Panther Theory: Reading Black Power

…if one is truly a revolutionary, one must understand that one must take time out to study.

– Stokely Carmichael

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Office: Johnson Chapel 301B
Office hours: M/W - 10-11:30

Required texts (please purchase from Amherst Books in downtown Amherst): Stokely Carmichael, Stokely Speaks (Chicago Review); Huey Newton, Revolutionary Suicide (Penguin), To Die for the People (City Lights), and In Search of Common Ground (Norton); Elaine Brown, A Taste of Power (Anchor); Angela Davis, The Angela Davis Reader (Blackwell); Mao Tse-Tung, On Guerrilla Warfare, Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin, Black Against Empire (California); W.E.B. Du Bois, Souls (Dover)

What is the memory and legacy of the Black Panther Party? The Party is probably best known for its militant politics and iconic imagery: guns, leather jackets, confrontations with the police, and often audacious forms of public protest. We remember those politics and that imagery for good reason: the Party’s organization and struggle galvanized communities beleaguered by poverty, police violence, and mass incarceration. But it is important to also recall that the Black Panthers were an intellectual movement that theorized mobilization, forms of strategy, ideas of solidarity and collaboration, and armed self-defense out of close study of a wide range of both conventional and revolutionary thinkers. This course focuses on that element of the Party’s life, exploring the Black Panthers as an intellectual movement. We will read key figures Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Elaine Brown, and Angela Davis with close attention to how they engage and transform canonical figures of Western philosophy like Socrates, Descartes, and G.W.F. Hegel, as well as revolutionary writers Karl Marx, V.I. Lenin, Che Guevara, Mao Tse-Tung, and Frantz Fanon. We will also discuss how the Party related to the wider Black Power movement through public debates on political and cultural nationalism and internationalism. Across our reading and discussion, we will have to think carefully about how Party social programs in nutrition, education, and healthcare emerged out of – and not just alongside or in addition to – militant political theory and action. The class will work closely with the Amherst College Library, which houses an extensive collection of Black Power newspapers, original writings, and other materials in the College’s archive. This course will also focus on group and independent research with the aim of making our findings publicly available.
Reading Schedule

3 September
Introduction to the course

8-10 September
Du Bois, from Souls
Lenin, from State and Revolution
Fanon, “Concerning Violence”
(10 September is end of add/drop)

15-17 September
Carmichael, Stokely Speaks, chs 3 & 4
Carmichael, Stokely Speaks, chs 7 & 11

22-24 September
Guevara, from Guerilla Warfare
Nietzsche, from The Will to Power
Newton, Revolutionary Suicide

29 September-1 October
Newton, Revolutionary Suicide
Newton, Revolutionary Suicide

6-8 October
Mao Tse-Tung, Guerilla Warfare
Newton, To Die for the People

13-15 October
Newton, To Die for the People
(13 October is fall break)

20-22 October
Newton, To Die for the People
Brown, A Taste of Power

27-29 October
Brown, A Taste of Power

3-5 November
Davis, Reader, chs 1, 3, 11

10-12 November
Davis, Reader, chs 12, 16, 20, 22

17-19 November
Newton and Erikson, In Search of Common Ground

Thanksgiving break

1-3 December
Newton and Erikson, In Search of Common Ground
Carmichael, Stokely Speaks, chs 14 & 15

8-10 December
Discussion of documentary films
Black Power Mixtape & Concerning Violence
Assignments

This course requires collaboration and weekly work, all of which is dedicated to making our thinking exploratory, engaged in dialogue, and public. As well, the aim of these assignments is to facilitate independent individual and collaborative research – both in terms of finding materials and crafting ways of disseminating the key ideas and aims of those materials.

Daily/weekly work on the course wiki @ bpp.jdrabinski.com

1. class discussion summaries (I will schedule)
2. edits and expansion of entries (your initiative)
3. crafting an historical narrative in wiki form through work on Black Against Empire
4. integration of information, concepts, and arguments from source materials project into wiki entries (expansion and addition)

Source project

1. Your group will be assigned a key primary text from the Black Power/Black Panther movement. As a group, you will be required to work through the book together, craft a way of presenting it in summary and analytical form, and integrating it into the wiki as both a special page and part of other entries (full details in separate document).
2. Your group will also be assigned a secondary source book on some aspect of the Black Power/Black Panther movement (education, healthcare, etc.). As a group, you will be required to work through the book together, craft a way of presenting it in summary and analytical form, and integrating it into the wiki as both a special page and part of other entries (full details in separate document).

Reports from the archive

Each week, a group will be assigned to casual archival research at the Amherst College library. By “casual research,” I mean perusing the collection of newspapers and newsletters in the College’s collection and reporting on the class blog and in the class wiki on findings – analyzing photographs, interesting political tidbits, and so on. This is an exploratory assignment intended to engage your curiosity and creativity (full details in separate document).

Weekly newsletter

Each group will be assigned dates for producing a weekly newsletter (full details on formatting, etc. in separate document), which will include a report or analysis of a theoretical problem in the Black Power and/or Black Panther movement, biographical sketch of a lesser-known figure in the movements, reflection on relevance, and consideration of aesthetic objects (music, photography).

Participation on the course blog @ bppblog.jdrabinski.com. This is an open forum for students.

Your final project will be a portfolio of the semester’s work and an extensive cover letter reflecting on the course material, your treatment of those materials, and a portrait of theorizing Black power in culture and politics.
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