

Violence vs. Nonviolence: Forms of Resistance in Black Movements

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Black Americans have been made targets of violence by white Americans, law enforcement, and the government since the birth of the United States of America as a nation. Even over a century after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing enslaved African Americans, Black people living in America today endure systemic racism and violence on a daily basis, solidifying the existence of modern day slavery. While they still encounter violent, racist attacks and are constantly failed by the judicial system, Black Americans today are empowered by their ancestors to organize and fight back for their rights and basic humanity. There exists a long history of Black movements in the United States, though two particular groups stand out in the conversation of whether or not aggression is an effective tactic to combat racist and systemic violence—these two groups are the Black Panther Party and #BlackLivesMatter. In order to fully understand either of these groups as movements, it is essential to analyze their goals, the figures who led and are leading each movement, the tactics used to accomplish their goals, and whether or not they were/are successful in what they set out to do. It is also crucial to differentiate between the two movements, as they both aim to empower Black Americans to fight for their rights to exist, but function in two different time periods. With this thorough discussion of both movements, we may begin to infer and visualize the future of Black movements in America.

The Black Panther Party was a political organization founded on the basis of challenging police brutality against Black Americans. In 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale joined together to organize the Black Panthers in Oakland, California in the wake

of the murder of San Francisco teenager, Matthew Johnson (Nelson). Despite the calls for action using nonviolent activism in the Civil Rights Movement, Black Americans remained a target for racist attacks by police forces across the nation—Newton and Seale felt it was necessary for Black Americans to take matters into their own hands and defend themselves against police violence. Policing law enforcement allowed the Black community to feel safe and, in a way, empowered. The message of the Black Panther Party made its way into cities across the nation, and eventually across the world. With chapters around the United States, in the United Kingdom, and in Algeria, the Panthers' mission transcended into a seemingly international movement with its approximate five thousand members at the party's peak in 1969 (Delli Carpini). In retrospect, the Panthers most notably caused a disruption in their origin country, the United States, rather than in other nations where chapters existed. While arming their community was one of the group's first initiatives, it should not be forgotten that the Panthers were equally as passionate about the use of nonviolent tactics to uplift the Black community.

The Black Panther Party established a ten-point program to be clear and honest about their movement's goals—the Panthers used both violent and nonviolent tactics to fulfill their mission. The party's ten-point program was originally published in their weekly newspaper, *The Black Panther*, and conveyed the party's beliefs and what they wanted for Black Americans. According to academic journal "Black Panther Party: 1966-1982" by Michael X. Delli Carpini, the "wants" of the party included "freedom, full employment, an end to capitalist exploitation, decent housing, education that emphasized Black history and the current plight of Blacks, exemption from military

service, an end to police brutality, the freeing of all Black prisoners, and juries of peers for Blacks on trial” (Delli Carpini, 191). In short, the Black Panthers strived to dismantle the systems that oppressed Black Americans in order to empower their community. In the party’s active sixteen years, the Panthers were able to establish various community-based initiatives to aid in the fulfillment of their ten-point program, including a free breakfast program, the publication of their own newspaper, and community outreach to increase Black voter turnout.

As discussed in Stanley Nelson Jr.’s documentary, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, the party developed the Free Breakfast for Children program to ensure children started their schooldays with a meal so that they could be properly prepared to participate and attentively learn in their classes. Historian Beverly Gage explains, “The breakfast program really caught on. It served about 20,000 meals a week to young people in 19 different communities” (Nelson, 28:30-28:39). Members of the party took a few hours out of their days to prepare meals for children, which in turn, set up the youth of the community for success. As mentioned previously, the Panthers also actively published their own newspaper, *The Black Panther*, which helped spread their message and allowed Black Americans to feel represented in the media. According to the newspaper’s primary artist, Emory Douglas, the community responded positively to and resonated so deeply with his art because it “was a reflection of [Black Americans] in the artwork itself. You’re putting them on the stage as the characters and the heroes in the images” (Nelson, 39:34-39:45). Douglas’s artwork gave the community a sense of pride, courage, resilience, and beauty. Towards the end of the party’s active years, there

was a push towards getting members of the party elected into local office, which resulted in political campaign efforts as well as community outreach to increase Black voter turnout. In 1973, Black Panther Party co-founder, Bobby Seale, ran for mayor of Oakland and party chairwoman, Elaine Brown, ran for Oakland city council (Delli Carpini, 192). Panthers from chapters around the nation came to Oakland to aid Seale and Brown's campaigns. According to member Phyllis Jackson, the party "sent people out into the community, going door-to-door, walking the streets, registering people to vote in mass" (Nelson, 1:41:40-1:41:46). Although neither Seale nor Brown won their elections, the Panthers made it clear in their campaign efforts that they were serious about making more concrete political change to help the Black community. Through various community-based initiatives, the Black Panthers solidified their movement was not completely violent.

