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# THE LUMPENPROLETARIAT AS VANGUARD? The Black Panther Party, Social Transformation, and Pearson's Analysis of Huey Newton

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## THE NEED FOR CRITICISM

The Black liberation struggle has taught its students that successful struggle must be measured both by its ability to transform society and its ability to transform those who engage in it. Hugh Pearson's (1994) *The Shadow of the Panther* is a critical analysis of the transformative capacity of the Black Panther Party's (BPP) most noted figure and cofounder, Huey P. Newton. Pearson documents what is, for him, Newton's ultimate failure to transform himself from criminal to crusader. One reviewer noted that if Pearson's assessment of Newton is accurate, then the BPP leader was little more than an intelligent, drug-addicted, sociopath (Robinson, 1994).

Relying on extensive interviews with former Panthers Landon Williams, Mary Kennedy, Sheba Haven, and a host of BPP supporters and detractors, Pearson's 422-page volume discusses the criminality that the BPP, primarily Newton, was never quite able to distance itself from. In it, Pearson lists the failures, the betrayals,

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the murders, rapes, robberies, and extortions of the BPP as they developed into the most recognized organization of the 1960s Black Power movement. Reduced in significance, in Pearson's analysis, are the free clinics, free breakfast programs, food giveaways, schools, ambulance service, voter registration, community patrols, and other programs. His primarily internal analysis also reduces the significance of Hoover's Counter Intelligence Program (COIN-TELPRO) that served to undermine many Black organizations in that era.

Pearson rejects the tendency for "messiah-making" within the Black community in which deceased leaders are granted a "martyr's immunity against criticism" that severely limits our ability to learn from their mistakes. However, it is not a condemnation of Black leaders for those who respect them to criticize their mistakes or transgressions. Failure to do so leaves their followers ill equipped to build on their work. For example, it is a disservice for the Nation of Islam (NOI) to fail to acknowledge and condemn the adultery of Elijah Muhammad by today suggesting that his secretaries somehow—unknown to everyone else including his devoted wife Clara Muhammad—were his wives. Likewise, it is a mistake for nationalists not to learn from the successes and failures of Malcolm X, or Queen Mother Moore, and of course, Huey P. Newton.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, however, it is important that criticism respects and appreciates the meaningful contributions that carry legitimate struggles forward. Such is the point made by former BPP and Black Liberation Army (BLA) member, Safiya Bukhari, who challenges that "we must remember that everybody that is Black is not involved in the Black Liberation Struggle and therefore, their critique of the struggle or elements of the struggle is not done with the motivation of curing the sickness to save the patient" (Bukhari-Alston, 1993, p. 4). Further, she suggests that we should beware of those who "seize opportunities like the one involving Elaine Brown and David Hilliard's books to vent their personal beliefs and agendas." For example, Bukhari maintains that Alice Walker's "suggestion that the male leadership of the Party's fear of their perceived homosexual love for each other, whether they had been

lovers or not, accounted for their macho sexist attitudes toward women, raises the tantalizing question of whether this may be an example of people coloring the facts with their own leanings" (Bukhari-Alston, 1993, p. 4).

Drawing on her experiences, Bukhari offers a critical analysis of sexism in the party without condemning its positive contribution. She credits the BPP with addressing the problem of sexism (noted in the Eight Points of Attention) and as an organization providing "a mechanism for dealing with this." Further, she differentiates between Black women's struggle and White feminism, which historically emerged to grant White women access to the workplace. Black women's struggle was not one "to be liberated so we could move into the work place, but a struggle to be recognized as human beings." This struggle, she asserts, must be grounded in an overall liberation strategy that appreciates that "it is through our social practice that we set the example to our community and advance the struggle." We should remember, according to her, "that the Black Panther Party may not have completed the task, but [the BPP] did put the question on the floor" (Bukhari-Alston, 1993, p. 4). On the other hand, concerning the highly touted treatise of Elaine Brown (1992), former Panther, BLA member, and one of three internal sources for Pearson, Sheba Haven (1993, p. 11) finds Brown's accounts incredible, misleading, and untrue. Haven (1993, p. 11) suggests that Brown's book "has done more to bring to the surface the post traumatic stress long endured by many sisters," but it also does a "disservice to those who died, were and are imprisoned, and are widowed and orphaned in the service of the Black Community than any racist tract published by the White Citizen's Council." Books such as Brown's, according to Haven, "underscore the need for those who survived and retained their sanity to speak and write about the mistakes and the accomplishments of the BPP before it became a monarchy controlled by Elaine Brown" (Haven, 1993, 11).<sup>2</sup>

So, Pearson's critical assessment is both timely and necessary. The criteria by which we can assess his analysis include the contextualization he utilizes, the reliability of his sources, his analysis of the movement and the contributions of the BPP, and the

lessons learned for the next generation. In all of this, it is necessary to offer a criticism where it is warranted, and not to simply self-promote or condemn when, in the final analysis, there are larger lessons to be learned. Pearson's analysis promises no less an effort.

### **THE HISTORICAL ROOTS AND ANTECEDENTS OF THE BPP**

To his credit, Pearson attempts to provide a historical context for the emergence of the BPP. He roots radicalism in Black Oakland with the earlier struggles of the sleeping car porters under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph. He also grounds Newton firmly in the grassroots activism of the civil rights movement: the student initiatives led by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from which they adopted both their symbol (the Black Panther symbol of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization) and their 10-10-10 program (p. 108); the Deacons for Defense (p. 109); and the Community Alert Patrol (CAP) in Los Angeles (p. 108). Although the attempt to ground the BPP historically is necessary, it is evident that Pearson is not quite grounded in the history of the era. For example, he incorrectly attributes the founding of the Community Alert Patrol to Roger "Crook" Wilkins, who was not the founder of the organization. He also confuses Robert Williams's armed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Monroe, North Carolina, with the Deacons for Defense that emerged among the early security elements of the civil rights movement in Bogalooosa, Louisiana.

