How the Black Panthers helped jumpstart free breakfast programs for kids

Their reputation as radicals made the effort a target of the federal government

Nina Renata Aron Follow
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Black Panthers distribute food in Oakland, Calif., in 1971. (AP/Sal Veder)

"Here are the children, tomorrow's adults," begins the booming voice-over for a 1966 Agriculture Department film. "Tomorrow's doctors and nurses, writers

and lawyers, tomorrow's spaceman."

The film, called "It Happens Every Noon," is full of images of well-kempt teenagers eating sandwiches and sipping from cartons of milk and saccharine testimonials by the directors of school lunch programs in urban and rural settings. It was intended as a celebration of the federal free lunch program, which was initiated in 1946 to serve "nutritious, attractive, and well-balanced" meals to children who might otherwise not have access to healthy food. "What better use of our cultural riches than the school lunch?" asks the film.

In 1966, the year the film was made, the USDA began a pilot program to offer free breakfast to school-age children as well. At the time, the free lunch program was serving a little over one-third of the country's enrolled public school students. The move to expand the program to include breakfast was based on a growing body of research suggesting that children who went to school hungry performed poorly. It was part of the Child Nutrition Act, and it wasn't meant to be particularly radical.

But, as David Hilliard, former chief of staff of the Black Panther Party, put it, "Food is a very basic necessity, and it's the stuff that revolutions are made of." The rollout of the government's food program coincided with the Black Panthers' Free Breakfast Program, which focused on feeding chronically underserved African American children from urban neighborhoods.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in 1966, primarily as a means of "policing the police," who regularly committed acts of brutality against black Americans with total impunity. But the party quickly expanded to include "survival programs" like the free breakfast initiative. It was just one of more than 60 programs designed to build what they called "revolutionary intercommunalism" and to strengthen community institutions beginning at the level of daily life. Some even think the federal government was taking cues from the Panthers. "I really do believe that the government [expanded] their program because of the work we were doing," former Black Panther member Norma Amour Mtume told *Eater* in 2016. By 1969, the Panthers were serving breakfast to about 20,000 children in 19 cities around the country. The meal often included eggs, bacon, grits, and toast.

This was happening in the midst of the federal government's War on Poverty, which was supposed to be bringing relief to low-income families but was criticized by many (including Martin Luther King Jr.) for being carried out piecemeal and having only minor success in offsetting poverty in heavily African American areas.

The Free Breakfast Program was one of dozens of social programs the Black Panthers implemented to raise the standard of living for black Americans. It also had the unintended consequence of shifting the gender dynamics within the organization itself, which had been fairly traditional to that point. Elaine Brown, former chairperson of the Black Panther Party, said, "You could have a thousand dialogues on gender issues and you would have never gotten that result faster than you did by saying look, if you love these children, if you love your people, you better get your ass up and start working in that breakfast program."

But the biggest legacy of the Panthers' Free Breakfast Program was the food justice movement it spawned, a movement dominated, according to scholar Garrett Broad, by "grassroots, people-of-color-led groups that are working to promote health, equity, and sustainability through urban food activism." In his book *More Than Just Food: Food Justice and Community Change*, Broad shows that though the food justice movement consists of a diverse range of small-scale initiatives, its goals are broad and surprisingly far-reaching. The activists he studied showed that food-related initiatives "could be used as a tool to develop a set of community-based solutions that might help transform the very political and economic systems that had historically oppressed low-income and ethnic minority communities" in the U.S. and around the world.

Food justice as a political movement always had the potential to do far more than simply feed hungry people. At the core of its mission is an analysis of the overlapping systems of discrimination and injustice that produce hunger in the first place. Because the Panthers were better known for their aggressive tactics, which included invading California's capitol building in 1967 and showing up to police emergencies with guns, their public image was menacing. The U.S. government seized upon and exploited the Panthers' most radical actions in order to demonize them. In fact, the FBI mounted its Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) and began aggressively scrutinizing and attempting to dismantle the Black Panther Party; the food program and other survival programs came under attack, too. As Mary Potorti writes in "Feeding Revolution: The

Black Panthers and the Politics of Food," an article in the journal *Radical Teacher*, "Numerous internal memos to and from FBI director J. Edgar Hoover reveal that federal officials perceived the food and other survival programs as a devious, highly effective tactic to divert media scrutiny" and to "win over" potential constituents. They were also likely afraid of a movement that sought to disrupt the white supremacist status quo by equipping black children with the energy to learn about the world around them.

The recent surge of interest in DIY and artisanal food practices has made food justice issues more visible. Most see this as positive. Americans are becoming more likely to buy local produce and support small farmers, and an emphasis on health and well-being may slowly be supplanting our reliance on the corporate purveyors of processed food. Of course, food justice advocates note that from the 1970s until today, the Slow Food and natural food movements have obscured the politics of race and class. In the book *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, A. Breeze Harper writes about the ways that alternative food movements like veganism, as well as the animal rights movement, assume that "race and class are unrelated to food practices." By eschewing race- and class-based analyses in favor of moral arguments, Harper argues, these movements exclude people of color. There are many reasons for this, including the high cost of fresh food in many places; the dearth of healthy food options in impoverished areas (i.e., food deserts), even in major cities; and the education, time, and energy required to pursue major dietary changes.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, where the free breakfast program began, the roots the Panthers planted with their community food programs — which went beyond breakfast to include grocery giveaways and food shopping for seniors — have grown into a thriving, dynamic food justice scene. There are food cooperatives, community gardens, and projects like the Freedom Farmers Market and People's Breakfast Oakland. Many draw a direct line from the Black Panthers through to today. As Adrionna Fike, a member of the Oakland Food Policy Council and a co-founder of Mandela Foods Cooperative, told *Berkeleyside* in 2017, "Behind what they did and behind what we do, is dignity … We want dignified food, dignified relationships with our farmers, with the makers, with the consumers."

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