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A Response to an Unjust Leviathan: The Black Panther Movement

After the Civil Rights Movement began to quiet down, another political organization centered around African American rights moved forward: the Black Panther Party. The political background of 1960s-America gave rise to the context that allowed such a movement to flourish: soldiers were being drafted to the ever-so-unpopular Vietnam War; African Americans did not gain their overdue rights through nonviolent protests; and many Americans could not stand for imperialism or oppression. Additionally, police officers harmed African Americans more than they protected them, and so through the use of mitigated violence and forcefulness, the Black Panthers established a presence that grew quite rapidly, despite intense government efforts to undermine them. In the end, though, when the political context shifted and the law began to treat African Americans better through efforts such as affirmative action, the Panthers lost vigor in terms of support and soon disbanded. An understanding of the successes and shortcomings of this movement can be analyzed through Thomas Hobbes' definition of a successful state: under a unequal law and a state that carried out law unjustly, chaos flourished and struggle ensued, allowing the Panthers to take the stage and guide those who wanted away from segregation; ultimately, they failed to achieve their mission as the United States eventually changed its laws to benefit African Americans, giving them less reasons to need the Black Panther Movement.

In *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr. characterize, with breadth and detail, the Black Panther Party. A

movement that is mostly collectively violent, it was characterized as a revolution, responsible for splitting the state into two factions: one composed of those who were oppressed, and another of those who were “imperialistically” oppressive, such as police officers (Bloom and Martin, 2). Though the Panthers were sometimes forceful and verbally abusive with officers, shoving them and calling them “pigs,” the tactics that they used were mostly nonviolent (Bloom and Martin, 48-50); they used guns, rallies, and intimidation to stand their ground in front of officers, demonstrating that they would now protect themselves against police brutality (Bloom and Martin, 56-57); such action was necessary when the police got away with killing African Americans in cold blood. The movement grew exponentially until 1969, when they reached the height of their power. At this point, community service missions arose and became as important as forceful demonstrations. For example, the Panthers opened free health clinics and allowed bus free rides to prisons. Not only acts of care, these acts were also demonstrative political agendas: health led to better socio-economic statuses and prison efforts highlighted the disproportionate number of incarcerated African Americans in accordance to their white counterparts. Though the movement made great progress and changed the lives of many, it did not succeed. When law began to favor African Americans more, the need for the Black Panther Movement dwindled. Violence and protection were no longer needed to oppose the American government as it was now trying to be better to them, causing the Panthers to sizzle out.

When the Black Panther Movement began, the United States was a rather unfair state that championed unequal laws and pushed segregation onto people of color, keeping them from achieving what they wished to achieve, and this is what Thomas Hobbes warns against in his book, *Leviathan*. Hobbes outlines the role a state must play in order to achieve peace and accordance, laying down the foundations of legal liberalism. Above all, he champions law and

rightful, authoritarian leadership; he writes that the job of the sovereign is to enforce the law. If the state does not exercise its rule properly, then law is meaningless and the sovereign is not carrying out justice (Hobbes, 258). Additionally, it is the job of the state to produce laws that are just in themselves; it is not the job of the public to assess their moral validity. The law, then, must guide people individualistically, “for the use of Lawes... is not to bind the People from all Voluntary actions; but to direct and keep them in such a motion, as not to hurt themselves by their own impetuous desires, rashnesse, or indiscretion” (Hobbes, 268); it must keep people from impeding on one another’s goals and requires that all are equal before it. If government and law do not fulfill these purposes, Hobbes’ ideal notion of a state will fail, falling into a state of chaos, for he believes that the natural disposition of men is brutish, causing war to ensue.

What fostered the growth of the Black Panther Movement, then, was the failure of the state, or what Hobbes calls the “Leviathan,” to establish laws that act as “hedged” and to have authoritarian members of that state, such as police officers, enforce those laws accordingly. In the first place, the American law then treated African Americans differently from how it treated whites. All people were not equal before the law, and this politics of difference fostered sentiments of white superiority, anti-blackness, racism, discrimination, and oppression. The state, going against Hobbes’ theory, did not have equal law, but rather, had Jim Crow Laws, creating segregation, and with such palpable differences in the distribution of justice, African Americans were bound to become discontent and do anything for change. Moreover, police brutality was a representation of the direct malpractice of justice: those who were supposed to be enforcing the law were abusing it, and as such, innocent African Americans were losing their lives. Together, these factors fostered discontent among the African American community in the United States, and they began to take the matter of whether a law is right or wrong into their own hands, which

Hobbes pins as a characterization of a failing state (Hobbes, 259). The “Leviathan” that was the United States, then, was, in some ways, a failure, and so those who were discontent resorted to creating the Black Panther Movement; though meaning well, the mass movement did embody some aspects of violence and aggression, openly using guns as a symbol of protection and display of power. A war between the state and the Black Panther Party ensued: the state continuously tried to undermine Party efforts, with the Justice Department even calling the Party “a threat to ‘internal security’” (Bloom and Martin, 392). For every step that the Panthers took forward in furthering their agenda, the United States government tried to push them back; for example, in August 1970, a series of “Gestapo-like raids of several Panther headquarters by... Philadelphia police proved disastrous for the Party, causing extensive property loss... damage and subjecting arrested Party members to humiliating public strip searches...” (Bloom and Martin, 197-198), and this was not an isolated incident. Originally, when the state tried to repress Panther efforts, the community actually gave them even more support, but eventually, as the political environment of America changed, support for the Panthers dwindled. When President Nixon came into office, he began to pull away from the Vietnam War, he passed affirmative action legislation, and under him, African Americans were winning more election seats and ballots. Effectively, then, the law no longer alienated blacks as harshly or kept them from achieving the same goals as whites, and they were beginning to be integrated into a society with more equal and just law, and as such, the need for the Black Panther Movement subsided. As such, when the law began to do its job more efficiently, when it began to support more people equally before itself, and when blatant ruptures in law enforcement became less apparent, the United States, as a “Leviathan,” re-established itself, thereby alienating the need for the Black Panther Movement, ultimately leading to its demise.

In many ways, the Black Panther Movement is a spectacle: it targeted an audience of working-class and lower-income African Americans; it gave power to marginalized people through demonstration, violence, and community service; and it believed that it could reform the world. Though it very evidently touched the lives of many and managed to bring solidarity and mobilization to a group of people who felt that all hope was lost for justice, its main essence did not manage to withstand the context of its materialization, thereby, leading to its failure to achieve justice as a movement. Hobbes' theory of legal liberalism and the necessities of a properly functioning state explain the life cycle of the Black Panther Movement rather well, and as such, correctly attributes the failure of equal law and procedural law to the rise of discontent and civil unrest, for as soon as the government began to address the needs those suffering at the hands of equal law and biased, unjust enforcers, the need for an outside movement disappeared.

Works Cited

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