He is correct, however, in his assessment of the impact of Malcolm X's, Fanon's, and Mao Zedong's philosophies on the BPP. Pearson also provides a useful analysis of the underlying bourgeois interests that shaped Black protest such as the Montgomery bus boycott. He views a historical tendency between Blacks victimized by the system and those Blacks who victimize others in pursuit of criminality and the rationalization of the latter's criminality in the light of Black activism. This victim/villain dichotomy, which

Pearson believes to be at the heart of Black struggle since the Brown case, is the template upon which Pearson analyzes Huey and the BPP.

### THE VICTIM/VILLAIN DICHOTOMY

The victim/villain dichotomy is evident early in Pearson's analysis, where he discusses community leader E. D. Nixon's rejection of a "would-be Rosa Parks," Claudette Colvin, who, though faced with a parallel discriminatory situation prior to the Parks incident, was not supported in the same manner as the seamstress. Pearson suggests that this was due to the fact that Colvin was an unsuitable "victim" for the civil rights leadership because she was pregnant and unmarried (p. 23). The dichotomy was also evident, as Pearson points out, in the conflict within the NAACP when its Monroe, North Carolina, president, Robert Williams, used guns to defend the Black community from White supremacist mobs. Unwilling to countenance the self-defense actions of Williams, the bourgeois leadership suspended him. At issue in cases such as these, is the Black bourgeoisie's image of a respectable victim that can be promoted as the focus of protest. It is evocative today of debates concerning the "deserving" versus the "undeserving" poor. It largely reflects the elitist, sexist, and often assimilationist orientation of the upper classes.

Although Pearson (pp. 30-32) seems to appreciate the dialectic between activism and criminality in an unjust society (i.e., many in the civil rights movement were, in light of racist laws, technically criminals), he does not seem to fully appreciate the fusion and transformation of the two (activism and criminality) brought about by Malcolm X and the impact of this image on the Black activists of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> This process was even more challenging for the Black lumpenproletariat elements that the BPP was attempting to organize and, following Fanon, promote as a vanguard.<sup>4</sup> For Pearson, Newton's most telling failure was his inability to transform himself along the lines of Malcolm X, and this failure, for Pearson, is not

only a personal one, but represents the collective failure of the Black Power movement itself. However, only if we reduce the BPP to Newton and then reduce Newton to his criminal behavior while ignoring all else can this claim be substantiated. Such conclusions are ahistorical and inaccurate, but, unfortunately, this appears to be Pearson's assessment.

Pearson finds successful cases of former Panthers who transformed their lives from their previous criminal behavior, such as Landon Williams and Flores "Fly" Forbes. Forbes, an extortionist, was implicated in the attempted murder of a witness to Newton's alleged murder of 17-year-old Kathleen Smith. He was released from Soledad in 1985 and went on to receive his master's degree in urban planning (Pearson, pp. 333-335). He worked for a community development corporation and is presently an independent consultant and independent film producer. Forbes's will to survive and transform himself, according to the author, was largely absent from other Panthers including Newton (p. 335). But Pearson is in no position to substantiate these claims absent a more thorough analysis of Newton and members of the BPP from across the country. His review of the Oakland Panthers (the national headquarters) does not allow him to draw such inferences and proffer such an overarching condemnation. Further, even in regards to Huey, as will be shown below, Pearson's assessment is inadequate.

Whereas he understands that the necessary transformation process that he suggests Panthers, did not manifest is a condition of both a "will to survive and transform," he ignores these characteristics in Newton. Pearson should be reminded that Newton had a strong will and drive to better himself; after all, Dr. Huey P. Newton did successfully complete a Ph.D. program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. More important, Pearson misunderstands the nature and extent of Huey's addiction—something to which David Hilliard, the former Panther Chief of Staff and recovering addict who introduced Huey to crack cocaine, is keenly aware (Hilliard, 1993, pp. 407-408). The nature and extent of Huey's addiction is something that should not be excused but

should be understood and put in context. The present context is the consideration of whether Huey had the will to survive and transform himself. This requires a deeper analysis than Pearson's, that allows us to appreciate the process that led to Huey's addiction without ignoring Huey's responsibility for his own actions.

Hilliard (1993, p. 353) suggests that Huey's addiction began with his response to the assassination of George Jackson—an event that traumatized Newton. The isolation of Newton in the penthouse (orchestrated by Hilliard and Elaine Brown) not only angered the rank and file but it furthered Newton's alienation and incipient paranoia and ensured his descent into alcohol and drug abuse. Pearson's simplistic victim/villain dichotomy does not allow him to distinguish the subtle gray areas between the black and white of Huey's life. Thus restricted, Pearson takes for granted that there are no lessons to be learned from Huey's descent. Huey's was not a singular descent, but it was only the more tragic in light of his awesome potential. Moreover, it is a route taken by so many of those same urban Blacks that the BPP successfully transformed. Clearly, Huey tried to adapt to changing political and personal realities (and he was harshly criticized for some of these changes), and these attempts should not be dismissed because they were ultimately unsuccessful. His personal failure was rooted in his personal choices, his drug addiction, his paranoia exacerbated by COINTELPRO, and the failure of movement members to assist in his transformation. The important question that Pearson does not ask is whether Huey's effort was insufficient in light of greater force from an outside party, or whether Huey simply gave up and became the hollow shell that Tyrone Robinson killed on August 22, 1989. The answers to these questions should be informed by the study of those who have journeyed this path and transformed themselves while remaining in the movement, such as Safiya Bukhari, Akinsanya Kambon, and Marian Stampps. Pearson's marginal familiarity with movement activists precludes a fuller examination of the context of Newton's experiences. This is only one of many shortcomings in Pearson's work.

