

## RETHINKING THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY CAN HELP US RETHINK OUR STRATEGIES IN PUBLIC HEALTH

**W**e applaud the October 2016 *AJPH* special section for bringing deserved attention to the focus of the Black Panther Party (BPP) on public health. The special section reflected on the BPP's use of political theater to challenge police brutality and racial injustice while making the case that its public health legacy has been overshadowed by perceptions that its principal aim was to foment violence. The special section also crucially placed the BPP at the forefront of public health work in the 1960s and 1970s, and identified the group as a critical agent for filling gaps in access to care for vulnerable people.

Two additional points can be made on this topic. First, understanding the BPP's public health activities helps us situate today's efforts to advance health equity. As Mary T. Bassett noted in "Beyond Berets: The Black Panthers as Health Activists," the BPP's "vision hewed closely to the fundamentally radical idea that achieving health for all demands a more just and equitable world."<sup>1(p1741)</sup> The BPP maintained an intellectual and pragmatic awareness of the

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linkages that bind racial inequality, economic deprivation, police and judicial surveillance, and health, linkages that persist today and that many in public health now characterize as social determinants of health.

It is no coincidence that the BPP included free health care for all in its 10-point program alongside demands for freedom from oppression, employment, decent housing, education, and peace.<sup>2</sup> Presciently, it sought health programs that would provide not only treatment services but also preventive services, health education, research, and access to medical information, all of which today represent key elements of the Affordable Care Act and the broader public health agenda.

Second, the BPP's public health efforts tell an important story about demands for social change in this country. Its agenda was a fundamentally American one that invoked the US Declaration of Independence and Constitution,<sup>3</sup> and sought to improve the lives of all citizens. The government responded to the BPP by vilifying and ultimately eviscerating its internal infrastructure. The public, for its part, all too often preferred to dismiss the BPP rather than engage its arguments. We cannot help but hear echoes of this past in many of the public reactions to Black Lives Matter and comparable social movements.

As our country confronts some of the same challenges in this new political era, we would do well to understand and engage with the BPP's platform and achievements. *AJPH*

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### MORABIA RESPONDS

**A***JPH*'s October 2016 special section dedicated to the public health legacy of the Black Panther Party (BPP) has generated tremendous interest—mostly positive, as is the case for this letter. It has undoubtedly provided a new, fresh basis for a critical discussion of this key moment in the history of public health in this country. Much more can be said and hopefully will be said about the BPP, but in their letter, Dickinson-Copeland and Bent Weber stress what is in my view, a remarkable trait of this legacy: the movement originated in the Black community, but its goals were framed in a universal perspective comprising all those who could benefit from reducing health inequities. The claim to global access to care will seem even timelier if the millions of Americans who had finally found a way to care thanks to the Affordable Care Act were to become uninsured again. *AJPH*

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