



# Legacies of the Cold War Historical Consciousness Of Black American Civil Rights Organizers

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## ABSTRACT

Black American civil rights organizers were frequently forced to align with either liberal democracy or communism due to the bipolar Cold War order. During this period, any critiques of the US system were vulnerable to being disingenuously associated with communist rhetoric, which were then met with extreme scrutiny. This fraught environment required activists to adapt their strategies to carefully and covertly align with communist groups, as in the case of the Black Panther Party (BPP); or, on the other hand, to appeal to liberal democratic institutions, as in the case of the National Negro Congress (NNC). This choice resulted in drastically different historical legacies of these two activist groups. The BPP's successful utilization of communist rhetoric has left a lasting imprint on the modern consciousness of civil rights activism, while the NNC's failed appeals to liberal democracy resulted in them fading from popular memory.

## Introduction

In her seminal 1988 essay, critical literary theorist Gayatri Spivak poses her titular question: “can the subaltern speak?” referring to the ways in which the Other is silenced through the narrow epistemology of colonialism (Morris 2010, 40). She asks the reader to consider whether ‘subaltern’ groups, namely those nations who were and are victims of colonialism and imperialism, can express themselves in opposition to dominant historical narratives. When telling the histories of marginalized peoples, the question of historical memory and legacy is of particular interest: historians must ask themselves which voices and consciousnesses are remembered (Morris 2010, 40). For Black US civil rights advocates in the latter half of the 20th century, mobilizing a historical consciousness and legacy for their movements presented a unique challenge due to the nature of the bipolar Cold War order. The political necessity of being either ‘for’ or ‘against’ communism or liberal democracy, as espoused by the USSR and the US respectively, limited the ways in which US civil rights advocates could define themselves. Furthermore, activists were limited by who they could conceivably ally with without suffering severe political repercussions, forcing them to make binary choices in complex situations.

The human rights struggle of the Cold War became an ideological battlefield between the American “empire of liberty” and the Soviet “empire of justice”—a division which further constrained the Black equality movement (Westad 2005, 8, 39). Narratively, there were striking similarities between the structural in-

equalities experienced by Black Americans in the southern Dixie states and inequalities experienced by other marginalized groups—particularly in Poland and the Baltic states—under the USSR’s totalitarian regime. Various oppressive apparatuses expressed through fraudulent trials and executions, prison conditions that violated human rights standards, state espionage, and a general culture of terror, characterized the experience of marginalized groups in both countries (Borstelmann 2001, 3). However, despite these similarities, the hold of McCarthyism in the US forced activist groups such as the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the National Negro Congress (NNC) to tread extremely carefully, lest they become labelled as dangerously subversive. For most Black civil rights organizations, the aim was not deliberately to demonstrate the failures of the American liberal democratic paradigm as a whole, but instead to highlight and fight against the disenfranchisement and oppression of Black citizens. Campaigns for Black equality were required to be made with the aim of reforming American democracy and never to challenge or question it, which severely narrowed the “sphere of civil rights politics” (Dudziak 2011, 11). Any narrative which undermined American posturing as the apparent leader of the free world represented a challenge to Washington’s credibility and therefore its geopolitical power. Subsequently, any political activism which appeared to challenge the power of the US was silenced (Anderson 1996, 561).

Given this particular context, the question becomes: how did the geopolitical context of the Cold War during the late 1940s-1960s de-

termine the success of Black civil rights movements within the US? The Black Panther Party (BPP) found success by appealing to international anti-imperialist movements. Their activism was predicated upon adopting communism to varying degrees, and it was inspired by the communist underpinnings of other anti-colonial mobilizations occurring at the time—in Algeria and Tunisia, Cuba, and Ghana, to name only a few. Contrarily, the National Negro Congress experienced less success due to their limited national and labour-focused approach, as well as their unsuccessful targeted appeals to the American liberal-democratic framework and liberal institutions such as the United Nations (UN).

This essay will first analyze the ways in which the BPP successfully mobilized communist rhetoric to become active on the world stage, as demonstrated by their activism during the Vietnam War. Within the scope of this essay, success is defined as the organization's prominence in popular history and memory that stands in the collective consciousness to this day. Secondly, this essay will provide an analysis of the NNC's comparative failure by discussing the ways in which the NNC mobilized on the national scale before eventually attempting to mobilize through the liberal-democratic organization that is the UN, which resulted in the NNC being labeled a communist threat.

### **The Black Panther Party: Communist Internationalism**

The Black Panther Party successfully mobilized the theory and language of communism in order to ally themselves with global anti-im-

perialist and subaltern movements. In doing so, they associated themselves with temporally powerful activism and solidarity, resulting in their strong historical legacy. There is no doubt that the Panthers were significantly influenced by communist rhetoric and ideology during their active years. Beyond communist American thinkers such as Malcolm X, Marxism and Maoism were omniscient in the actions and values of the Party. The key factor that allowed them to escape a formal “communist” label was that they did not identify themselves as dogmatic Marxists, instead referring to themselves as “dialectical materialists” (Bloom & Martin 2013, 311). Huey Newton, a founder of the BPP, described their Marxism as simply a belief in the validity of its mode of thought, rather than any particular love of Marx himself (Bloom & Martin 2013, 311).