### CRITICISM OF THE CRITICISM: THE FIRST NEGATION

Pearson's narrative, insightful at times, is encumbered both substantively and technically. On the latter point, the editors use a footnote style where footnote numbers do not appear in the text, though footnote references are numbered in the endnotes section. Footnotes aside, a larger issue is the substantive mistakes in Pearson's historiography. Though he attempts to provide a historical backdrop to his narrative, there are some glaring inconsistencies in his chronology of "Premier Negro Leaders"—an annoying phrase he uses throughout the text. These premier Negro leaders, in Pearson's view, are Oedipally slain and succeeded by the next premier Negro leader under criteria and for reasons seemingly known only to Pearson. The process in this century proceeds from Washington to Dubois, from Dubois to Randolph, from Randolph to Powell, from Powell to King, from King to Carmichael, and apparently from Carmichael to Newton (pp. 13-108). Pearson has difficulty situating Garvey, Malcolm X, or organizational leadership such as the National Association of Colored Women, SNCC, and the NAACP in his historiography, opting instead for the "great man model" of history. Though he mentions Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, he does not develop them or their importance. Bypassing the role of the Communist Party, even though his premier Negro leader Randolph was a member, he does not offer an analysis of the contradictions in the nationalist-communist power struggle that could have informed his analysis of the BPP and the role of the White Left in its development and its later factioning (see Cruse, 1968). He also fails to connect the sexism of the church with the maintenance of that mode of domination throughout the post-World War II era. Such failures to acknowledge the persistence of sexism in the church leaves nationalists as the whipping boy of Marxists who assert the virtual equivalence of nationalism and sexism. The White Left continues to use this argument to draw attention away from its own long history of sexism and racism. Pearson does not engage in this very important discourse because

he largely ignores the agency of women in his treatment of the BPP and the wider Black liberation struggle.

Pearson also reports as fact some very contentious assertions, including the disputed police account of George Jackson's assassination. He even suggests that the rapacious COINTELPRO checked itself whenever activist lives were at risk—which is clearly at odds with what is known of the COINTELPRO (see Churchill & Vander Wall, 1988, 1989). He insists that Huey, upon expelling Bobby Seale from the BPP, bullwhipped and raped him (p. 264)—an assertion Seale has publicly denied. He accepts the BPP caricature of Karenga's Us organization by calling it United Slaves (p. 151) instead of the actual name Us (as opposed to "them"). In addition, he incorrectly credits the seminal use of the racial designation Black over Negro to Carmichael and Ricks, ignoring the very public proclamations of Malcolm X (1964) who made a mantra of referencing "Blacks" as opposed to "Negroes." It was Malcolm's, more than anyone else's, use of the term *Black* that led to SNCC, the BPP, and a whole generation of Black youth accepting it.

Pearson also seems to be unfamiliar with some basic aspects of BPP history insofar as he does not mention the transformation of party chapters into the National Committees to Combat Fascism—a signal event in BPP history. He does correctly attribute to Fred Hampton the "Rainbow Coalition" program that was later appropriated by Jesse Jackson. He is also correct that too many Panthers were unreformed criminals. For example, he reminds us that Bobby Hutton probably would not have died in the manner he did if Eldridge had not orchestrated a "jackanape" attack on the police that resulted in the shoot-out and murder of Hutton on April 6, 1968. However, Pearson does not focus his analytical lens on the enduring and deadly conflicts such as that between Us and the BPP. Notwithstanding the dominant issues in the dispute, with the prominence of Maulana Karenga and ex-Panther members, this episode still lingers, second only to the culpability of the NOI in the assassination of Malcolm X, as the most divisive unresolved conflict within

the Black Power movement.<sup>5</sup> His woefully incomplete internal analysis of the BPP leaves the reader bereft of the context necessary to fully evaluate the BPP's actions. Further, it leaves one unprepared to apply the lessons of the BPP to the present condition facing Blacks in America. Such limitations lead one to question the intentions of the author who seems intent on not simply providing a necessary critique of the BPP but who appears desirous of undermining the very idea of Black nationalist mobilization in the United States.

### **THE GLORIFICATION OF THE "LUMPEN" AND ITS IMPACT ON THE VICTIM/VILLAIN DICHOTOMY**

Pearson does admit that "strong BPP chapters . . . which contained dynamic leaders such as Michael Tabor and Dhoruba Moore" existed in New York as well as in Fred Hampton's Chicago. However, as Robinson (1994) notes, this comes more as an afterthought to Pearson's central concern and focus of detailing the salacious allegations and rumors of Newton and the Oakland BPP while leaving the Federal Bureau of Investigation relatively unscathed if not heroic in their treatment of the activists. Generally, Robinson is correct that in his attempt to document Huey's criminality, Pearson seeks to indict, by implication, the BPP as a whole. He goes so far as labeling the BPP as "little more than a temporary media phenomenon" (p. 347). He is upset that "radical Left and the Left-liberal media continued to play a major role in elevating the roughest, most outlaw element of Black America as the true keepers of the flame in all it means to be Black" (p. 339). He maintains that the destructive repercussions of this process of glorifying "lumpenism" is visited upon the present generation. In this assessment, Pearson is largely correct; however, the impact of glorified lumpenism is hardly the result of the BPP alone.

The reality is that the Black urban centers today have become war zones where dope dealers and gang leaders are respected and

the gun is often the final arbiter of conflict. Notwithstanding the impact of larger politico-economic forces that have given rise to urban violence (not to mention the criminality of the perpetrators themselves), one could argue that it is the absence of the Black power activists that has allowed the same streets they once patrolled to become the stomping grounds of the worst elements of the Black community. Nonetheless, although popular media, especially hip-hop, has generated a new interest in the Black liberation struggle among the youth, its more prominent impact has been its glorification of criminality and sexism in the Black community (Henderson, 1996). The recent writings of former Panthers also have had an impact on this phenomenon—whether intended or not. The present proliferation of Panther exposés can be labeled “The Growth Industry of Panther Revisionism,” or “When Radical Chic Meets the Statute of Limitations.” Here we find Panthers such as Elaine Brown, fresh from her Paris home descending upon the movement and offering her analysis after a decade and a half. We are reminded of Nyerere’s (1974, p. 25) instruction to Black intellectuals that, “We have to be part of the society which we are changing; we have to work from within it, and not try to descend like ancient gods, do something, and disappear again.” David Hilliard emerges from his recently discovered sobriety to offer a difficult-to-read overview of the party and his relationship with Newton. Both authors settle no pressing issues, whereas they show an incredible capacity to incriminate others while remaining exculpate themselves. Further, they both, especially Brown, were put on whirlwind tours by their publishers, sometimes presented as being among current Black leadership—a designation that neither merits by present activity. Though respecting their earlier work, just as Huey had descended from leadership, so have these two. They have much to comment on, but we find little of that in their exposés, and clearly the writing of books after 20 years of absence from struggle cannot be the qualifying criteria for leadership.

