



The Role of Government in the Black Power Movement

Stacy Litz

Throughout the course “the History of the Black Power Movement,” students were taught through the readings and historian speakers of the many political organizations that work within the government to create change for equality and more freedom for those who have been persecuted for the color of their skin. This follows in the same school of thought that is usually taught in academics, spouting big government compromises that “fix” problems that were only propped up in the first place by government-based laws and policies. This does not seem like a sensible solution and with enough analysis proves to only continue the inequality or cause it to form in other groups of people. While the majority of the black power movement was fueled by working through the government or seeking goals that would establish a stronger and bigger government power, there is evidence that subsidizing poverty, affirmative action, ending capitalism and other acts of a socialistic government would do the opposite of support equality and neglect to strike the root of inequality in America.

Individualism is the main philosophy that pertains to this research paper, which is the idea that humans are all sovereign beings and it emphasizes ideas such as personal responsibility, self ownership and the non-aggression principle. In reference to diversity, individual is the smallest minority, and to quote the philosopher Ayn Rand, “The smallest minority on earth is the individual. Those who deny individual rights cannot claim to be defenders of minorities.” Looking beyond collective groups can be difficult after being trained for centuries to look upon humans as the government does, as black, white, women, men, rich, poor, and so on, and then establishing some sort of control over those groups, which then becomes the status quo of the country to follow. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his “I have a Dream” speech, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” While skin color is a collective trait that *does* exist, not all people of the same skin color are the same person. Therefore, the “content of their character” is on an individual level, which is unique of all people.

Alex Haley, author of *Roots*, said in an interview, “Phrases like ‘you people,’ we hear a lot, and we boil inside. We may not say it, but I get sick of people talking about ‘my people,’ like there are twenty-eight million of us who think alike and act alike, when actually we are as diverse as any group of people on the face of earth. ‘What do ‘you

people' want?' It's what I call the 'pronoun people' we're not regarded as people, but as a thing." Collectivism is an issue in stereotyping and prevents people to think on an individual level – which allows for a continuation of possible hatred in belief systems. Haley even uses "we" often in his quote, being collective himself, but it is quite difficult to be a perfect individualist; collectivizing is allowed for aesthetic descriptions, but not necessarily for beliefs.

Throughout the course, there were a many examples of individualism being ignored, especially involving women in the black power movement. Elaine Brown, former chair woman of the Black Panther Party, discussed in her book *Taste of Power* how she financially contributed to the cause but was of low rank and was put down often in the Black Panther Party. In historian Peniel Joseph's *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, he mentions how women were disillusioned with the "overly macho" national black power movement and created their own black feminist organization in response. The rights of people as people are easily defensible – when people are put into groups, it is much harder to prove worth of arguments without being hypocritical in nature. Equality would mean that one group should not have any power over others, nor should any group receive special treatment by law; fighting for the rights of one group but blindly criticizing another group for doing the same is completely unprincipled and unjustified. The Black Panther Party, due to its group mentality, lacks the ideology that the individual is the smallest majority and disregards the fact that the promotion of the "group mentality" promotes the opposite of equality.

Looking back to past history of America, there is never really a clearly defined answer of what caused racism to occur. The ancient Romans, for example, held slaves just as Americans did, but with one difference – they were of all different skin colors and nationalities. This was simply the way that it turned out in their civilization – which is what can lead us to believe that Americans did not simply choose to take Africans as slaves because of their skin color. There are debatable facts that tribe leaders sold their own members into slavery, ideas that people of darker skin are inferior to those with light skin, the psychological relationship with color, and a whole other slew of information that can be found in any text book that claims to have the answer to the beginnings of racism. Alas, there is only way that these ideas were enforced and propagated into existence – and that is through establishing a law and using force or coercion to enforce certain beliefs. There are many examples of laws that are racist in nature, starting with slavery, such as the Fugitive Slave Laws of 1793 and 1850, which basically turned people into property that had to be properly returned to a master. From the 1880s into the 1960s, a majority of American states enforced segregation through "Jim Crow" laws, which ranged from involvement in marriage to restaurants to hospitals. Many of these laws also appeared to be sexist, as well, such as the law, "No colored barber shall serve as a barber to white women or girls." There were hundreds of these laws that differentiate between individual states in America, making matters more confusing and the endless power over black Americans to seem ever extending into even personal matters of life. The question will remain whether or not these racist factors would exist without a law to enforce it and simply be part of a normal human practice, but looking at other civilizations, it seems doubtful without government enforcement.

