**What was Black Power and was it just an empty slogan?**

Black Power was an informal ideology that spread across America during the late sixties and early seventies which drew upon the ideas of Malcolm X as its basis and quickly developed into different forms across the United States. The phrase first came into mass use after Stokely Carmichael's speech at Greenwood on the Meredith March in 1966.The term would quickly be adopted by radical blacks in America who were feeling frustrated with the lack of progress that Dr Martin Luther King's non-violence campaign was generating. For different people Black Power meant different things: Stokely Carmichael saw it as a movement that would reject white help and give black Americans a sense of pride and power unavailable to them due to their existence as an ‘internal colony’ in an oppressive racial system. However others were more radical: the ‘Black Panther Party for Self Defense’, headed by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, took a more aggressive stance than the ‘Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’ (SNCC). The Black Panthers advocated violence, an armed revolution, and were separatists. Black Power experienced an immediateswell in popularity, exemplified by Tommie Smith and John Carlos giving the Black Power salute on the 200m podium at the 1968 Olympic Games. However the impact of Black Power is questionable; virtually no physical gains were made as a direct result of the campaign yet at the same time, its influence was considerable. Black Power made America question itself; it gave many blacks a sense of self-worth and it gave rise to Black Nationalism. The cultural legacy of Black Power is very visible and even today there exists a new Black Panther party.

Before the Black Power movement began there was Malcolm X. Described by Eric Foner as the “intellectual father of Black Power”, Malcolm’s influential ideas would shape the minds of SNCC in general and Stokely Carmichaelin particular.[[1]](#footnote-2) Adam Fairclough argues that Malcolm’s message had four main aspects:his emphasis on racial pride, his condemnation colour consciousness, also his condemnation of non-violence as cowardly and ineffective and finally his appeal to black manhood.[[2]](#footnote-3)Fairclough points out that “Every element in “Black Power” … was anticipated in Malcolm’s speeches.”[[3]](#footnote-4) Additionally, Bruce Dierenfield describes how Malcolm was “consistently dedicated to the spiritual regeneration of African Americans. He employed the rhetoric of racial separatism to affirm the resolve of blacks to exist on their own terms.”[[4]](#footnote-5) In an interview in 1988, Carmichael describes the profound effect that Malcolm had on him: “He gave us all the intellectual arguments and opened up the way for us to show clearly an intellectual basis for nationalism and an ability to smash all ideas that were in contradiction to it.”[[5]](#footnote-6) Malcolm was massively popular throughout the Civil Rights Movement with the SNCC. Carmichael recalls how as early as 1962, all of Malcolm’s speeches would be taped and then passed around SNCC members in the South, or how when the SNCC sent delegates to Africa, they were asked their stance on Malcolm X by the people there. There is no doubt that for the establishment of Black Power as a political idea, Malcolm was vital. While Martin Luther King was completely assured of his position as a proponent of non-violence, there were many Blacks who wanted to do more, and they turned to Malcolm, and when Malcolm was shot in 1965, they had to look elsewhere. It was then that they found Stokely Carmichael.

In 1966 Carmichael stood on the podium at Greenwood, Mississippi and gave his manifesto, culminating in a chant of “We want Black Power, we want Black Power, we want Black power, we want Black Power!”[[6]](#footnote-7) It would mark a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement, fracturing the unified Black community into two different groups that would splinter into more and more groups, but that would ultimately result in a Black community with more sense of self and of Black Nationalism than ever before. Carmichael would quickly prove to be an active figure and waselected to the SNCC chairman post the same year, after already founding the ‘Lowndes County Freedom Organization’ (LCFO) in 1965. This was the very first group in the ‘Black Panther Party’ mould;the LCFO strove to organize voting registration in an Alabama county which had a massive black majority but where none were registered to vote. But what did Carmichael mean by Black Power? In a BBC interview given in 1971, Carmichael explained that “[Black Power] wasn’t a question of morality, it wasn’t a question of being good or bad, it was simply a question of power, and we black people had no power. The only type of power we could have was Black Power.”[[7]](#footnote-8)In short, ‘Black Power’ as a slogan was a rallying call for the black community to unite in one body and use their worth as people to determine their own lives. In his book, ‘Black Power’, Carmichael describes how black people have a chance “to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations”, he explains the importance of unifying behind Black Power, saying that “black people have not suffered as individuals but as members of a group; therefore, their liberation lies in group action.”[[8]](#footnote-9)Carmichael’s view isnot separatist; while he sees white help as counter-productive, he does not want the black community to leave America, but he argues that the only way Blacks could obtain power and equality was to “close ranks”, to “come together and do things for themselves.”[[9]](#footnote-10) Carmichael understood the situation of blacks living in America to be an ‘internal colony’, an exploited people used by whites and white government in America in the same way for example, Europeans were using Africa. He argues that whites simply exploit blacks through any means they can: “exploiters come into the ghetto from outside, bleed it dry, and leave it economically dependent on the larger society.”[[10]](#footnote-11) Carmichael’s goal as soon as he was elected chairman of the SNCC was to put his ideas into policy; “Our direction was clear. A heavy emphasis on nationalism.Strong, as strong as Malcolm hadit, as strong as we could get it.”[[11]](#footnote-12)The Meredith March was the first opportunity SNCC had to project this new idea and they did it strongly with the Black Power speech. After that date the SNCC continued to radicalise, Fairclough argues that “by the time that H. Rap Brown replaced Carmichael as chairman of SNCC in 1967, SNCC’s rhetoric lost all restraint.”[[12]](#footnote-13)For Carmichael then, Black Power was about the establishment of a black community that would exist outside of the white world and build itself on its own, independent of white influence, it would have its own self-determination; “black people will choose their own leaders and hold those leaders responsible to them.”[[13]](#footnote-14)

