



An important catalyst for the movement in Britain was the Dialectics of Liberation conference in London, June 1967. This was set up by a number of radical psychiatrists, including R. D. Laing who's more famous for experimenting with LSD in the treatment of schizophrenia. Most of the currents of the 1960s counterculture and anti-war movement were represented: critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, plenty of students, a few Maoists and Marxist writer CLR James, to name a few. One of the future leaders of the Black Panthers in the US – Stokely Carmichael – debated the beatnik poet Allen Ginsberg on the use of political violence.

This debate was, for the sake of this presentation anyway, the most interesting part of Dialectics of Liberation. Carmichael very strongly advocated black people arming and defending themselves, while Ginsberg was opposed to that and much preferred non-violence and, in his own words, 'flower power'. Carmichael saw liberation as needing a coherent strategy with specific objectives, while the tone of the conference was much more focused on self-expression and creating free and alternative spaces

For anyone here who ever attended a General Assembly during the Occupy movement and sat through endless meta-discussions and abstract arguments nominally about tactics, the clash between Carmichael and Ginsberg should sound like a very familiar one. What the Panthers offered black people was a politics that stood up for them and their rights. This was something which other movements and organisations had previously not been able or willing to do.

In Britain the Black Panthers were organised more loosely than they were in the US, functioning more like a network with varying politics, ranging from Black Nationalism to Marxism, but sharing the unifying ideology of Black Power. Ties between the British and the US movements were largely informal, and the US served as a source of inspiration for Black Panthers in Britain. One former Panther Leyla Howe was interviewed a few years ago by Organised Youth, and said that her 'moment of inspiration' came from seeing Huey Newton on TV with a black beret and a gun, talking about black people standing up for themselves.

So that's how the movement came about in Britain. I'm now going to look at how they operated, especially in London. I'm going to start with one of the major organisations, the Universal Coloured People's Association. This group was a vanguardist and conspiratorial organisation, influenced heavily by Leninism, and led by Nigerian-born playwright Obi Egbuna. Egbuna was arrested, tried and locked up for inciting to murder police, and there's an extensive file in the National Archives on this court case. Much of the evidence the police put forward indicated that Egbuna was the head of a paramilitary organisation. It included a Black Panther oath of allegiance where members were to be willing to sacrifice

