

The Rise of Black Power and the Black Panther Party

1. The Radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement towards Black Power

- the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) by President Johnson eventually gave legal equality and full Civil Rights to African Americans
- these measures were the major successes of the non-violent Civil Rights Movement, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- but despite these legislative changes, the economic situation of many African Americans remained horrible and the first in a series of race riots broke out in Watts, L. A., only two weeks after the passage of the Civil Rights Act
- many African Americans, especially in the northern ghettos, felt that King's non-violent approach had not helped to tear down the social and economic walls of racism
- > James Meredith was shot on his *March against Fear* in 1966 and the major Civil Rights Organizations including King's SCLC and SNCC decided to continue his project
- > Stokeley Carmichael, chairman of SNCC, spoke to the gathering crowd after he had been arrested for civil disobedience and called for *Black Power*
- > The slogan *Black Power* attracted nationwide attention and became a powerful symbol of African American economic, cultural and social independence and self-determination

2. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense

- Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the *Black Panther Party for Self-Defense* (BPP) in Oakland, California in 1966
- claiming Malcolm X as major influence, the Panthers promoted their constitutional right to arm themselves in public to protect African American communities from police violence and discrimination
- built on marxist ideology, the BPP valued its militant freedom struggle within the context of revolutionary independence movements all over the world, e. g. in Algeria
- besides their para-militaristic approach, the Panthers also organized social programs in the communities, e. g. the *Free Breakfast Program*, which offered food and assistance to neglected African American children

- soon after the Panthers had become a nationwide and hotly debated phenomenon, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover declared them to be the “greatest threat to national security”
- he started the counterintelligence program COINTELPRO to destroy the BPP through manipulation and violence, resulting in often deadly confrontations between police and Panthers
- due to these efforts and internal conflicts, the BPP split and lost influence within the Black Nationalist movements in the 1970s and eventually dissolved in 1982
- the BPP has achieved iconic status within American political and popular culture and remains a major signifier of *Black Power*

3. *The International Impact of the Black Power Movement*

- the appearance, strategies and goals of the *Black Power Movement* exercised strong magnitude on the emerging NEW LEFT in Western Germany
- the main organ of leftist student resistance was the SDS (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund/German Socialist Student League), which was publicly identified with sociology student Rudi Dutschke
- > hosted by the SDS, SNCC delegate Dale Smith spoke at the 1968 Vietnam Congress in Berlin and demanded more radical forms of resistance against the US military engagement in Vietnam
- SDS president “KD” Wolff organized the “Black Panther Solidarity Committee” after he had experienced the work and mission of the BPP first-hand during his stay in the US
- the imprisonment of Panther Angela Davis furthermore mobilized the German Student Protest Movement and led to the founding of the “Angela Davis Solidarity Committee”, which sought to raise consciousness about the inherent racist structures of US society
- BUT: the BPP also served as role-model for leftist terrorist organizations like the RAF (Rote Armee Fraktion/Red Army Fraction), which aimed to overthrow the capitalist German State by assassinating its main representatives > “Konzept Stadtguerilla”
- > **Question:** How did categories of race, class and gender influence and determine the overall enthusiastic perception of *Black Power* within the German Student Protest Movement

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