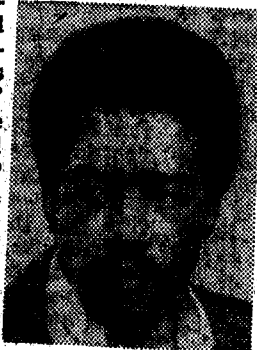


Pink Panthers

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

SEIZE THE TIME: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton. By Bobby Seale. 429 pages. Random House. \$6.95.

About a year and a half ago, I wrote a review in this column praising Eldridge Cleaver's "Post-Prison Writings and Speeches." A howl of protest went up that would have warned Leonard Bernstein of the pitfalls of Kaffeeklatsching with the Black Panthers. Dozens of letter writers wanted to know how I could lavish such praise on a "murderer." How could I even take seriously the writings of a "cop-killer" and "an advocate of violence and race warfare"? These were not all kook letters, either; some of them came from distinguished people who ought to have known that Mr. Cleaver had never killed anyone or muttered a word about race warfare. I was perplexed by the reaction, to say the least. (Remember: This was long before Cleaver surfaced in Algeria and came out in favor of training black guerrillas, with Al Fatah.) To me, the letter writers seemed to be projecting some variety of fantasy onto the figure of Cleaver. But what fantasy and why?



Associated Press

Bobby Seale

Notion of Fighting Back

Well, the most eloquent thing about Chairman Bobby Seale's history of the Black Panther party is that it explains that reaction. By describing the early days in 1967 when Huey P. Newton, founder and Minister of Defense, pored over the laws of California and then armed himself and his associates legally, Mr. Seale touches the bone. The very idea that a black man would carry a gun and say that he intended to fight back if attacked was tantamount to murder and violence in the racist mind. Right on time, certain members of the Oakland Police Department exclaimed, "Niggers with guns! A stop will have to be put to that!" according to Mr. Seale.

But judging from his account, that was the high point in Panther history—that intensely theatrical moment when Newton dared the police to mess with him, and thereby created a myth and an image of manhood that black youths could "relate to" with pride. By Seale's account, the rest has been a history of harassment, false arrests, genocide, infiltration by F.B.I. agents provocateurs, party purges, murderous raids on Panther headquarters across the land, public misunderstandings and the general lowering of the American racist boom.

"Seize the Time" is both a history of the party and yet another event in its history, and a white liberal establishmentarian hardly knows how to respond to it at this late stage. Frivolously? All right: it is

badly written, lacking both Eldridge Cleaver's brilliant rhetorical fire and the irresistible funkiness of, say, a Julius Lester (who is not a Panther). But then, according to the "publisher's note" at the end, the book "derives from tape recordings made by Bobby Seale in the early fall of 1968 and the fall and winter of 1969-1970," and the recordings were obviously made on the run, considering Mr. Seale's hectic involvement with the Chicago conspiracy trial and the New Haven trial for the murder of Alex Rackley, which, Mr. Seale contends, is another frame-up. Moreover, he is not striving for the eloquence of Western Civilization, but writing in the code of "Afro-American lumpen proletarians" and the block phrases of a political ideologue, which is his business and his right, I suppose.

Problem of Interpretation

Or does one treat his book as a fundraising love letter to guilty white liberals? O.K. He convinces us that the Panthers have been misrepresented and misused by the white Establishment, that Huey P. Newton is a genuine hero. But if he is at such pains to clean up the Panther image—to persuade us that the Panthers are into class warfare, not race warfare; that they loathe the cultural nationalists like LeRoi Jones and Ron Karenga; that they are concerned with defense and not offense; and that his own intentions were not to disrupt Judge Julius Hoffman's court, but to demand his constitutional rights; then why does he not once bring up the anti-Zionist poetry that appeared in the Panther newspaper, or Cleaver's advocacy of guerrilla-training with Al Fatah?

Or one can walk the existential tight-rope. Let's accept Mr. Seale's conceit of the American head severed from its body. Let's buy for a moment his images of puritanical, sexless, comic-book-reading white American brains fatally at odds with pagan, procreative, funky black bodies. Assume that he's right when he says you can't sit around theorizing. And believe him when he contends that where the Panthers are really at is in what they're trying to do—feeding breakfasts to poor children, drumming up free medicine and free medical care, registering voters, setting up liberation schools and pushing for community control of police (not Establishment review boards). Well and good, if it all works out.

But the inescapable fact remains that Bobby Seale has written a book, and, by definition, that is a cerebral, abstract undertaking—headwork. And it's filled with revolutionary cant, with echoes of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist dogma, and, worst of all, the sort of sloganeering prose that brutalizes individual consciousness just as badly as 400 years of American history have brutalized the blacks. So the brain and the sensibilities inevitably get engaged. And one wonders: What if the sources of racism are psychoneurotic rather than economic? Is the working class really on the side of the blacks? Are the hardhats ripe for class revolution? Haven't we been down this road before? Isn't this all beginning to sound rather familiar?

Books of The Times

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