However vague Newton makes the association seem, the fact remains that Marxist theory was deeply embedded in the BPP, with foundational documents such as the Ten Point Programme referring directly to Marxist concepts such as the “means of production” (Newton 1980, 83). Marxist vocabulary was even used to reform the Ten Points, and in 1969 Point 3 was altered from “We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our Black Community” to “We want an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our Black Community” (Bloom & Martin 2013, 312, emphasis added). Maoist philosophy was also mobilized, particularly with the rise of Masai Hewitt within the Party, an educator personally fascinated by Mao's Little Red Book—the iconic document of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which described Mao's commu-

nist philosophy (Bloom & Martin 2013, 311). Co-founders Bobby Seale and Huey Newton even sold copies of the *Little Red Book* to students on the University of California's Berkeley campus at a profit of 70¢ apiece, which they used to arm members of the Party (Harris 2001, 413). The BPP also published essays on the spread of drug addiction—an issue which disproportionately affected Black communities at the time—calling it a tool of capitalist oppression (Tabor 1970, 2). In addition, Angela Davis, a prominent voice in the Party, frequently spoke on the globalization of capital and the subsequent exclusion of Black people from the ability to accumulate capital (Bhatia 2016). Suffice it to say that there are copious examples of the BPP's mobilization of communist rhetoric throughout the history of their advocacy. It is this unique interpretation and reinterpretation by each individual Panther chapter that allowed them to uphold anti-imperialist and essentially communist activism on the world stage. This mutable quality of their communist ideology allowed them to align themselves with internationally oppressed and subaltern groups.

One case in which the Panthers' activism was particularly prominent on the international stage was in their response to the Vietnam War, which took place from 1955-1975 and lasted over twenty years. In this response, their specific focus on self-determination—the right to assume statehood and independence—can be understood as a reaction to the US cultural milieu, which made socio-economic rights notably difficult to obtain for black people. On the Cold War's ideological battlefield, socio-economic rights became associated with commu-

nism, making them antithetical to the American vision of liberal democracy. Black leadership in America could “only envision” the emergence of civil rights movements and not actualize the fuller realization of a human rights paradigm (Anderson 2003, 7). This contextualizes why the BPP was so motivated to ally themselves with the Vietnamese people. Ostensibly, the Vietnam War was a conflict between North and South Vietnam, later extending into Laos and Cambodia. In reality, it was a proxy war orchestrated by the US against its Cold War rivals, the USSR and China, each to advance their own “global [...] strategic and political interests without the need to intervene by [their] own forces” (Bar-Siman-Tov 1984, 263). The US had been blundering through Vietnam for some time by the late 60s, having also provided funding and personnel support for French war efforts during the first Indochina War, and had continued supporting Vietnam after the formal French departure in 1955 (Lowe 1998, 140).

Communist guerilla forces were active and powerful in Vietnam by 1961, as was the BPP in an entirely different part of the world (Lowe 1998, 72). The 1968 Hemispheric Conference to End the War in Vietnam, which took place in Canada, drew a huge attendance, including a BPP delegation led by Bobby Seale (Bloom & Martin 2013, 309). His speech called the Vietnamese people heroes, argued for the universal liberation of the ‘third world’—including African Americans in the US—and explicitly said that self-determination was a core right of oppressed peoples. The parallels between African-Americans and the Vietnamese during the war were striking: the violence experienced by

African Americans from the occupying army that was, and is, the US police was compared to the occupation of Vietnam by the US military. It was certainly an apt comparison as police brutality against African Americans took shape as a violent imposition in their sociocultural spaces, which from an outside perspective felt remarkably similar to a military occupation (Bloom & Martin 2013, 310). For the Panthers, the failed manifestation of the right to self-determination in Vietnam mirrored the ways in which American democracy failed Black Americans by denying them the right to equal political participation and representation in segregated states (Du Bois and the NAACP 1947, 10). The narrative propagated by this alliance—that the US was internationally stymying processes of self-determination and, therefore, human rights—created exceptionally strong associations between the two oppressed groups, beyond any sort of superficiality but instead one of foundational, intrinsic ideological similarities. By appealing to the communist Vietnamese fighters, the Black Panther Party successfully and deliberately mobilized communist rhetoric and allied itself with the historical consciousness of the international, subaltern communist movement.

