institutionalized power and no longer wielded the capacity to disrupt on a large scale, so they advanced no practical basis for a national movement.

The vast literature on the Black Liberation Struggle in the postwar decades concentrates largely on the southern Civil Rights Movement. Our analysis is indebted to that literature as well as to more recent historical scholarship that enlarges both the geographic and temporal scope of analysis.⁵ Thomas Sugrue in particular makes important advances, calling attention to the black insurgent mobilizations in the North and West, and to their *longue durée*.⁶ This work, however, fails to analyze these mobilizations on their own terms, instead seeking to assimilate these black insurgencies to a civil rights perspective by presenting the range of black insurgent mobilizations as claims for black citizenship, appeals to the state—for full and equal participation. This perspective obscures the revolutionary character and radical economic focus of the Black Panther Party.

A newer generation of Black Power scholars, most compellingly Peniel Joseph, challenges this conflation by distinguishing Black Power activism and thought from civil rights activism and thought.⁷ Joseph argues that the Black Power movement, perhaps epitomized by the Black Panther Party, was distinct in crucial ways from, ran parallel to, and at times intersected with the Civil Rights Movement throughout the twentieth century.⁸ We agree that Black Power—and the revolutionary black politics of the Panthers in particular—followed a distinct and coherent logic and in fundamental ways is best understood as separate from the Civil Rights Movement. Ideologically and practically, revolutionary black nationalism has long ties to previous mobilizations.

Ultimately, however, both of these perspectives fail to answer important political questions. Why did revolutionary black nationalism—and Black Power mobilization generally—become so influential in the late 1960s, and why did it unravel so disastrously in the 1970s? The Sugrue approach bypasses this question by conflating radical Black Power mobilization with the Civil Rights Movement. While Joseph's important corrective acknowledges that Black Power was different in significant ways from civil rights activism, by emphasizing the roots and *longue durée* of Black Power, his approach obscures and does not adequately explain why Black Power as exemplified by the Black Panther Party became the center of black politics in the late 1960s, influencing the world around it in ways it never had before and hasn't since.

Our analysis shows that, even as Jim Crow was defeated and civil rights practices lost their political salience, the revolutionary practices of the Black Panther Party tapped into the rage of young blacks. The Panthers provided an insurgent channel for influence, drawing broad

support from blacks, opponents of the war, and international revolutionary movements. The ideological and practical roots of Black Power politics had long been present on the political stage. But to the extent that Panther-like practices may have appealed to young blacks throughout the twentieth century, Panther politics were impractical both before and after the late 1960s. Panther practices could receive broad political support only while the majority of Americans opposed to the Vietnam War and draft had no recourse through institutionalized political channels and while most blacks continued to face economic and political exclusion.

The history of the Black Panther Party holds important implications for two more general theoretical debates. First, this history suggests a way out of dead-end debates about how the severity of repression affects social movement mobilization. One common perspective, supported by a rich scholarly literature covering various times and places, is that “repression breeds resistance”: When authorities repress insurgency, the repression encourages further resistance.⁹ But others pose the opposite argument, with equally rich scholarly support, suggesting that repression discourages and diminishes insurgency.¹⁰ A classic sociological position that seeks to reconcile this apparent contradiction is that the relationship between repression and insurgency is shaped like an “inverse U”: When repression is light, people tend to cooperate with established political authorities and take less disruptive action; when repression is heavy, the costs of insurgency are too large, causing people to shy away from radical acts. But, according to this view, it is when authorities are moderately repressive—too repressive to steer dissenters toward institutional channels of political participation but not repressive enough to quell dissent—that people widely mobilize disruptive challenges to authority.¹¹

The history of the Panthers defies the basic premise of this debate: that the level of repression independently explains the level of resistance. The Black Panther Party faced heavy federally coordinated state repression at least from 1968 through 1971. Our analysis shows that for the first two years, from 1968 through 1969, brutal state repression helped legitimate the Panthers in the eyes of many supporters and fostered increased mobilization.¹² Taken alone, this finding would appear to support the idea that repression breeds resistance. But during the second two years, 1970 and 1971, the dynamic gradually shifted. The Panthers maintained the same types of practices they had embraced in the previous two years, and the state maintained a similar level and

type of repressive practices. But in this later period, as the political context shifted—increasing the difficulty of winning support for the Panthers’ revolutionary position—repression made the core Panther practices difficult to sustain and quickly led to the Party’s demise.