Aside from Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, the other major figure in the Black Power movement was the Blank Panther Party, founded in Oakland, California by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. It was a party that would set the example for copycat parties all across the US,they were a determined Black Power activist group heavily influenced by Frantz Fanon. Fanon was a French-Algerian who supported the native rebels in Algeria. Fanon’s book ‘The Wretched of the Earth’, in which he advocated violence as a means with which to bring about decolonization deeply affected black leaders such as Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, who would adopt Fanon’s philosophy. The historian Franz Ansprenger explains that Fanon’s argument for armed revolution was“an act of disinfection, a medical treatment. It is no race struggle.”[[14]](#footnote-15) The Panthers were a complex party; their goal was a revolution, of political, economic and social grounds, achieved through violence. Their ten point program, described by Fairclough as a combination of “reformist, revolutionary and nationalist demands” shared ground with Carmichael, indeed he would join them after stepping down from the SNCC; they too wanted to determine “the destiny of our black community”, they wanted “an end to the robbery by the capitalists”, as well as basic needs such as housing, education, freedom, employment.[[15]](#footnote-16)

The Black Panthers were easily the largest and most well-known proponent of Black Power. They were further influenced by Marxism and Mao, and as a result they began many social programs to support the Black community in Oakland. In 1970 there were 19 free breakfast programs across America, feeding over 200,000 blacks. They established free health clinics, conducted voter registration programs and established “Liberation Schools” for black children.[[16]](#footnote-17)However the focus of their organization was on guns, which they saw as their method of giving back pride to the black community. They patrolled black neighbourhoods in Oakland, following police around, justifying their actions by accusing the police of harassment, brutality and racism. Newton would compare the police in their community to a “foreign troop occupying foreign territory” and accuse the police of “denying us the due process of law.”[[17]](#footnote-18)Newton explained that the Panthers thought they “would quickly become a national organization when Blacks across the country saw what we were doing in Oakland by driving out what we called the oppressive army of police.”[[18]](#footnote-19)The Panthers epitomised cool in this regard; with stylish street garb, they were easily adopted role models for young black men in the ghettos. The iconic photo of the Panthers outside the State Capitol building protesting Huey Newton’s incarceration personifies the Panthers form of Black Power: the independent, gun carrying black man exercising his rights to the full, in front of the white controlled government building. The Panthers however struggled with various internal problems; Huey Newton was an unstable leader, often involved in serious criminal cases and indeed, a large portion of the Black Panthers existence was devoted to the ‘Free Huey’ campaign; a campaign to get Newton released from prison for the shooting of a police officer, John Frey. They were also an overtly chauvinistic and homophobic party, although women did play a large role in the running of the party, especially in the community programs. Kathleen Cleaver was the wife of Eldridge Cleaver, the party’s ‘minister of information’, she was a professor at Fisk University in Tennessee, but joined the Panthers in 1967 and she would organise the entire ‘Free Huey’ campaign.[[19]](#footnote-20)

The ‘Free Huey’ campaign was a major event in the history of the Black Panthers and the Black Power movement in general. Carmichael described the event as a “merger between the lumpen proletariat and the intelligentsia, the revolutionary intelligentsia about people in America which SNCC represented.”[[20]](#footnote-21) In February 1968, the SNCC and the Black Panther Party allied together to rally in Oakland in protest at Newton’s trial. However, the rally failed to ‘Free Huey’ andthe jury still sentenced him to significant time – though he did escape the death penalty. Furthermore the collapse of the SNCC in the following few years meant that any alliance Carmichael hoped for was short lived. Again then, like so many other acts of the Black Power movement, the results were not physical but psychological. Huey Newton went to prison, but the black community had been glued ever tighter; rallying around the martyr figure of Newton, chanting ‘no more pigs in our community’, they found a family of similarly aggrieved people who wanted justice and equality just as much as them.