Further, Pearson admonishes the popular press for promoting former Los Angeles gang member Cody Scott (Sanyika Shakur) in

a manner ominously similar to the marketing of Eldridge Cleaver. Atlantic Monthly Press's Morgan Entrekin's elevation of Scott as a "primary voice of the Black experience" is for Pearson another case of promoting "defiant posturing over substance" (p. 339). He also argues that Leon Bing's book about Los Angeles gangs, *Do Or Die*, rests subliminally on a "threat of rape" foundation (p. 339) similar to Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*. The gangster-Panther relationship actually deserves a broader treatment than Pearson supplies.

Actually, it was evident from the inception of the BPP. Because the BPP was attempting to organize the lumpenproletariat, it stands to reason that they would interact with urban gangs. For example, Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter was a BPP leader in Los Angeles who was a leader of the Slausons, a dominant territorial gang in South Central Los Angeles. As youths, Danifu (Raymond Scott) along with Irving Hakim and Crip founder Raymond Washington were politicized by Los Angeles BPP members, primarily John Huggins and Bunchy Carter, in an attempt similar to that undertaken in Chicago by Fred Hampton with Jeff Fort's Blackstone Rangers and Hispanic gangs. It appears that Raymond Washington had wanted to become a BPP member but was too young. He, nonetheless, put superficial aspects of Panther philosophy (Crip as an acronym for continuing revolution in progress), Panther style (cripping), and fashion (the BPP powder blue shirt as the Crip blue rag) into his early organization.<sup>6</sup> However, the BPP was not simply transferring imagery to gangs. BPP member Akinsanya Kambon worked to organize gang truces across California from the early 1970s. It is ironic that it was a gang member, Tyrone Robinson, allegedly trying to "make rank" in the Black Guerrilla Family (BGF), who killed Newton.<sup>7</sup> Is this the slaying of the father that Pearson used in his evolution of premier Negro leaders? Does this represent the passing of the torch from the Panthers to the urban gangs? What are the lessons that the destruction of Huey Newton and the BPP teaches us? Pearson's analysis is exceptional in its failure to adequately address these issues.

**THE NEED FOR OUR OWN REFERENTS:  
LEARNING THE CORRECT  
LESSONS FROM HISTORY**

Pearson is correct that the BPP's downfall cannot simply be attributed to COINTELPRO, though it was a principal agent of its destruction. For the most part, however, COINTELPRO was an external manipulation that capitalized on internal weaknesses and contradictions. We are reminded of one of the major lessons of Cabral: "That in the general framework of the daily struggle this battle against ourselves—no matter what difficulties the enemy may create—remains the most difficult of all. . . . I am convinced that any national or social revolution which is not based on the knowledge of this reality runs great risk of failure" (cited in Davidson, 1971, p. 74). This is a more eloquent statement of the maxim that the personal is political. Cabral insisted that culture played a key role in the resolution of these contradictions.

The BPP did not fully appreciate the necessity for cultural transformation in the movement. Instead, they promoted a "revolutionary culture" that was amorphous and self-serving. It was rooted in a Machiavellian rationalization of Malcolm's "by any means necessary" dicta whereby members simply legitimized their lumpen activities by asserting that these were somehow "revolutionary" while labeling those who decried these activities as "counterrevolutionary." This approach was used especially to sexually exploit women, to character assassinate rivals, to rationalize the misuse of BPP funds by the national leadership, to justify internecine violence, or to excoriate rival organizations (such as with the NOI, SNCC, RNA [Republic of New Afrika], and Us organization) within the Black Power movement. This glorified lumpenism was so expansive that Hilliard (1993, pp. 338-339) reports that Huey even came to require that BPP members watch *The Godfather*, as he began to argue for a "progressive capitalism" (Newton, 1971). Allegedly, the Panther nightclub, The Lamp Post, even became, among other things, a front for prostitution and funding source for Huey's and the Central Committee's personal indulgences.

Clearly, there is no such thing as a revolutionary culture, *per se*. Cultures are only revolutionary in opposition to some other culture. The fact that people are engaged in revolution does not suggest that they possess a revolutionary culture—at least not in any developmental sense. For example, Pol Pot led a revolution in Kampuchea and the product was killing fields and millions of deaths but not the creation of a revolutionary culture. The BPP's condemnation of cultural nationalism actually reflected their antipathy toward Us organization (exacerbated by COINTELPRO and the gang conflict of Los Angeles). But Pearson did not explore the roots of the Us-Panther conflict, so issues such as these are not raised. This is as much a problem of Pearson's failed analysis as of the popular press forum of Pearson's book that does not countenance more developed and scholarly exegesis.

The BPP, owing to disjointed Marxist borrowings, the influence of White leftists, and the personal battles with Karenga and Us, ignored the challenge of cultural transformation in the movement. This owed, in part, to its conflating of popular culture with national culture and their consideration of the latter in a very superficial way. Though the BPP maintained a Minister of Culture (Emory Douglas), leaders attacked cultural nationalism as an ideology and an approach to revolutionary struggle. The negation of the transformative power of cultural practice, especially in the area of ethics and social conduct, allowed for the BPP's vulnerability to outside manipulation and control as warned by Cabral. Ironically, they did not appreciate that the transformation they were intending from their survival programs was a cultural transformation rooted less in Marx and more in Malcolm. This misunderstanding allowed Newton to evoke Papa Doc Duvalier as a prime example of the vacuity and inappropriateness of cultural or "pork chop" nationalism (cited in Foner, 1970, p. 50). The Oakland BPP, unlike the New York chapters—who Hilliard (1993, p. 168) labeled cultural nationalists—also misunderstood the basic pan-African (and American) nature of Black culture (Henderson, 1995) and were ultimately unable to successfully channel it for the party's own ends. This lack of cultural grounding, especially on the West Coast, led the BPP to become distant from their own Black communities.

This was particularly destabilizing to the larger BPP program. Without the support of the larger Black community, they came to rely more on White leftist support that became increasingly ambivalent as the Vietnam war wound down.