The Panthers' nonviolent efforts to uplift their community do not take away from their radical use of violence. Rather than outright denounce the more aggressive tactics of the Black Panther Party, we must beg the question: how was violence valuable in accomplishing the goals of the party? To recall, one of the party's "wants" was to discontinue the murders of Black Americans by law enforcement. In order to effectively combat police brutality, the Panthers implemented Malcom X's notion of self-defense by forming "police patrols," in which members of the party organized neighborhood watch programs with visibly armed Black Panthers protecting citizens from potential abuse by police (Delli Carpini, 192). Despite legally obtaining their firearms, the Panthers on the police patrols were viewed by law enforcement, the government, and the media as a

violent militia. As previously discussed, the Panthers were not a completely violent movement, having numerous peaceful initiatives to empower Black Americans—however, their use of aggression and their outspoken criticism of the government and law enforcement led to tension between the party and those they criticized.

The Black Panther Party was not favored by police nor by government officials. The party was undoubtedly vocal about their distrust in law enforcement—in *The Black Panther* newspaper, artist Emory Douglas published illustrations depicting the police as pigs, insinuating anti-police rhetoric. According to former Los Angeles police officer Ron McCarthy, the Panthers' use of the term "pig" did not bother the department at the time. He further explains, "The rhetoric didn't bother us when it was spoken by the Panthers. But when it was picked up by college students, them saying it, *that* definitely bothered us" (Nelson, 41:25-41:46). McCarthy's statement reveals the police clearly had more respect for middle-class college student activists than they had for the Panthers. According to Delli Carpini, a few significant events stand out as central to the increase in the party's notoriety, such as "several community rallies organized by the Black Panthers to tie the April, 1967, shooting of a black youth in Richmond, California, to a larger pattern of police violence 194 against blacks; the sending of an armed delegation of Black Panthers to the California State Assembly in Sacramento to protest pending legislation to ban the carrying of firearms; a shootout between Oakland police and the Black Panthers in which Huey Newton was wounded; and after the assassination of Martin Luther King, a shoot-out with Oakland police involving Eldridge Cleaver and

resulting in the death of Panther Bobby Hutton” (Delli Carpini, 193-194). These protests and shootouts were crucial to the Black Panther Party, in the sense that it certainly got their message across—if the police were to continue racist attacks on Black Americans, the Panthers would stand for their community and retaliate.

The Black Panthers also found themselves under the surveillance of the FBI. The FBI’s counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) targeted domestic protest groups, particularly Black activist groups, and made efforts to infiltrate and destroy the Black Panther Party specifically. COINTELPRO aimed to pin party members against each other and provoke local police attacks by using tactics ranging from undercover informants, harassment, and misinformed campaigns (Delli Carpini, 195). Federal and local governments actively tried to tear the party apart from the inside out, for they viewed the Black Panthers as leaders of a threatening and extremely violent revolutionary movement. Another attack on the Panthers by the government is the passing of the Mulford Act in 1967. California governor at the time, Ronald Reagan, signed the bill to repeal a law that allowed public carrying of loaded firearms—this was a direct response to the police patrols in Oakland and the party’s armed march on the State Capitol in protest of gun control (Coleman). Law enforcement and government officials were undoubtedly threatened by the power of the Black Panther Party and went to great lengths to destroy it.

Over thirty years after the Black Panther Party dissolved, a contemporary Black movement erupted in response to the abuse and murders of Black Americans—this movement is Black Lives Matter. Sprouted from a Twitter hashtag in July 2013 after the

acquittal of police officer George Zimmerman in the murder of teenager Trayon Martin, the Black Lives Matter movement aims to bring awareness to the disproportionate use of violence on Black Americans by law enforcement (Pew Research Center). The use of the movement's hashtag gained a greater prominence in August of 2014, when a white police officer murdered Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. While the movement was sparked by an increase in visibility of police brutality in the twenty-first century, Black Lives Matter is not a new movement at all. As discussed in Christopher J. Lebron's novel, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea*, Black Lives Matter is rooted in over a century of racism against Black people living in the United States. Founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the Black Lives Matter movement is committed to "imagining and creating a world free of anti-Blackness, where every Black person has the social, economic, and political power to thrive" ("What We Believe"). The movement has transcended its existence as a mere online hashtag, and has erupted into an international movement that uses a diversity of activist tactics to combat police brutality.

Since the movement's inception, Black Lives Matter has pushed for peaceful approaches in urging systemic change. Staying true to its roots, the movement heavily depends on social media to spread its message across the world. According to Pew Research Center's analysis of the BlackLivesMatter hashtag, "#BlackLivesMatter" was mentioned in an average of nearly 500,000 tweets daily over the course of ten days, spanning from July 7 to 17 in 2016. Social media allows for the quick distribution of information on a mass scale—for Black Live Matter, this means anyone around the world

can capture, upload, and share photo or video evidence of police brutality taking place, sparking public outrage and a call for systemic change.