The level of repression did not independently affect the level of mobilization in a consistent way across the four years. Instead, the level of repression interacted with the political reception of insurgent practices to affect the level of mobilization. In other words, potential allies’ political reception of Panther insurgent practices determined the effects of repression on mobilization. During the time that Panther practices were well received by potential allies, in 1968 and 1969, repressive measures fostered further mobilization. But as these allies became less open to the Panthers’ revolutionary position in 1970 and 1971, repressive actions by the state became increasingly effective.¹³

Our analysis also suggests a way forward in stalled debates of the political opportunity thesis that broad structural opportunities, by conferring political advantage on a social group, generate mobilization. The political opportunity thesis has made a crucial contribution to the sociological study of social movements in recent decades by emphasizing the importance of political context for explaining mobilization.¹⁴ But attention to political context in isolation does not provide much explanatory power in the case of the Black Panther Party. From the classic political opportunity perspective, the late 1960s were the period in which the civil rights movement declined and thus a period of contracting political opportunities for blacks generally. That perspective makes it hard to understand why, even as the insurgent Civil Rights Movement fell apart, revolutionary black nationalism developed and thrived.

Recovering lost insights from early political process writings by Doug McAdam and Aldon Morris about the importance of tactical innovation for explaining mobilization, we designed this study to focus on the development of Panther political practice and influence.¹⁵ We have found that political context, rather than independently determining the extent of mobilization, determines the efficacy of particular insurgent practices. The stepwise history of the Black Panther Party’s mobilization and influence demonstrates that the relative effectiveness of its practices depended on the political context. Panther insurgent practices—specifically armed self-defense—generated both influence and following when they were both disruptive and difficult to repress. But the Panthers became much more repressible when the political

context shifted, making it harder for the Party to practice armed self-defense and sustain allied support. This history suggests that insurgent movements proliferate when activists develop practices that simultaneously garner leverage by threatening the interests of powerful authorities and draw allied support in resistance to repression. Conversely, when concessions undermine the support of potential allies for those practices, the insurgency dies out.¹⁶

There is no movement like the Panthers in the United States today because the political context is so different from that in the late 1960s. This is not to say that the core grievances around which the Panthers mobilized have disappeared. To the contrary, large segments of the black population continue to live impoverished in ghettos, subject to containment policing, and send more sons to prison than to college. Many young people in these neighborhoods might well embrace a revolutionary political practice today if it could be sustained. But crucially, the conditions for rallying potential allies have changed.

The black middle class has greatly expanded since the Panthers' heyday. Its sons and daughters have access to the nation's elite colleges and universities. Black public sector employment has expanded dramatically: city governments and municipal police and fire departments hire many blacks. Blacks have won and institutionalized electoral power both locally and nationally. Most blacks in the United States today, especially the black middle class, believe their grievances can be redressed through traditional political and economic channels. Most view insurgency as no longer necessary and do not feel threatened by state repression of insurgent challengers.

No less important, the United States has no military draft today, and no draft resistance. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may be unpopular, but few people will risk years in jail to oppose them. No New Left exists today to embrace a Black Panther Party as its vanguard. Internationally, the struggles for national independence have almost all been won: the vast majority of the world's population is no longer colonized, if not yet truly free. Today, with few potential allies for a revolutionary black organization, the state could easily repress any Panther-like organization, no matter how disciplined and organized.

The broader question is why no revolutionary movement of any kind exists in the United States today. To untangle this question, we need to consider what makes a movement revolutionary. Here, the writings of the Italian theorist and revolutionary Antonio Gramsci are instructive: "A theory is 'revolutionary' precisely to the extent that it is an element

of conscious separation and distinction into two camps and is a peak inaccessible to the enemy camp."¹⁷ In other words, a revolutionary theory splits the world in two. It says that the people in power and the institutions they manage are the cause of oppression and injustice. A revolutionary theory purports to explain how to overcome those iniquities. It claims that oppression is inherent in the dominant social institutions. Further, it asserts that nothing can be done from within the dominant social institutions to rectify the problem—that the dominant social institutions must be overthrown. In this sense, any revolutionary theory consciously separates the world into two camps: those who seek to reproduce the existing social arrangements and those who seek to overthrow them.