Moreover, none of the successful revolutions that the BPP evoked were explicable unless one appreciated the role by which leaders utilized their indigenous culture as a means of mobilization and transformation. Such revolutionaries did not await a "revolutionary" culture, instead they grounded themselves in their national heritage and evoked the best of it, and the best of it was in opposition to the status quo of their (neo)colonial oppressors—especially in the areas of values, views, and ethics, the latticework for the struggle that Cabral argues. The wars of national liberation that the BPP celebrated (i.e., Vietnam, China, Algeria, Cuba) maintained a nationalistic base from which even Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries directed their efforts and derived their commitment. In these cases, revolutionary leaders seemed to appreciate that insofar as an important aspect of struggle is to capture the hearts and minds of their people, then a revolution that attacked the cultural hegemony of their oppressors formed the basis of the larger political-military struggle for national self-determination. Without it, the masses, suffering under the cultural hegemony of their colonizers would be unconvinced of their own capacity to realize the objective of liberation.

In its wholesale rejection of the revolutionary role of cultural transformation, the BPP was not only distancing itself from revolutionary practice, but it was distancing itself from the core of the Black nationalist movement itself. In fact, once we focus clearly, we find that though "pigeonholed as one of the more esoteric, even aberrant expressions of the Black liberation ethic, cultural nationalism actually provided much of its thrust and dynamic" (Van DeBurg, 1992, p. 176). It was notable in the writings of the father of what became known as "revolutionary Black nationalism," Malcolm X (1964/1971, pp. 419-420). In his 1964 "Statement of the Basic Aims and Objectives of the Organization of Afro-American Unity," he stated that "We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people." Further, Malcolm insists that

“Armed with the knowledge of the past, we can with confidence charter a course for our future. Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past.” Although seemingly aware of these precepts,<sup>8</sup> too often the BPP operated as if they were oblivious to them. Nonetheless, the heavy rhetoric of the times made a meaningful discussion of these issues problematic at best and “counterrevolutionary” at worst. A misreading of Maoism and the influence of the White Left (many of whom would later become some of the most trenchant critics of the BPP) led the formerly nationalist BPP to embrace a “cultureless leftism” that even led them to reject the teaching of Black Studies (Foner, 1970).

The transformative power of the BPP was not in taking up the gun—Blacks had a long history of armed resistance up to that time. The transformative power, on the individual level, was to be found in the provision of the community with patrols and development (survival) programs in a context of political education and activism. It was the Oakland leadership, the security elements, exiles, and many members of the underground, largely out of touch with the day-to-day grounding and operation of these programs, who lacked the opportunity to be transformed by this reorienting of values in the community. It was the service to the community that transformed peoples of all classes from college students to gang members. As these projects in California came to be extortionist plans and strong-arming attempts, they lost their capacity to transform folk. In fact, they further legitimized the unprincipled lumpen activities of the BPP and reduced its capacity to substantively transform themselves and their community.

The survival programs taught through practice the ethics of love, caring, diligence, reciprocity, community, creativity, responsibility, and struggle—all of these representative of the best aspects of a truly African American culture. These “poor people’s programs” provided a cultural reorientation for participants allowing for the political transformation envisioned by the BPP. The cultural reorientation was toward the best in African American culture. Because of the opposition between this national culture and the dominant White supremacist culture, the result was a very revolutionary

*process*, as opposed to the revolutionary *act* of organizationally picking up the gun for a political objective. This cultural (largely ethical) transformation provided the resin for subsequent political activity.

One is reminded that the BPP's attempt to organize the most disorganized group in the United States, the lumpenproletariat, on a program that drew from Mao, Fanon, and Guevara is impressive, although it was sure to flounder as it drew from a myriad of sources from outside the United States when the people required an example consistent with their experiences within America. Huey seemed to understand this as early as his "The Correct Handling of a Revolution" (May 18, 1967) and attempted to expand his analysis based on Panther experiences in his "intercommunalism." But most Panthers, and academics, did not understand Huey's later formulations and dismissed them. This was due in part to Newton's not being a good public speaker but also to the rejection of his thesis by the White Left who could accept, and even glamorize, Huey's thuggery but not his theory. Hilliard (1993, p. 319) points out that the Left "like us picking up guns and shooting it out with the pigs. But they don't want us as theoretical leaders." They did not want theorizing but only thuggery.<sup>9</sup> In similar fashion, Pearson (pp. 234-235) reduces Huey's paradigm, ultimately a Ph.D. dissertation, to a paragraph.<sup>10</sup>

The foreign nature of the neo-Marxist models and their inapplicability to the condition of African Americans was exacerbated by party members' lack of familiarity with Black history and political science. Former Panther, BLA member, and revolutionary exile Assata Shakur (1987) concurs that

The basic problem stemmed from the fact that the BPP had no systematic approach to political education. They were reading the Red Book but didn't know who Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey, and Nat Turner were. They talked about intercommunalism but still really believed that the Civil War was fought to free the slaves. A whole lot of them barely understood any kind of history, Black, African or otherwise. . . . That was the main reason many Party members, in my opinion, underestimated the need to unite with

other Black organizations and to struggle around various community issues. (p. 221)

This failure to unite with progressive elements in the Black community was underscored by the BPP's alliances with groups outside of the Black community—primarily the antiwar movement. However, the antiwar movement had no coherent ideology or much stomach for revolution. The White Left seemed less intent on revolt and more on keeping its followers out of Vietnam. Not surprisingly, BPP alliances with these leftists dried up as the war wound down.

Further, the antagonistic language of Marxism-Leninism, vanguardism, and the cult of personality allowed for purges and the excommunication of peoples and families in a manner unforeseen in the Black community. The Panther use of the bullwhip for punishment, and the introduction of some of the most esoteric and confusing precepts—including the wholesale attack on spirituality—was so foreign and far removed from Black culture that it was sure to engender disenchantment with the Panthers in the community. These were holdovers from the White Left and their moribund ideology. Pearson does not examine these influences fully, and without such an undertaking, the BPP story hovers outside of history.

