The Black Panther Party

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Course Description:

This course examines the history, legacy, and controversy of the Black Panther Party (1966-1982). Founded as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in October 1966 by radical college students Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party (BPP) became one of the most popular and infamous Black Power era organizations. The Black Panthers’ combination of militant rhetoric and paramilitary accoutrements (which included black berets, leather jackets, guns, rifles, and at times bandoliers) turned the group in modern revolutionaries engaged in a quest for black liberation by any means necessary. Armed with guns and a ten-point program that vowed to end police abuses in black communities and demanded “bread, justice, land, and peace” the Black Panthers threatened to start a political revolution by politicizing urban dwellers (what Newton called the “lumpen”) and organizing poor blacks into a potent political force. Through survival programs that included the popular free breakfast program (that would eventually be implemented by local municipalities) the Panthers offered an alternative vision to the Civil Rights Movement. Yet there was a dark underside to the group. Plagued by a lack of internal democracy, sexism, and ideological disputes the group succumbed to a campaign of systematic harassment, incarceration, and, in certain instance, murder during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This seminar examines the group’s impact, origins, and legacy.

Course Objectives: To gain an in-depth historical understanding and contemporary political analysis of the Black Panthers and the larger socio-political context from which they emerged. By studying the Black Panthers, and examining their successes, failures, and shortcoming, we are better able to understand the way in which American race relations unfolded in the postwar era and why certain historical actors organized in the name of a political, social, and cultural revolution. The Panthers also exemplify the revolutionary political spirit of the 1960s and allow us to explore the complicated relationship between civil rights, Black Power, and the New Left. In so doing, students will gain a more nuanced understanding of the way in which issues of race, civil rights, and democracy were redefined by black radicals whose confrontation posture with authority would scandalize as much as it would change America.

Classes will be seminar styled discussions that rely heavily on student participation. Students will be responsible for paying close attention to assigned reading and preparing discussion notes and questions for future classes. Each student should be ready to engage in a good amount of sophisticated, yet highly readable intellectual material. Finally, students are expected to participate in classroom discussions in an informed manner regularly.
Students are responsible for coming prepared to class to engage in a robust intellectual discussion. This is a seminar, so it is not a lecture course, which means we will be engaging in a close discussion and, at times, classroom reading of course materials.

Absences: Class attendance is crucial, especially since we are meeting only once per week over the course of the spring semester. When students miss class they miss important information in lectures and critical questions and commentary contained in classroom discussions. My hope is that you learn from reading, lectures, and a critical and informed exchange of ideas with fellow students. Poor attendance will result in a failing grade for class participation.

Participation: All students are expected to read assigned reading materials. Merely showing up in class is not enough to ensure a passing grade. Students who have fears about speaking in front of others should come to me.

Requirements:
Students are expected to keep up with the reading assignments. This is imperative since this seminar is writing intensive and will be based on an understanding and conceptualization of the assigned readings. All students are expected to be prepared for class and contribute to discussion in an informed manner. Students are required to keep detailed notes of the readings and lectures. Notes based on the reading assignments will be collected periodically.

Assignments

Paper 1 30%
Book Review of Primary Research Materials Related to BPP 20%
Participation (includes group discussion and notes) 10%
Attendance 10%
Final Research Paper 30% (due on the last day of class)

Required Readings: Available at the University Bookstore

Huey P. Newton, Revolutionary Suicide (1973) and To Die For the People (1972; reprinted 2009)
Janes Rhodes, Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon
Reserved Readings: Will consist of primary sources readings of the BPP, including articles from the group’s newspaper The Black Panther as well as newspaper and periodical coverage of the group in The New York Times, Oakland Tribune, Ramparts, National Guardian, etc.

Recommended Readings

Additional Readings (Not Required)

Class Schedule

Week 1
Class 1: Introduction: The Black Power Movement
The Black Panther Party in History and Memory
Waiting ’Til the Midnight Hour, pp. 1-94
Liberated Territory, Introduction, 1-31
Framing the Panthers, chapter 1

Week 2
Class 1: Hard Times
The World that Made the Black Panthers
Waiting Til the Midnight Hour, pp. 95-204
Revolutionary Suicide

Week 3
Class 1: An Origin Story Reconsidered
Class 2: Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale before they were Panthers
Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, TBA
Newton, ToDie for the People, 3-79
Week 4
Stepping into History/From Lowndes County, Alabama to Oakland, California
Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour, pp. 205-240
Framing the Panthers, Introduction and Chapter 3.
Hasan Jeffries, Bloody Lowndes excerpt on blackboard

Week 5
Black Power Scandalizes the Nation and Inspires the Panthers/Black Panther Icons: Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver
Framing the Panthers, Chapters 4-5.
Newton, To Die for the People, 80-111
BPP Intercommunal News Service, 1-100
Book Review Due

Week 6
Class 1: Black Panther Women/Rainbow Radicalism
Jones, ed., The Black Panther Party Reconsidered, book excerpt on blackboard

Week 7
Class 1: The Rank and File/ From Revolutionary Nationalism to “Intercommunalism”
To Die For the People,
Waiting ’Til the Midnight Hour, pp. 241-275
BPP Intercommunal News Service, TBA

Week 8
Class 1: All Power to the People/The Black Panthers and the New Left
Framing the Panthers, Chapter 6
Newton, Revolutionary Suicide
Barber, A Hard Rain Fell, book excerpt on blackboard
Newton, To Die For the People, 149-179

Week 9
Class 1: Neighborhood Rebels: Local Black Panther Chapters
The Black Panthers and the Prison Movement
Liberated Territory, pp. 85-135
Framing the Panthers, Chapter 7
BPP Intercommunal News Service, TBA
Week 10
Class 1: Revolutionary Suicide: The Triumph and Tragedy of Huey Percy Newton
Framing the Panthers, Chapter 8
BPP Intercommunal News Service, TBA
Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, complete book
Newton, To Die for the People, 180-236

Week 11
Class 1: The Split in the Party: Government Repression and Internal Fighting
“This Will Tide Us Over Until Liberation”: The Black Panthers and Survival Programs
Survival Pending Revolution, Chapter 6
Framing the Panthers, Chapter 9
Waiting Til the Midnight Hour, complete book.
BPP Intercommunal News Service

Week 12
American Babylon: the Black Panther Party and Electoral Politics
Framing the Panthers, Complete book
BPP Intercommunal News Service

Week 13
The Party’s Over: Debating the Legacy and Contemporary Significance of the BPP
Framing the Panthers, Chapter 1.

Week 14
The Historiography of the Black Panther Party
David Garrow, “Picking up the Books,” (blackboard)

Notes
Any student that has documented requirements for special needs can contact me in private.

Class discussion is encouraged. As a group of intellectuals in the process of becoming a scholarly community debate and discussion is encouraged. However, these individuals must maintain civility and respect toward one another at all times.

Cheating and plagiarism are serious offense and will be dealt with according to university regulations.

Scheduling Notes:
Class 1 on the Syllabus Indicates First Day of Classes: Readings scheduled for each class should be done before the class date, with the exception being the first day of class.