CALL AND RESPONSE

Key Debates in African American Studies

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To Maggie Gates: May our profession give you the pleasure and satisfaction that it has given me.

For Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham:
For being there for me, first, foremost, and always.

HLG

For the Burton family and Aniruddh,
Roger, and Lilia: my past, present, and future.

JB

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courage to put an end to suffering by willingly suffering themselves rather than inflict suffering upon others. It will be done by rejecting the racism, materialism and violence that has characterized Western civilization and especially by working toward a world of brotherhood, cooperation, and peace.

Huey Newton and Bobby Seale

October 1966 Black Panther Platform and Program [1966]

On October 15, 1966, Huey P. Newton (1949–1982), a law student, and Bobby Seale (b. 1936), an employee of the city of Oakland, California, drafted a ten-point program calling for racial equality in employment, housing, education, and civil rights. Their “What We Believe” manifesto became the founding document of a new organization, which they dedicated to enforcing the rights of African Americans “by any means necessary,” with the teachings of Malcolm X as its philosophical model. Inspired by the illustration of a panther that served as the emblem of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (a political party founded earlier in 1966 in Lowndes County, Alabama, by Stokely Carmichael) Newton and Seale called their new organization the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (later shortened to the Black Panther Party). As Seale recalled in an August 1996 interview for the Cold War series on CNN:

And at another point that day, Huey says, “You know, I think the nature of a panther is that if you push that black panther into a corner, he will try to go left to get out of your way. And if you keep him there, then he’s going to try to go right to get out of your way. And if you keep oppressing him and pushing him into that corner, sooner or later that panther’s going to come out of that corner to try to wipe out whoever’s oppressing it in the corner.”

I says, “Huey, that’s just like us, that’s just like black people.”

In 1967, when they launched their official newspaper, The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service, they included their “What We Believe” platform in each issue. The following year, they added a separate section outlining “What We Want,” and gave the new document the title “October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program.” The final version, reprinted here, with the “What We Believe” and “What We Want” sections interleaved, was first published in 1969.

The Black Panthers challenged police brutality by monitoring police activity in predominantly black neighborhoods. Members armed themselves for patrols not only with loaded weapons but also with tape recorders and knowledge of the law. Although the Black Panthers later moved toward more revolutionary positions, their philosophy was initially rooted in the idea of armed self-defense as a way of stopping further violence. As Newton is famous for saying, “Sometimes if you want to get rid of the gun, you have to pick the gun up.”

During their first year, the Black Panthers became influenced by Marxist ideas and began organizing community programs, such as free breakfast programs for schoolchildren and free medical clinics. As the Panthers gained popularity and started forming coalitions with other groups to further the goal of “all power to all the people” (in contrast to the black nationalist idea of Black Power, which was stressed by other groups), they became a target of the FBI, especially its counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO. J. Edgar Hoover, the longtime director of the FBI, called the Black Panthers “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” and utilized police harassment, spying, infiltration, and the fostering of internal conflict to destroy the organization.

Further complicating their goal of attaining legitimacy within the black community, some Panther members engaged in illegal activity; Newton, for example, engaged in violent behavior and abused drugs. Seale left the organization in 1974, and Newton went into self-imposed exile in Cuba in 1974 to avoid being tried for the murder of a seventeen-year-old girl. The organization never regained its momentum, even after Newton’s return (and acquittal) in 1977. With internal conflicts exacerbating the external attacks by the government, the Black Panthers had faded in political relevance by the end of the 1970s. In a 1997 interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr. for PBS’s Frontline, former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver (1935–1998) linked the rise of random urban violence to the government’s suppression of organized liberation groups like the
Black Panthers, while also pointing to an unfulfilled shift in Black Panther strategies toward politics:

And I regret the way that the Party was repressed because it left a lot of unfinished business because we had planned to make a transition to the political arena and we would have been able to transmute that violence and that legacy into legitimate and peaceful channels. As it was they chopped off the head and left the body there armed. That’s why all these young bloods out there now, they’ve got the rhetoric but without the political direction and they’ve got the guns.

From The Black Panther (February 19, 1969).

WHAT WE WANT
WHAT WE BELIEVE

1. **We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.**

We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.

2. **We want full employment of our people.**

We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the white American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.

3. **We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our Black Community.**

We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules was promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of black people. We will accept the payment as currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The Germans are now aiding the Jews in Israel for the genocide of the Jewish people. The Germans murdered six million Jews. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over twenty million black people; therefore, we feel that this is a modest demand that we make.

4. **We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.**

We believe that if the white landlords will not give decent housing to our black community, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people.

5. **We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.**

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.

1. The Black Panthers revised their platform in March 1972, moving away from exclusive black nationalism to include "our Black and oppressed communities;" the revised platform was published in The Black Panther Intercommunal News on May 13, 1972; both the original and revised platforms are included in Stanford University's "History of the Black Panther Party" at http://www.stanford.edu/group/blackpanthers/history.shtml.
2. In the 1972 revision, this number was changed to "over fifty million."
6. We want all black men to be exempt from military service.

We believe that Black people should not be forced to fight in the military service to defend a racist government that does not protect us. We will not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America. We will protect ourselves from the force and violence of the racist police and the racist military, by whatever means necessary.

7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people.

We believe we can end police brutality in our black community by organizing black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all black people should arm themselves for self defense.

8. We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.

We believe that all black people should be released from the many jails and prisons because they have not received a fair and impartial trial.

9. We want all black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.

We believe that the courts should follow the United States Constitution so that black people will receive fair trials. The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives a man a right to be tried by his peer group. A peer is a person from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical and racial background. To do this the court will be forced to select a jury from the black community from which the black defendant came. We have been, and are being tried by all-white juries that have no understanding of the "average reasoning man" of the black community.

10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations—supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny.

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands 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 entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the 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 a 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 shown, 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;