However how much were the Panthers able to achieve? In an interview conducted in 1989, just a few months before his death, Newton laments that “the Party grew much too rapidly because many of the young people were very enthusiastic about the guns and about the berets, but they knew little about the community programs that are our reason for existing.”[[21]](#footnote-22) Newton’s criticism is ironic considering his hardly community focused actions while leader of the Party, but his point is very real. The Panthers succeeded in empowering a small minority of gun wielding young blacks, but at the cost of many of their lives – in fire fights with the police – and no real focus on political activism. Perhaps this is the crucial issue with Black Power in the form the Panthers personified it; it was an idea so vague that to try and use it as more than a slogan meant that the true meaning behind it was lost. While Newton was going in and out of jail and trials, and eventually exile, the Panthers struggled to make long term changes to the community. Fairclough does argue however that “they took their political doctrines seriously”, however he also acknowledges that the pursuit of these doctrines was dangerous: “the fate of the Black Panthers illustrated the dangers of organizing a political movement around guns.”[[22]](#footnote-23) The fall of the Panthers came swiftly, and arguably before the Panthers ever gained any truly national support. By 1970 the Panthers had chapters in twenty different states, but only had 5,000 members. Regardless, the FBI had turned their gaze onto them and proceeded systematically to dismantle the Panthers in what most outside observers now describe as severe overkill.

Ultimately however, Black Power was far more than just an ‘empty slogan’, as an idea it succeeded. While there are many who argue against this, such as Andrew Young, who was an activist who supported Martin Luther King and believed in non-violence. In a BBC interview in 1971, Young stated that he felt King himself “had no problem with the concept of Black Power, he just didn’t think it was a tactically wise slogan, and that his sense was slogans basically were substanceless.”[[23]](#footnote-24)In Young’s own view,“Black Power was a dead end. It provided emotional release and the illusion of manhood, without the content… The advocates of Black Power had failed to master their own fears. They could not trigger genuine social change.”[[24]](#footnote-25)Clayborne Carson agrees, delivering his damning conclusion that “the Black Power movement of the last half of the 1960s promised more than the civil rights movement but delivered less. Black Power militants talked of power yet exercised only transitory power within black communities and none outside those communities.”[[25]](#footnote-26) Carson justifies his conclusion by arguing that the lack of racial change in the social context of America meant that “The Black revolution did not happen”, but arguably it did, just over a much longer space of time. Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panther Party fizzled out within ten years, yet the legacy of Black Power is still visible today. Black Americans find themselves ever more able to find expression, an African American is president, and education and job equality exists. Across all forms of media are hubs of ‘black power’, black expression and black nationalism. Angela Davis, a prominent activist during the Black Power movement campaigned just as passionately during the Occupy Wall Street movement. She gave a speech in New York, exclaiming that “you are reinventing our political universe, you have renewed our collective passion, you have reminded us that it is still possible to build communities of resistance,your refusal to assent to class hierarchies, racial hierarchies, gender hierarchies, sexual hierarchies.”[[26]](#footnote-27)William Van Deburg argues that “by decolonizing their minds, cultivating feelings of racial solidarity, and contrasting their world with that of the oppressor, black Americans came to understand themselves better… Black Power’s unconquerable spirit and its message of self-definition are visible to all who take the time to familiarize themselves with contemporary Afro-American culture.”[[27]](#footnote-28)

The Black Power movement struggled both to define itself and to survive outside pressures, born in the rhetoric of Malcolm X and fading slowly with the collapse of both SNCC and the Black Panthers. However in the process it achievedboth popularity among young blacks frustrated with Civil Rights and notoriety amongst white authorities. It was an ideology that was so vast and so vague that it was never truly harnessed for political gain, but its legacy is one which deeply affected the struggle for racial equality across America ever since Stokely Carmichael’s speech in Mississippi.