### **CRITICISM OF THE SOURCE: THE SECOND NEGATION**

Pearson's difficulties are apparently rooted in his limited exposure to the BPP, his reliance on three BPP insiders—"those who would never forgive Huey for what he did to the party," and the fact that it was "easiest" for him "to gain the cooperation of nonblacks who had been affiliated with Newton and the party" (p. 344). We should appreciate the difficult nature of Pearson's attempts to discern the internal workings of the BPP considering the history of betrayal, infiltration, harassment, and imprisonment to which members have been subjected. Nonetheless, we should also inquire

into the historical grounding of the author and his sensitivity and knowledge of the subject that would allay the fears of members and protect him from the recriminations of those who would question his motives. Having said that, the author's suggestion that his original intent in his book was to promote positive male Panthers seems rather incredible. In fact, it begs the question of the author's grounding in BPP history that he would end up with Newton, who was known for his vices more than his virtues, than for instance, Fred Hampton, Geronimo Pratt, Sundiata Acoli, Akinsanya Kam-bon, or a litany of others.

However, the burden of historical grounding is not Pearson's alone. There is a clear responsibility of surviving Panthers (and movement activists, more generally) to educate the generations that follow them and not sacrifice those generations to their paranoia. Simply put, COINTELPRO happened (and in various ways continues), and those who ran it know how it was done, and those in think tanks with access to the information can educate others in how to do it again to another generation taking up the mantle of struggle. Unless there is a disclosure by the 1960s generation activists to the present generation activists of the methods, means, and opportunities that underlay COINTELPRO, then both the present and future generation activists will suffer from this lack of information. The police need to send no new informants; most in the struggle are not even clear on who the old ones were, or what to do when they are discovered. The past generation was good at many things, but discovering infiltrators and handling informants—much less counterintelligence—were hardly their strong points. In fact, we could argue that we were better at isolating, bad jacketing, and killing innocents than ferreting out the villains from among them. I think Malcolm X, Sandra Pratt, Fred Hampton, Michael Baynam, Mark Clark, Sam Napier, Fred Bennett, Alex Rackley, James Carr, and many others would attest to this fact. Nonetheless, the present generation should know what happened—from the BPP (and the NAIM) perspective—if the struggle is to continue.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Pearson's attempt, at its best, is a useful undertaking, one that should be joined by serious students and practitioners of Black liberation.

### PEARSON'S BASIC FAILURE

Pearson's basic failure is his attempt to deny the value of the movement by pointing out (correctly) some of the worst aspects of Huey P. Newton and the BPP. Although he understands that the experience of other chapters across the country, particularly New York and Chicago, were not those of California, Pearson is upset by what he discovers about the California BPP; however, because he does not have a history of struggle and the lessons of that struggle to reassure him, the project that should strengthen him with the spirit of the best of the movement ultimately disillusion him. This revolves around Huey's apparent irredeemability—evocative of Pearson's great man model of history. But the pressures brought to bear on Newton can only be imagined by most of us, and usually are not appreciated at all by those who are not engaged in the Black liberation struggle. Pearson fails to understand both the transformative power of the BPP and the limitations of that power that led to not only Huey's failure to be transformed but his descent into an abyss of drugs and destruction. More telling is Pearson's apparent antagonism with the Black Power movement that leads him to focus primarily on Huey's personal failures. Understanding Huey's personal failures is important and even a contribution to our understanding of the BPP; however, such an analysis is woefully incomplete. What is needed is a work that would situate Newton in context while offering a way forward for the struggle that Newton and the BPP joined and expanded in meaningful ways.

Instead of such an undertaking, Pearson moves from attacking Huey's personal failures to indicting the BPP as a whole. However, instead of indicting the BPP as a whole (the vast majority of whom were not criminals of any sort), a deeper analysis probably would have led to the conclusion that activists should reject formations that promote messianic leaders within cults of personality in organizations that have a paramilitary element. Such associations lead to the arbitrary use of power to silence dissent. Further, the violence and criminality of followers in such organizations is often sanctioned by "divine right" (such as in the NOI) or rationalized in the name of the revolution (as in the case of the BPP). These

processes led to the assassination of Malcolm X by members of the NOI and the murders of James Carr, Fred Bennett, Sam Napier, Mark Baynam, and others by the BPP. Such conclusions provide an important critique of the Black Power movement, but unlike in Pearson's analysis, it is a pointed critique informed by the history of Black struggle instead of the wholesale denigration of the movement that Pearson attempts. He leaves the reader without a synthesis of the divergent tendencies clashing within the Black Power movement, and he projects *his own inability* to synthesize trends in the Black Power movement as *the movement's inability* to provide a compass for present mobilization. Pearson simply fails to appreciate both the context and the implications of the Black Power movement and the BPP on important issues within the Black community today. I will attempt to briefly examine some of these in the next section.

### THE BLACK NATIONALIST IMPERATIVE

Clearly, one of the prime antagonisms in the Black Power movement is the one between "revolutionary nationalists" and "cultural nationalists." Friction between these two camps was an important context for understanding Huey and the BPP. However, even though there was much blood spilled over this ideological line, the line itself is more apparent than real. In fact, there is considerable agreement between both, and their commonality provides a basis for building on the lessons of the Black Power movement. For example, Assata Shakur (1987, p. 242) summarizes the shortfalls of the BPP in that "On the whole, we were weak, inexperienced, disorganized, and seriously lacking in training." She is clear that armed struggle could never be successful in itself unless it was wedded to an overall strategy for winning that appreciated political and military dimensions. It became apparent to Shakur (1987, p. 242), as well as to other former Panthers, that the "most important battle was to help politically mobilize, educate, and organize the masses of Black people and to win their minds and hearts." This is almost identical to Karenga's assertion that "The revolution being

fought now is a revolution to win the minds of our people. If we fail to win this we cannot wage the violent one" (Halisi, 1967, p. 18). The biggest problem, Shakur (1987, p. 242) maintains, was of political development—"an overall ideology and strategy that stem from a scientific analysis of history and present conditions." Again, her "revolutionary nationalist" perspective dovetails with Karenga's "cultural nationalist" admonition that Blacks "must develop a new plan of revolution for Black people here in America." For Karenga (1980), this new plan was Kawaida, for Obadele (1986) it was the "macro-level theory," and for Huey Newton it was "revolutionary intercommunalism." There is a great degree of confluence between these approaches, and students of the movement should build on this work instead of clinging blindly to earlier antagonisms that have little to do with the forces operative in the Black community today.

