

Black Nationalism

Overview

Despite the legislative victories won in the early 1960s, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African Americans continued to fight for equality into the late 1960s. Although the end of legal segregation drastically impacted the lives of African Americans in the South, African Americans elsewhere, who were not subjected to legalized segregation, experienced very little change in their situation. Urban riots broke out in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Detroit, and other large cities during the 1960s. The riots grew out of frustration and despair, nurtured by lifetimes of discrimination and poverty.

Some, inspired by the ideals of nonviolence, joined the civil rights movement and marched, prayed, and sacrificed to win justice. Others, no less idealistic, seized the proud claim of black power, and trying to ignore white government and power structure as much as possible, devoted themselves to building black pride and a black community. Black power scared many people in the 1960s. So long as the civil rights movement talked only of equality, nonviolence, and love, most people were unthreatened. However, a concept known as "black power" empowered black people to determine their own political, social, and economic realities.

Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam

The Nation of Islam was an organization of African American Muslims that promoted black nationalism and became a major force in the civil rights movement. Malcolm X was one of the most prominent figures associated with the Nation of Islam and is considered the father of the black power movement in the 1960s. Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam advocated for black



empowerment, and their message resonated most strongly with young African Americans in urban areas, primarily in the North.

Malcolm X was a staunch critic of the more moderate strategies of other civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. Rather, Malcolm X believed in black separatism, not integration, asserting that throughout history whites had imposed their culture on African Americans. He also encouraged a more militant strategy to attain equality, including armed self-defense. Because of these views, Malcolm X and the black power movement frightened many whites, who labeled him and the movement as too radical. Although Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, his legacy lived on through the black power movement and the Black Panthers.

Black Power and Black Pride

Influenced by the ideas of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) first used the phrase in a speech he delivered in June 1966. Black power integrated Malcolm X's views of militancy and black separatism, urging black people to pursue economic and political independence free from white control and institutions. The movement focused on the empowerment of black people and the black community to combat racism, while also attempting to cultivate pride in black heritage and culture.

As SNCC led the political movement for black power, black writers, musicians, and artists led the cultural movement for black pride, known as the Black Arts Movement. Pride began with looking black. Black men and women stopped straightening their hair, instead displaying Afros above colorful African-styled dashikis, or wrapped their heads in African-styled caps and turbans.

Poets from Gwendolyn Brooks to Nikki Giovanni and Leroi Jones celebrated blackness. Some people, like Jones, also changed their European-sounding names. Jones became Amiri Baraka. African American parents, who had grown up seeing their history represented in school by only a brief mention of slavery, now demanded that their children be taught of African kings, queens, and cultures and of the contributions of African Americans to the making of the United States.

The Black Panther Party

At this time, the Black Panther Party also leapt onto the national stage. Founded in Oakland, California, in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, the Black Panthers soon spread across the country. In their trademark leather jackets and black berets, they looked as fierce as their namesake. They espoused the ideals of black power and Marxism, and rejected nonviolence, insisting instead on arming themselves to defend their families and communities against all attackers, including the police, whom they called "pigs."

In addition to wanting black empowerment and separatism, the Panthers also asserted several other, more specific demands. They called for the end of police brutality directed at African Americans, the full employment of African Americans, education that included the contributions of African Americans, the creation of decent housing, and the exemption of African Americans from military service. Lastly, they wanted the release of all black men in prison and a more representative justice system, where black people were tried by members from their own communities to diminish the discrimination African Americans faced in the legal system.

While Panther rhetoric was fierce, the organization also proved capable of focusing its energy on service to the community. Panthers ran breakfast programs for hungry children, education programs, and free medical clinics. Despite this work, their image remained that of armed defiance.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, the federal government, and state and local law enforcement agencies took aggressive action against the Panthers. They tapped phones, infiltrated the organization with spies, intercepted mail, and did everything they could to disrupt the Black Panthers, culminating in a 1969 push to destroy the organization. The 1969 police campaign began with mass arrests, first in New York and then across the country. In December, two Chicago Black Panther leaders, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, were killed by police. Although the party fell into decline through the 1970s and dissolved in the 1980s, it helped to expose the issues and the de facto racism impacting the black community.

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