

Mumia re-examines history of the Black Panther Party

Book review

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a review of

We Want Freedom: A life in the Black Panther Party by Mumia Abu-Jamal. South End Press: Cambridge, 2004

In his new book *We Want Freedom*, acclaimed activist Mumia Abu-Jamal has re-examined the history of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and has situated them in a broader history of Black resistance for a new generation to learn from their successes and failures.

A journalist from Philadelphia, Abu-Jamal has been on death row since 1982 for allegedly shooting police officer Daniel Faulkner. Years later, his radio remarks and other writings reach a relatively large audience through independent media, and his cause has become nearly synonymous with radical left activism in the US today.

As a teenager, Abu-Jamal was a founding member of the Philadelphia Chapter of the Black Panther Party. In this book, he fleshes out his carefully researched history with reminiscences of his involvement with the Panthers in Philly, Oakland, and New York. This helps to create a work that has not only academic value, but emotional depth as well; Abu-Jamal accomplished this feat in part by discussing in some detail the daily lives of Panthers.

We Want Freedom begins by outlining the history of armed Black struggle in the US. Positing this as a more radical—and deeper—current of resistance than the celebrated nonviolence of the civil rights movement, Abu-Jamal demonstrates that the Black Panther Party was far from an aberration.

Black armed resistance and Black nationalism predated the founding of the US and have continued from generation to generation, up to the founding of the Panthers and to the present day. Abu-Jamal contrasts Malcolm X and the Panthers with Martin Luther King's well-known dream, thus reminding us that the history we have been taught is full of intentional omissions.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in 1966 in Oakland, CA by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, two college students, who had been deeply affected by the ideas of Mao, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon, not to mention their firsthand experience of urban Black life under a racist government. Due to the popularity of its ideas and programs, the BPP spread rapidly in Oakland, and then to most major cities in the US. The Panthers' platform appeared in a self-published newspaper that was sold on street corners and in bookstores all over the country.

The philosophy of the Panthers was far from the rigid, nationalist ideology many today associate them with. The term "Black nationalism" hardly does justice to the full range of Panther thought. "While the idea of revolutionary nationalism held sway for a time," Abu-Jamal tells us, "it had to give way to a kind of revolutionary internationalism." Newton quickly abandoned the concept of a separate Black nation within US borders and looked to forge ties with

similar movements around the world. The Panthers, through declarations of solidarity or active support, aligned themselves with liberation movements in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Asia (even going so far as to offer Panther troops to North Vietnam). Newton went even further by proposing a Black movement that was “intercommunal,” acting in solidarity with movements that were not necessarily nationalist in nature, like those of Chicano, Asian, and white radicals within the US, including feminist and queer groups.

While many latter-day critics might note the problematic influence of Marxism and Maoism, Abu-Jamal explains: “Although it has rarely been observed in these ideological terms, the Black Panther Party was a Malcolmist party far more than it was a Marxist one. Though all Panthers owned and were required to study Mao’s *Red Book*, and the Party claimed to adhere to the principles of Marxism-Leninism, few Panthers actually pored through turgid, laborious translations of key Marxist texts.”

These debts to Malcolm are as much psychological, emotional, and spiritual as purely political. While the competing ideologies of nationalism and internationalism impacted many revolutionary movements, the Panthers were more known for their actions than their theories. Abu-Jamal’s book helps map these distinctions.

Despite its advanced ideals, sexism and authoritarianism remained major problems in the BPP leadership. In trying to contextualize these problems, Abu-Jamal asserts that the BPP’s recruitment of those most damaged by racism and capitalism guaranteed that “...the least enlightened on gender issues would be widely recruited into the organization.” Some may find his treatment of these problems apologist, but to his credit, he lets women speak for themselves, giving space for the oral histories of several women whose experiences reflect the complexity of Panthers’ approaches to gender.

An FBI program called COINTELPRO, as many know, brought down the Panthers through an extended campaign of illegal thuggery. The lengths to which the FBI went to destroy this movement speak volumes, not only about the violent extremes to which the US government will go in order to silence dissent, but also about the seriousness with which the BPP was viewed by the government. Through COINTELPRO, the FBI used infiltration, “brownmail” (letters purporting to be from one Panther to another, but actually penned by FBI agents in order to foster mutual suspicion), and outright murder, often committed by convicted criminals in exchange for leniency.

The eventual result was a split between Panthers in the East and those on the West Coast. The BPP dissolved into several bickering factions that fought each other (sometimes violently) for legitimacy. However, the legacy of the BPP includes many groups; Abu-Jamal even mentions the Anarchist People of Color (APOC) movement and the work of “anarchist panther” Ashanti Alston and criticizes the New Black Panther Party for ignoring the teachings of Huey and characterizes them as “an emergence of the Nation of Islam under a different name.”

The first and most obvious lesson the Panthers leave us is never to underestimate the duplicity of the US government. Panthers “didn’t think that they were important enough to warrant that... level of government repression,” but their modesty created a fatal blind spot. While COINTELPRO has been filed away as an historical anomaly, the Department of Justice’s war on dissent has continued unabated, as Abu-Jamal’s 22 years on death row attest. The book also describes the Panthers’ attempts to lead a class-conscious, multi-racial revolutionary movement in the United States. Finally, the egotism and authoritarianism in Panther leadership created the deep fractures along which it eventually split.

The Panthers’ success stemmed both from its theory and its practice. The radical stance taken by the party appealed to a population that had tired of reformism, and communities could easily see that the Panthers meant business. Even so, most of the BPP’s success could be attributed to its emphasis on community service. From its Police-alert Patrols to its Free Breakfast for Children Program, from free schooling to free health clinics, busing, clothing, and housing, “For most Panthers, our lives in the Party were dedicated to community service,” Abu-Jamal remembers. The inability of many subsequent groups to mobilize those most oppressed reflects their unwillingness to engage in difficult and unglamorous work.

For long-time supporters of Mumia’s cause, *We Want Freedom* provides a valuable glimpse of his radicalization as a young man. For those new to the study of Black resistance, this book makes a great starting point, and suggests many avenues to explore. While some anti-authoritarians might take issue with the near-saint-like status that Huey Newton had among the Panthers on the street, this story eloquently explains Newton’s politics and persona. For anarchists, this book—better than anything in the current platformist milieu—sheds light on the appeal that an effective political organization has as a viable means to confront capitalism, imperialism, and the state. For white

readers, this book clearly challenges us to confront our own internalized white supremacy and deal with the lasting critique that revolution will never come until we are willing “to do all that [is] necessary to break asunder from [our] Mother Country.”

By allowing many voices from the Panther milieu to speak through his book, Abu-Jamal demonstrates the breadth and complexity of this important—and often misunderstood—movement.

In this generally inspiring and unapologetic history, Abu-Jamal proceeds honestly and modestly, refusing to dodge some of the more problematic elements of the Panther legacy. Near the close, the long quote from Afeni Shakur, mother of the assassinated rapper Tupac Shakur and former Panther prisoner, is as much about owning up to idealistic ignorance and arrogance as it is about the heroism and hope the Panthers posed. And appropriately, Abu-Jamal ends the book not in the past but in the future: “The Black Panther Party may indeed be history, but the legacy that gave rise to it is not.”

Despite overwhelming evidence of his innocence, Mumia Abu-Jamal remains on death row. It is for his freedom and for all our freedom that we still must fight.

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