Another important lesson to draw from an analysis of the BPP is that the lumpenproletariat is clearly not the vanguard for Black or American advancement—and it never has been. Likewise, activists should abandon Eurocentric notions of the primacy of one class over another and the assertion that groups innately retain some revolutionary disposition. Such analyses draw on historical experiences that are neither African nor American, and they cannot provide the historical compass to allow Blacks to navigate the landscape of our very American oppression. History and reason suggest that we must abandon notions of "the vanguard" and develop out of our own Black culture group by rooting across classes and groups in our outcaste race—the intelligentsia, the middle class, upper, workers, lumpen—into an organized struggle (see Mohammed, 1974). From that point of departure, multicultural political organizations should be pursued. This raises the issue of the "progressive" quality of Black nationalism itself.

Assata Shakur (1987, p. 267) maintains that "without a truly internationalist component nationalism was reactionary." But she failed to recognize the implication of the fact that African American national culture, where it obtains, is a pan-Africanist culture of many different African (and American) cultures subsumed under the diasporic rubric (Henderson, 1995). The inherently interna-

tional nature of pan-Africanism resolves the apparent contradiction that Assata observes (and it also undermines the constant claims of “narrow nationalism” from leftist critics of Black nationalism). Utilizing this culture—seen more as a way of life and not simply the aesthetic contributions of a group—the Kingian (King, 1986) “revolution of values” can be realized and institutions to reflect those value reorientations can be created starting with Black male/female relationships. Haki Madhubuti (1973) is correct that one of the most revolutionary things Blacks in the United States can do is build Black (Afrocentric) institutions, the most important of which is the Black family. From that organizational base, social change proceeds.

Social development ultimately returns to this basic construct of social organization—familial relationships. If Huey had such principled relationships over time, one can argue that his fate may have been different. David Hilliard found a way to recovery through the value-based relationships he found in the 12-step programs. There is a greater task to provide these meaningful relationships throughout Black communities and to struggle within them to transform ourselves, our society, and our world. This massive undertaking, block by block, should be pursued with renewed vigor by those who would bring to our communities that which they are in dire need—peace, development, and social justice. The recent Urban Peace and Justice Movement, founded by grassroots survivors of the victims of homicide such as Clementine Barfield’s Save Our Sons and Daughters (SOSAD) in Detroit, and expanded on in the present Gang Truce Movement led by Dewayne Holmes, Mujahid Karim, Diamond and Big Al in Los Angeles and by former Panther Marian Stampps in Cabrini Green in Chicago and by Sharif Willis and United For Peace in Minneapolis, were seminal in relating the historic Black struggle to the present movement to stop the killing in the Black community. These and other grassroots Black community initiatives in other cities may be the template for further organizing, inclusive of many of the issues raised by the BPP and others. Importantly, all of these initiatives have former Panthers at the core of their cadre of community organizers.<sup>12</sup>

Pearson's analysis does not offer a meaningful discussion of any of these issues as he opts instead for lambasting the Black Power movement under the guise of providing insight into Huey and the BPP. The BPP has much to be criticized for—especially their legacy of wanton violence against the Black community; however, Pearson's real attempt is to discredit the movement itself. This suggests that his "disillusionment" is little more than an attempt at historical nullification. Moreover, a more thorough analysis would show that the present generation has much to learn from the experiences of the BPP and the larger Black Power movement.

### **CONCLUSION: THE NEGATION OF THE NEGATION**

In sum, Pearson does not glean from his analysis a way forward for the Black liberation struggle. He simply challenges the lumpen legacy of the party and its manifestation in rap music. Contrary to Pearson's subtitle, Huey Newton's experience, especially his death, is not the price of Black Power in America. Pearson teaches a catechism of impossibilities: Those who resist—especially those who rise up in the name of Black Power—are doomed. But Black Power cannot be simply reduced to Huey P. Newton and the BPP. Huey's life and the BPP, at their best, are massive positive contributions to the cause of freedom, dignity, and Black liberation. At their worst, they reflect a personal and collective failure to study and learn the lessons of Black liberation and the enormous personal and social costs that such a struggle entails. Huey's life is set on a destructive path due to his actions and not because of some inherent deficiency in the Black liberation struggle. Huey died a crackhead's death, and that should not be glamorized or rationalized as a "plot" of COINTELPRO. It was a testament to the work left undone that Huey's death was neither. Pearson attacks Huey for his failures but is blind to the redemptive quality of the struggle itself—ultimately a liberating process; for what would Huey Newton have been in life were it not for the Black liberation struggle?

The burdens that Huey placed on himself and others and those to which he eventually succumbed are rooted in larger failures of policy that were endemic in the BPP program. Most fundamentally, the BPP confused a historic moment of incredible reform in the United States with an opportunity to wage revolution in the name of a multiracial proletariat that did not exist in any meaningful way. They misconstrued the interests of White leftists who were more intent on avoiding war than in waging revolution, thus they confused an antiwar movement with a revolutionary struggle to bring down the government. These shortcomings reflected their use of a revolutionary compass grafted from foreign struggles that was not oriented to the demands of the U.S. politico-economy. Further, by ultimately eschewing nationalism for intercommunalism, they dislodged themselves from the very basis of their support in the Black community.

Although a full discussion of the BPP's strategies and tactics is beyond the scope of this article, the legacy of the BPP instructs us that we must abandon the notion of a vanguard party and instead build in us, our everyday practice and relationships, the nurturing and positive values and interests that is the "stuff" of successful liberation struggles. It should be understood that no class or group has an innate quality that ordains them as the vanguard. Instead, scholars and activists from divergent political perspectives should offer their models for Black collective action gleaned from rigorous analysis of historical and current trends. Black nationalists, for example, should put forward their own analyses, which might provide a template for both research and activism aimed at Black political, economic, and cultural development. Afrocentrists should attend less to 21st-dynasty Egypt and more to the conditions facing 21st-century African Americans to provide theoretically and empirically compelling paradigms of social change applicable to today's reality (see Henderson, 1995). Neo-Marxists should reexamine the works of Luxembourge and Gramsci: Especially important is the former's critique of Lenin's party formulation and the latter's perspective on the role of culture and cultural hegemony in revolutionary struggle. It is important to remember that the BPP

can serve as a template for each of these perspectives as we attempt to explicate the domestic and global processes that continue to encourage and constrain Black progress in America. This is part of the rich legacy of the BPP that Pearson misunderstands and dismisses.