Stemming from all the history of racism in America, it usually comes down to pointing

the finger or putting the blame on someone or some entity. Reiterating the research paper's thesis, it seems that groups in support of black power rarely seem to point the finger at the figurative structure of government, but the ever-changing individuals in power who continue on the same warpath that they have in the past in the name of a country or "for the good of all." Figure heads come and go, leaving behind more and more laws and policies pertaining to either creating or destroying racism in America, keeping us at a stalemate that did not have to exist. African Americans are not the only ones affected by the government, but the blame goes to everyone who is a citizen – coming out of tax payer dollars, putting the country into debt and other devastating factors. The idea for reparations is tossed around by black power groups of the past, such as the Black Panther Party and current groups, including the Uhuru group of Philadelphia. On an individual level, it is impossible to be blamed for the past decisions of others, but reparations do just that, forcing people to pay for something that they had no control over. Reparations, directly repaid by the violator, however, are perfectly sensible, but in regards to slavery, it is tough to call a single perpetrator of the matter. Also, it is hard to believe that money could solve the deep rooted emotional damage caused by racism and this use of force may just end up causing even more hate to spawn from an already devastating fact of history. Both African Americans and those forced to pay the reparations would not benefit from this "quick fix" of the past, haunting history of slavery – and again, this does not strike the root of the issue and only trims the branches.

After surviving through racist laws and developing a culture around it that continues to this day, there seems to be an obvious link in America to poverty and skin color – but its roots go farther than just blaming it on the past. In 2006, only 8.2 percent of whites were in poverty, compared to the 24.2 percent of African Americans. Currently, there are many factors in play that keep the poor in a state of poverty concerning the government, and a few will be mentioned in this research paper. For example, the cigarette tax has skyrocketed in the past year, claiming to be a possible deterrent from smoking. However, the largest percentage of people who smoke are the poor, and according to a Gallup survey 34% of adult smokers make \$6,000-\$11,999 annual income while only 16% of smokers are in the \$60,000-\$89,999 range. Along with tobacco, the umbrella of the American "war on drugs" has definitely negatively impacted the African American community. Drug Policy Network Alliance states, "Although African Americans comprise only 12.2 percent of the population and 13 percent of drug users, they make up 38 percent of those arrested for drug offenses and 59 percent of those convicted of drug offenses causing critics to call the war on drugs the 'New Jim Crow.' The higher arrest rates for African Americans and Latinos do not reflect a higher abuse rate in these communities but rather a law enforcement emphasis on inner city areas where drug use and sales are more likely to take place in open-air drug markets where treatment resources are scarce."

According to the Cato Institute, eminent domain is yet another government mandate that ends up hurting African Americans, and "some 3 to 4 million Americans, most of them ethnic minorities, have been forcibly displaced from their homes as a result of urban renewal takings since World War II . . . Current eminent domain horror stories in the South and elsewhere are not hard to find . . . the city of Clarksville, Tennessee is giving itself authority to seize more than 1,000 homes, businesses and churches . . . many who reside there are black."

Lastly, another example of the government increasing poverty in America can be that of lottery tickets, which are bought most by the poor. Emily Haisley, who studied the correlation between lottery tickets and poverty for Carnegie Mellon said, "The hope of getting out of poverty encourages people to continue to buy tickets, even though their chances of stumbling upon a life-changing windfall are nearly impossibly slim and buying lottery tickets in fact exacerbates the very poverty that purchasers are hoping to escape." The government taxes any lottery winning over \$5,000, sometimes over 50 percent – so in the end, the poor are losing and the government is winning. Perhaps better methods of gambling to make a profit would be possible, but the government even makes gambling illegal unless approved. Another tax that affects the poor that is looming in the near future of legislation is a tax on soda. Again, this tax hurts the poor, who have higher obesity rates of that of the wealthy. While it is an aim for the government to use these taxes as coercion to stop purchasing these highly taxed products, the companies who make these products have to find ways to still making money around the high costs – and the poor simply continue to buy the products anyway and lose more money. Of course, these taxes of commodities are in addition to taxes on property, social security, city, federal, restaurant and parking tolls. The tobacco, drug war, eminent domain, lottery taxes and other examples are only a few ways that the government attempts to benefit society, but in the end, ends up causing extreme harm.