Word count: 3,000

**Bibliography:**

Asprenger,Franz, review of *Les Damnes de la Terre* by Frantz Fanon, *(*The Journal of Modern African Studies, Cambridge University, 1963

Carmichael,Stokely, *Black power speech*, (Meredith March, Greenwood, Mississippi, 28 July 1966)Accessed from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ed3b7uS3fn8>

Carmichael,Stokelyand Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, (New York, Random House USA, 14 July 1988)

Carmichael,Stokely, *Man Alive: The Black American Dream,* interviewed by the BBC (TV, BBC, 2 June 1971)Accessed from:<http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/black-power-the-march-against-fear-mississippi-1966/5249.html>

CarmichaelStokely,*Interview with Stokely Carmichael*.Interviewed by Judy Richardson (TV, Washington University, November 7, 1988). Accessed from: <http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eii/eiiweb/car5427.0967.029stokleycarmichael.html>

Carson,Clayborne, “Rethinking African-American Political Thought in the Post Revolutionary Era,” in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* by Brian Ward and Anthony Badger (London, Palgrave MacMillan, 1995)

Cleaver, Kathleen and Susie Linfield, *The Education of Kathleen Neal Cleaver*, (Transition, No 77, Indiana University Press, 1998)

Davis, Angela, *Speech to Occupy Wall Street protestors*, (Washington Square Park, New York City, 30 October 2011). Accessed from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HlvfPizooII>

Dierenfield, Bruce and John White, *A History of African-American Leadership*, (Harlow, Pearson, 3rded 2012)

Fairclough,Adam, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York, Penguin Books, 2001)

Foner, Eric, *Give me Liberty! An American History,* 3rd edition (New York, Seagull, 2012)

Newton,Huey, *Interview with Huey P. Newton*, interviewed by Louis Massiah. (TV, Washington University, 23 May 1989)Accessed from: <http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eii/eiiweb/new5427.0458.119hueypnewton.html>

Newton,Huey, *Off the Pigs!*, (TV interview, 1968)Accessed from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDNilKNDMuU>

The Black Panther Party, *Ten Point Program*(15 October 1966). Accessed from: <http://www.blackpanther.org/TenPoint.htm>

Van Deburg,William, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)

Young,Andrew, *Man Alive: The Black American Dream,* interviewed by the BBC (TV, BBC, 2 June 1971) Accessed from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/black-power-the-march-against-fear-mississippi-1966/5249.html>

Young,Andrew, *An Easy Burden: Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America*, (New York, HarperCollins, 1997)

1. Eric Foner, *Give me Liberty! An American History,* 3rd ed (New York, Seagull, 2012) 978. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York, Penguin Books, 2001) 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Bruce Dierenfield and John White, *A History of African-American Leadership*, 3rded(Harlow, Pearson, 2012) 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Stokely Carmichael,*Interview with Stokely Carmichael*. Interviewed by Judy Richardson, (TV, Washington University, November 7, 1988), question 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Stokely Carmichael, *Black power*, (Meredith March, Greenwood, Mississippi, 28 July 1966) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Stokely Carmichael, *Man Alive: The Black American Dream,* interviewed by the BBC (TV, BBC, 2 June 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Stokely Carmichael & Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, (New York, Random House USA, 14 July 1988) 44-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Carmichael, *Black Power,* 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Carmichael, *Black Power*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Carmichael, as interviewed by Judy Richardson, q34. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Carmichael, *Black Power*, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Franz Asprenger, review of *Les Damnes de la Terre* by Frantz Fanon,  *(*The Journal of Modern African Studies, Cambridge University, 1963) 403-405. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 317. The Black Panther Party, *Ten Point Program*(15 October 1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Huey Newton, *Off the Pigs!*(TV interview, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Huey Newton, *Interview with Huey P. Newton*, interviewed by Louis Massiah (TV, Washington University, 23 May 1989) Q12. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Kathleen Cleaver and Susie Linfield, *The Education of Kathleen Neal Cleaver*, (Transition, No 77, Indiana University Press, 1998) 4-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Carmichael, *Interview*, Q64. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Huey Newton, *Interview with Huey P Newton*, Q24. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Andrew Young, *Man Alive: The Black American Dream,* interviewed by the BBC (TV, BBC, 2 June 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York, HarperCollins, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Clayborne Carson, “Rethinking African-American Political Thought in the Post Revolutionary Era,” in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* by Brian Ward and Anthony Badger (London, Palgrave MacMillan, 1995) 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Angela Davis, *Speech to Occupy Wall Street protestors*, (Washington Square Park, New York City, 30 October 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 306-07. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)