In its brief history, Black Lives Matter has evolved into a more direct action-based movement, actively organizing a number of demonstrations across the world. The movement connects its supporters through protests, rallies, and staged die-ins (“Black Lives Matter builds power through protest”). One of the first and most notable organized protesting efforts of the movement occurred in August 2014, after the shooting of Michael Brown. This protest was the movement’s first in-person national protest in the form of a “Black Lives Matter Freedom Ride” to Ferguson, with more than five hundred members partaking in nonviolent demonstrations (Solomon). The movement also uses other forms of media, such as film and music, to inspire its supporters. For example, rapper Kendrick Lamar’s song “Alright” is commonly used as a rallying call at Black Lives Matter demonstrations (Harris). The movement’s quick and immense growth in popularity allows for Black Lives Matter to be interconnected with popular culture and infiltrate the mainstream. Black Lives Matter values inclusivity, peace, and empathy (“What We Believe”)—this calls back to LeBron’s discussion of the power of love:

“Loving another person is a powerful thing. When we truly love another we essentially affirm our own humanity. We put our vulnerability on the line by opening ourselves to others’ virtues and vices... Most powerfully, when we love, we transform from victims into persons of honor and dignity... When we love, we invite others to take responsibility for what they think, say, and do—we empower

them to realize that they can be better people, that character is malleable when the will to face the challenge of love rises to the occasion... Love delivers what democracy promises: equality and fairness” (Lebron, 109-110).

While their published beliefs do not explicitly mention love as a value of the movement, it is clear by their strides towards peace and empathy that actions based in love are essential to Black Lives Matter’s mission. Ultimately, the movement’s push towards nonviolent, peaceful activism is what makes it appealing on a mass scale.

Being openly against abuse by law enforcement, the Black Lives Matter movement has an unfavorable reputation with police and the government. Despite their peaceful efforts, Black Lives Matter finds themselves under police surveillance, similar to the Black Panthers’ surveillance by the FBI (Winston). The police have only grown in hostility towards the movement, adopting a counter-slogan: Blue Lives Matter. The lack of acknowledgment of the fact that Black lives do, in fact, matter, as well as the use of this counter-slogan reveal police have a clear divide between themselves and Black Americans. Blue Lives Matter is insensitive to what Black Lives Matter is all about, taking away from the fact that Black Americans are disproportionately targeted by the police. President Donald Trump also has a history of denouncing the movement and its supporters—at a Birmingham, Alabama campaign rally in November 2015, a Black Lives Matter protester was physically assaulted by a Trump supporter, to which Trump responded, “Maybe he should have been roughed up because it was absolutely disgusting what he was doing” (Diamond). While the protester entered Trump’s space, they had every right to be there without encountering violence. In a 2015 televised press

conference, President Trump has vocalized that in response to an incident at a Bernie Sanders rally, he would “fight” Black Lives Matter protesters if they were to invade one of his rallies and attempt to steal the spotlight (“Trump Pledges To Fight Black Lives Matter”). Black Lives Matter’s outspoken objection of violent, racist police brutality and the systems in which allow law enforcement to get away with their abuse has led to even more hostility between their movement, police around the nation, and our government.

Now that we have a clear understanding of both the Black Panther Party and Black Lives Matter as movements, it is important to analyze how each movement functions in their separate time periods. The two movements overlap in many areas, such as their mission to put an end to police brutality and their tumultuous relationships with the government and law enforcement. They are also extremely different from one another in other ways, the most obvious being the use of the internet as a tool. Black Lives Matter have the advantage of the internet and social media to further their movement, as opposed to the Black Panther Party who did not have such technology available at their disposal. The Panthers spearheaded the anti-police brutality movement by initially bringing light to local issues, which eventually spread to cities across the country—however, Black Lives Matter exists in a time where social media and smartphone cameras exist, allowing for people around the world to bear witness to America’s racist law enforcement in real time. The digital age in which we’re currently living in allows for information to transmit internationally in a matter of seconds. Without this technology, would Black Lives Matter exist how we know it today? It is safe to say that without the internet, Black Lives Matter would not be such a global

movement. What if the Black Panther Party had access to today's technology? Perhaps the party would feel less inclined to use violent tactics if they knew the world watched their every move in real time. Either way, both movements have brought necessary disruption to America, playing crucial roles in combating racist violence against the Black community by the police.

Whether they actually use violence or not, Black movements in America are historically viewed as violent movements. As we have seen with Black Lives Matter, a movement can push for peace, yet still face denunciation from the President of the United States. When the United States is exposed for their racist law enforcement and racist systems of oppression against the Black community, those in power take it as an attack. It is important we have movements such as the Black Panther Party and Black Lives Matter to disrupt these systems that favor Whites over minorities. While this might seem like a radical idea to some, aggression is sometimes necessary to be heard—we must acknowledge that the use of violence in movements is less about homicide and more about causing a disruption for the sake of revolutionary change. While the Black Panther Party dissolved decades ago and Black Lives Matter is a relatively new movement, it is without a doubt both movements are successful in that they inspire Black Americans to fight for their rights and basic humanity.

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