Poverty is caused by government in America and the African American race is affected the most -- but what can be done to stop this? Lessening the size of government would appear to be the proper answer, but that is not the current response from any political agenda that we see being pushed in modern times. Never has there been a time in the history of America, contrary to popular belief, that there has been a total free market that would be capable of creating charity systems to protect the poor. Throwing money at the problem seems like a more viable option to both the politician and the voter, in fact, America is giving \$294 billion a year into welfare, and it just keeps going up year after year, obviously not amounting to a solution any time soon. As an example of this ideology occurring in the Black Power movement, a few points in the "Ten Point Program" of the Black Panther Party may sound great, such as "free" housing, "free" healthcare, and so on – but what exactly does "free" mean? And are these "free" services *only* available to black Americans within this policy, creating a sense of reverse racism? Big government programs can only contribute to the problem, separating people even more by skin color and feeding the poverty epidemic through fostering aid dependency, keeping it steadily increasing, year by year. America is currently 12.5 trillion dollars in debt – it is hard to believe that it is on the path to success with the current state of affairs. The term that the government uses to deal with inequality to create even more inequality is through this type of affirmative action. This can be expected with the un-free market that currently exists, but is still detrimental to creating true equality in America. On paper, affirmative action seems like a good idea – giving those who are "less fortunate" to make up for it. However, as I quoted King earlier, this does not allow judgment for the content of one's character but just for skin color. According to *the Los Angeles Times*, "The system of affirmative action enables hundreds of minority law students to attend more elite institutions than their credentials alone would allow. Data from across the country suggest that when law students attend schools where their credentials are much lower than the

median at the school, they actually learn less, are less likely to graduate and are nearly twice as likely to fail the bar exam than they would have been had they gone to less elite schools." Affirmative action disregards real evidence of success rates and disregards the basic instinct of competition, proving not to be an effective tool in creating equality.

Capitalism has become one of the dirtiest words in economics in recent history, being shown as being a way to "exploit" workers, pay low wages, provide horrid work conditions and destroy the environment. What is failed to be mentioned in modern, anti-capitalism rhetoric is the difference between free market capitalism and state capitalism or corporatism. "Corporatism . . . It perfectly describes a great majority of our politicians and the infrastructure set up to support the current corporations in the country. It is not just inaccurate to call these people and these corporations capitalists; it is in fact the exact opposite of what they are" (Uygur). When capitalism is described as being free market, it means that there is no political interference involved at all and the market is determined by a supply and demand basis. With a free market, not hiring someone based on the color of their skin would be completely unbeneficial to business, thus would not be proper to undertake as an endeavor. Capitalism does not only "exploit workers," but it creates competition which drives prices down and deters monopolies from forming. There are many state sponsored monopolies in America, such as the United States Postal Service, that lack competition, horrible service and have high rates. Would giving more power to the government for more of these monopoly-like establishments be the ideal solution to the "problem" of efficiency, supply/demand, and competitive prices? Lastly, many worry about the majority of capitalists being racist, but it would make more sense to attempt to change hearts and minds rather than allow these people to be in charge of creating legislation. Most likely racism would not exist on the level it does today if it was not for the past, and if free and voluntary markets existed, theoretically, perhaps America would be more peaceful and prosperous.

Another key philosophy besides individualism concerns a different economic system is the Austrian school of economics, which is almost the opposite of our current economic system, which is known as Keynesian economics. Austrian school of economics supports spontaneous organizing power of the price mechanism, determine that the market is unpredictable and advocate for the laissez faire approach with little or no coercion from government power. When attacking state capitalism or corporatism, it would be similar to attacking the current economic system that supports it – a complex, hard to understand system where few are extremely successful and many work hard to just to get by. The current recession and inflation can contribute to Keynesian economics as well as the private entity of the Federal Reserve, which answers to no one, not even the federal government, and controls much of the monetary supply. Free market capitalism and the Austrian school of economics goes hand in hand, but sadly, this type of system has not had a chance to shine in America – philosophically being known to be of the most popular in promoting freedom. The black power movement most likely does not support the Austrian school because, as I mentioned, it supports "capitalism," defamed by the state, and does not include big government money handouts.