### **How To Kill A “Communist”: The NNC, US, and UN**

In stark contrast to the Panthers, the legacy of the National Negro Congress (NNC) has been “banished” from popular memory; with the sad reality being that an organization which formerly commanded significant organizing power within the labour movement has now been largely erased from the historical con-

sciousness of the Black civil rights movement (Gellman 2012, 3). At its peak, the NNC boasted 75 council chapters scattered around the country. Much like the Black Panther Party, the NNC believed in the need for a radical restructuring of American values: they feared the rise of fascism and believed that the global structure of capitalism was at odds with the protection of human rights, including the right to self-determination (Gellman 2012, 3). The NNC founded itself on a slightly different theoretical and ideological basis than the BPP. While the BPP denied explicit communist associations but clearly drew on communist theory and ideas to launch their activism onto the world stage, the NNC became a Black “vanguard of the Popular Front,” a broad coalition based on labour alliances of American radicals, referencing the Leninist concept of the working class political party that would lead the socialist revolution (Gellman 2012, 2). At the forefront of the industrial labour movement, the NNC was certainly upholding the Marxian ideal of a working-class revolution through various forms of militant activism, drawing on historical labour union tactics, including pickets and boycotts (Gellman 2012, 2).

Unfortunately, many of these tactics proved ineffective in the face of global capitalism. The boundaries of established institutions in the American South were impervious to attempts to challenge labour exploitation, such as tobacco strikes and boycotts, both of which suffered from a simple lack of participants (Gellman 2012, 65-67). The perpetrators of this labour inequality, who thought of themselves as “welfare capitalists,” remained largely unaffected

by the local mobilizing power of the NNC. The lack of uptake by the community can be partially explained through the fact that the NNC's tactics challenged the "middle-class respectability" that many activists clung to at the time, calling upon respectable groups such as housewives to take up the mantle of organizing sessions, reports, and "scrapbooks" (Lightfoot 1937). The anti-fascism of the Popular Front remained essential to the NNC; they relied upon it to draw links between fascism on the world stage, including the galvanizing event of Italy's second invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 (Vaughn-Roberson 2018, 5). However, they did not specifically advocate for the international anti-imperialist movements, instead focusing on national advocacy for working class justice, which they believed would eventually be a force to "fight the oppression of colonial nations throughout the world," thus limiting their organizing to the national stage (The Baltimore Afro-American 1936).

There was one interesting attempt from the NNC to mobilize through the international community, which was their ill-fated efforts to garner UN support against the US. In 1946, the NNC presented a petition to the UN General Assembly. The petition laid out the rationale through which they believed the UN had the authority to "end the oppression of the American Negro", and took as a premise that African-Americans were oppressed (Anderson 1996, 545). Not even responding to the contents of the petition, UN officials replied by asking the NNC to prove that the "rights of African Americans were indeed being violated" (Anderson 1996, 546). They then made it clear to

the NNC that according to the UN charter, they had little authority to even receive petitions from non-governmental organizations, much less to interfere in what they termed "domestic affairs" (Anderson 1996, 546). Due to the context of the Cold War, namely the anti-communist hysteria that made it impossible and dangerous to even give the appearance of challenging the US, the NNC was unable to respond to the UN and 'prove' that African-Americans were being oppressed (Anderson 1996, 548). The UN's message was blunt and clear: they were unwilling—and perhaps unable—to interfere with US sovereignty. For the NNC, this response was a dismal disappointment, as they had subscribed to the opposite pole's vision of sovereignty and human rights: that, in the wake of the Holocaust, asserted that the international community cannot fully trust local sovereignty, requiring a global standard of human rights (Borstelmann 2001, 3).

This petition proved to be disastrous strategically, raising alarms in Washington. The FBI considered it a treasonous act and an attempt to distract attention away from Cold War efforts, particularly at the time, the American effort to bring democracy to Greece (Anderson 1996, 548). Other liberal-democratic establishment-aligned actors, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—who were firmly and publicly against communism given their alliance with the US federal government—began to denounce the NNC as well, with NAACP executive secretary Walter White calling the organization "problematic" (Anderson 1996, 546). Even labour unions, who were crucial



to the values and activism of the NNC, began to withdraw their support in favour of other organizations following the failure of the UN petition. The tense climate of the Cold War led to the NNC developing a reputation as a ‘communist problem,’ despite their continual focus on labour relations, without necessarily any direct association with communist rhetoric. By attempting to appeal to the UN, a purportedly neutral international institution in lieu of subaltern and deliberately radical groups, the NNC fatally overestimated its ability to ally with liberal-democratic actors. This error drew too much negative attention to the NNC, and it was permanently branded as a communist and, therefore, anti-American group.

### **Conclusion: Legacies or Lack Thereof**

Apparent allegiance to communism became a key factor in determining the memorialization and historical legacy of these two groups. Within the broader international context of the Cold War, the BPP’s ability to ally with international communist and anti-imperialist groups cemented it firmly outside of the historiographical and epistemic influence of nationalistic US forces, which sought to protect their own legacy and the reputation of liberal democracy. On the other hand, the NNC, which focused on labour organizing tactics and remained on the national scale, attempted to ally itself with liberal-democratic institutions which favoured the US, resulting in them being labeled subversive enemies of American democracy and wiping them from the historical consciousness of the Black civil rights movement. While figures such as Malcolm X and Angela Davis are

still recognized as prominent voices and thinkers of their time, the names of NNC organizers such as John P. Davis and James Ford have faded from the American consciousness. These occurrences and narratives are not merely historical happenstance: they reflect the real geopolitical power relations of the Cold War and its legacies which carry into today’s world.

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