In this first, ideational sense, many insurgent revolutionary movements do exist in the United States today, albeit on a very small scale. From sectarian socialist groups to nationalist separatists, these revolutionary minimovements have two things in common: a theory that calls for destroying the existing social world and advances an alternative trajectory; and cadres of members who have dedicated their lives to advance this alternative, see the revolutionary community as their moral reference point, and see themselves as categorically different from everyone who does not.

More broadly, in Gramsci's view, a movement is revolutionary *politically* to the extent that it poses an effective challenge. He suggests that such a revolutionary movement must first be creative rather than arbitrary. It must seize the political imagination and offer credible proposals to address the grievances of large segments of the population, creating a "concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organise its collective will."¹⁸ But when a movement succeeds in this task, the dominant political coalition usually defeats the challenge through the twin means of repression and concession. The ruling alliance does not simply crush political challenges directly through the coercive power of the state but makes concessions that reconsolidate its political power without undermining its basic interests.¹⁹ A revolutionary movement becomes significant politically only when it is able to win the loyalty of allies, articulating a broader insurgency.²⁰

In this second, political sense, there are no revolutionary movements in the United States today. The country has seen moments of large-scale popular mobilization, and some of these recent movements, such as the mass mobilizations for immigrant rights in 2006, have been "creative,"

seizing the imagination of large segments of the population. One would think that the 2008 housing collapse, economic recession, subsequent insolvency of local governments, and bailout of the wealthy institutions and individuals most responsible for creating the financial crisis at the expense of almost everyone else provide fertile conditions for a broad insurgent politics. But as of this writing, it is an open question whether a broad, let alone revolutionary, challenge will develop. Recent movements have not sustained insurgency, advanced a revolutionary vision, or articulated a broader alliance to challenge established political power.

In our assessment, for the years 1968 to 1970, the Black Panther Party was revolutionary in Gramsci's sense, both ideationally and politically. Ideationally, young Panthers dedicated their lives to the revolution because—as part of a global revolution against empire—they believed that they could transform the world. The revolutionary vision of the Party became the moral center of the Panther community. To stand on the sidelines or die an enemy of the Panther revolution was to be “lighter than a feather”—to be on the wrong side of history. To die for the Panther revolution was to be “heavier than a mountain”—to be the vanguard of the future.²¹ The Black Panther Party stood out from countless politically insignificant revolutionary cadres because it was creative politically. For a few years, the Party seized the political imagination of a large constituency of young black people. Even more, it articulated this revolutionary movement of young blacks to a broader oppositional movement, drawing allied support from more moderate blacks and opponents of the Vietnam War of every race.

When expanding political and economic opportunities for blacks and the growing consensus among mainstream politicians to wind down the Vietnam War opened institutionalized channels for redressing the interests of key Panther supporters, Panther practices lost their political salience. When the political foundation of the Black Panther Party collapsed in early 1971, the practices that had won the Panthers so much influence became futile. No Panther faction was able to effectively reinvent itself.

Even as concessions siphoned off allied support, the state sought to vilify the Party, driving a wedge between Panthers and their allies. Ultimately, nothing did more to vilify the Panthers than the widely publicized evidence of intraorganizational violence and corruption as the Party unraveled. Any attempt to replicate the earlier Panther revolutionary nationalism was now vulnerable to provocation and vilifica-

tion. The political “system” had been inoculated against the Panthers' politics.²²

While minimevements with revolutionary ideologies abound, there is no politically significant revolutionary movement in the United States today because no cadre of revolutionaries has developed ideas and practices that credibly advance the interests of a large segment of the people. Members of revolutionary sects can hawk their newspapers and proselytize on college campuses until they are blue in the face, but they remain politically irrelevant. Islamist insurgencies, with deep political roots abroad, are politically significant, but they lack potential constituencies in the United States. And ironically, at least in the terrorist variant, they tend to reinforce rather than challenge state power domestically because their practices threaten—rather than build common cause with—alienated constituencies within the United States.

No revolutionary movement of political significance will gain a foothold in the United States again until a group of revolutionaries develops insurgent practices that seize the political imagination of a large segment of the people and successively draw support from other constituencies, creating a broad insurgent alliance that is difficult to repress or appease. This has not happened in the United States since the heyday of the Black Panther Party and may not happen again for a very long time.

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