Politics, whether it be coming from the left or right does not make a difference, and in the end the paradigm is simply authoritarian power versus freedom. Even laws with seemingly good motives use force against individuals to help others, if even doing that,

and tend to just counterbalance past laws that have posed problems to an agenda that is usually unknown by the majority of American citizens. Also, in regards to voting, rational ignorance plays a role by single-issue voting, party-line voting, and other habits that tend to ignore a candidate's actual qualifications for the job, increasing the number of issues that a person needs to consider in order to make a decision between candidates, and it often comes down to choosing the "lesser of two evils" in bi-partisan politics. Government often responds to self interested politicians, special interests lobbying efforts, and bureaucracy, and according to James Buchanan, defender of the public choice theory. Politicians do not always support the "common good" and adhere to the will of the people – and it is nearly impossible to elect a politician who is more interested in public interest than self interest. When a few individuals make the decisions of the majority of others, rights are inherently trampled and trouble quickly arises. Fighting the power within the system seems like a practical solution, but many have tried and failed, proving it to be ineffective.

Freedom is not something that should be measured and given only to certain people; it is present in all sovereign individuals as long as they recognize that fact. The black power movement would be rather successful if it moved its forces to rely on one another and not on government powers to make decisions for them – it has become evident that the less government there is, the better. In the end, it can be determined that the human race has grown from poor conditions and it is possible to overcome just about any odds and succeed. The black power movement, if striking the root of inequality in America, could do just that, and hopefully as older generations become new generations, racism in every fashion will dissolve almost completely.

Bibliography

- Amar, Vikram and Sander, Richard. *Does affirmative action hurt minorities?* LA Times. September 26, 2007. <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/sep/26/opinion/oe-sander26>.
- Balko, Radley. *Corporatism, Not Capitalism*. Reason.com. September 24, 2008. <http://reason.com/archives/2008/09/24/corporatism-not-capitalism>.
- Baum, Sandy. *Poverty, Inequality, and the Role of Government: What Would Adam Smith Say?* Eastern Economic Journal, 1992, vol. 18, issue 2, pages 143-156.
- Beito, David T. and Ilya Somin. *Battle over Eminent Domain is Another Civil Rights Issue*. April 27, 2008. http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=9361 (accessed March 18, 2010).
- Brown, Elaine. *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*. Anchor Books, NY. 1993.
- Brunner, Borgna. *Civil Rights Movement Timeline*. <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html>.
- Davidson, James. *The Sovereign Individual: How to Survive and Thrive During the Collapse of the Welfare State*. Simon and Schuster, NY. 1997.
- Eggleston, Andrew. *Slavery = Segregation = Minority = Socialism?*. The Libertarian Enterprise. Number 534, August 30, 2009.
- Fontova, Humberto. *Exposing the Real Che Guevara: And the Useful Idiots Who Idolize Him*. Sentinel Trade, NY. 2008.
- Gaibraith, J. K. *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956.
- Goszkowski, *Among Americans Smoking Decreases, Income Increases*. Gallup. March 28, 2008. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/105550/Among-Americans-Smoking-Decreases-Income-Increases.aspx>.
- Joseph, Peniel. *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*. Holt, NY. 2003.
- Logon, Amanda. *American Progress*. April 28, 2008. http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/04/minorities_economy.html.
- Race and the Drug War*. Drug Policy Alliance Network. 2010. <http://www.drugpolicy.org/communities/race/>.
- Rand, Ayn. *Atlas Shrugged*. Signet, NY. 1957.
- Ross, Scott. *The Roots of Racism: An Interview with Alex Haley*. The 700 Club. http://www.cbn.com/700club/scottross/interviews/alex_haley.aspx.
- Shawki, Ahmed. *Black Liberation and Socialism*. Haymarket Books, NY. 2006.
- Sughart, William. *Public Choice. Library of Economics and Liberty*. 2nd Edition. <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/PublicChoice.html>.
- The History of Jim Crow. <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/home.htm>.
- Hornberger, Jacob. *Health care is not a right. Future of Freedom Foundation*. July 1, 2009. <http://www.fff.org/blog/jghblog2009-07-01.asp>.
- Jaroff, Leon. *Teaching Reverse Racism*. TIME Magazine. April 4, 2004. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,980453,00.html>.
- Uygur, Cenk. *Corporatists vs Capitalists*. Huffington Post. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cenk-uygur/corporatists-vs-capitalis_b_288718.html.

Why Socialism Doesn't Work: The Guide to Why Socialism Causes More Poverty, Inequality and Injustice. Misc. Authors. 2010. <http://socialismdoesntwork.com/>.