In sum, we must move past the historical negation that is continued and countenanced by Pearson and instead ensure that present and future generations learn from the rich history of struggle of which the BPP and Huey P. Newton have played a significant part. This struggle includes success and failures, and quite a bit of "in-betweens." We should be critical in our assessment of the BPP, Newton, and all of our social movements. Such acts of criticism, borne from grounding in the movement and continued dedicated practice in it, are both virtuous and necessary. We are still waiting for such a constructive and critical analysis of the Black Power movement, the Black Panther Party, and Huey P. Newton.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1. While philosophically, Huey emerges as a Black nationalist, he then advocates a Marxist (actually Maoist) political philosophy before opting for his own neo-Marxist "revolutionary intercommunalism."

2. Haven is not alone in her denunciation of Brown's narrative. Kathleen Cleaver also decried Brown's veracity. Others remark at the apparent ease both Elaine Brown and David Hilliard seem to have for remembering lengthy verbatim quotes of individuals that sometimes span pages—all without documentary references. Both books can only be considered less than candid.

3. Malcolm X's criminal past was widely known, and his mentor, Elijah Muhammad, had also been incarcerated in Milan, Michigan, for draft evasion. Malcolm's prison experience and transformation inspired the Black Power movement in U.S. prisons.

4. Marx (1852/1969, pp. 76-77) defines the lumpenproletariat as "scum" and "the refuse of all classes." The lumpenproletariat consisted of vagabonds, ex-convicts, ex-slaves, swindlers, pickpockets, beggars, and so on, that Louis Bonaparte used during his power struggle. Marx did not consider this element to be revolutionary. By contrast, Fanon (1968, pp. 136-137), drawing on the experience of revolutionary Algeria, insists that the lumpenproletariat is essential to the success of the revolution.

5. It is clear that the Us-Panther conflict needs to be given a balanced treatment, especially in light of the failure of the movement to adequately police itself. This failure has not only resulted in the bad jacketing of movement participants such as Geronimo Pratt but

has led to physical as well as character assassination. Karenga and Us organization continue to be slandered, although most of the "evidence" against them comes from an admitted police informant and abettor of murder, Louis Tackwood (1973). The movement cannot proceed relying on "informants" to "inform" on other "reputed informants." It was the police informant William O'Neal who constructed an "electric chair" to torture alleged "agents" all while he was helping to set up Mark Clark and Fred Hampton for assassination (Churchill & Vander Wall, 1988). Even a cursory review of Federal Bureau of Investigation documents shows that COINTELPRO operations were targeted at Us organization. This is in contradiction to both Tackwood and Muhammad Ahmad's assertion of Us complicity with the police and federal authorities. It is clear that a member of Us organization killed Carter and Huggins (who was armed) in a shoot-out where Us members were also wounded; however, it is just as clear that members of the Black Panther Party (BPP) killed innocents, though one is vilified and the other celebrated. What is necessary is a fuller examination of the facts relating to the assorted shoot-outs, assassinations, retaliatory and wanton murders, and a public disclosure of findings with regard to these incidents. This is the same process that needs to be undertaken in respect to the assassination of Minister Malcolm (Kongo, 1993). The retrial of Geronimo Pratt may provide an opportunity for such review. Among the episodes discussed, clearly the murders at Campbell Hall should be revisited and Elaine Brown's role in the incidents preceding the murders needs to be examined as should Karenga's statements regarding the incident. One should remember that James Boggs often emphasized that it is the general political backwardness of this country that makes it easier to deal with one's political opponents by character assassination and physical force than by political criticism and ideological struggle. We should heed this criticism and take it as a challenge to the ethics we employ in our everyday interactions as well as those that emanate from our explicit political engagement. A fair and constructive resolution of these issues would also go far in providing the next generation an example of how a righteous movement confronts such matters in a just manner.

6. I am indebted to Akinsanya Kambon for the discussion of Scott, Washington, and Hakim.

7. The Black Guerrilla Family (BGF) is allegedly the remnant of the organization developed by former BPP Field Marshall, George Jackson, that operates primarily (though not exclusively) behind the walls of the California penal system. A rift developed between the BGF and Huey Newton over the course of the revolution in the early 1970s as Huey began to opt more for reform and the BGF advocated a much more militant stance.

8. Later, Cleaver (1974, pp. 75-79), a chief antagonist of cultural nationalists, acknowledged as much. In addition, Fanon (1968, pp. 245-248), one of the patron saints of the BPP, also noted the significance of culture in revolution. Cabral (1973) probably made the most pointed "culturalist" arguments among the African revolutionaries. He argued that within culture is found the seed of opposition that leads to the fashioning of the liberation movement.

9. One popular product of Panther parenting, the late rap artist and son of Panther 21 veteran Afeni Shakur, Tupac Shakur, has likewise glamorized "Thug life." Gangsta rap, as Tupac's genre has been labeled, increasingly plays to a White audience (Samuels, 1991, pp. 24-29) and is widely consumed by Black and White youths who find little difficulty accepting the stereotypical criminality of Black youth and the denigration of Black women (Henderson, 1996).

10. Nonetheless, scholars have noted Newton's (1980) seminal contribution to Black political theory in his model of "revolutionary intercommunalism." For a critical analysis of Newton's contribution, see McCartney (1992, pp. 136-150).

11. NAIM—New Afrikan Independence Movement (Lumumba, 1992), includes the Republic of New Africa, New Afrikan People's Organization, the Black Liberation Army, and other ancillary organizations that support the liberation of the "New Afrikan" nation in the United States.

12. Many of these initiatives provided the impetus for the Million Man March and Day of Absence of October 1995, although such public mobilization for single-day events largely detracts from the organizing required for real transformation of Black communities.

13. Works in that direction include Shakur (1987) and political prisoner Sundiata Acoli's (1983) collection of writings.

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