**The civil rights movement and the message of the Black Power movement converge**

By Aaron Jura

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s assassination in April 1968 resulted in a convergence of the previously detached civil rights and Black Power movements that had been operating in America since the early 1900s. While the greater civil rights movement and the Black Power movements had commonalities, the approaches to action were often quite different in their scope and rhetorical intensity. The previous narratives within the Black Power movement influenced by Marcus Garvey, the Nation of Islam, and appeals of the Pan Africanist ideals were partially consolidated nationally following the death of King. While King’s assassination may have been the catalyst to action in poor urban communities on a national scale, the message and aim of the Black Power movement continued to be fluid and offered a different critique on the proposals for increased equality.

Beginning in the early 1950s through his murder in the late 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King had become a leader in the civil rights movement both regionally and nationally. King’s message of nonviolence was taken up by organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The philosophy of nonviolence was one that King espoused to act as Jesus would by “facing fear and danger with courage and strength” (Harding, Kelley, and Lewis p. 190). King’s message remained consistent with the fundamental tenants of the teachings of Jesus; however, later in King’s life his message began to shift on a national scale to the plight of the poor in urban ghettoes of America.

By the late 1960s, King’s national message began to shift to mirror the aims and goals of the Poor People’s Campaign. King’s national prominence had also been publically battered during the late 1960s. Dr. King’s critique of the war in Vietnam proved to be difficult to navigate, and King fell out of favor with the White House and other prominent civil rights leaders of the era due to his critique (Harding, Kelley, and Lewis p. 249). While battered, King remained committed to the philosophy of nonviolence and extended this pacifist philosophy to the debate surrounding the U.S. aggression abroad.

During this same time period Black Power activists had been engaged in grassroots activism and resistance to capitalist pressures that were holding back those in the urban communities of color. Stokely Carmichael’s “What We Want” clearly articulates the concerns of the urban poor who had become increasingly frustrated by the institutional nature of racism in the United States. Carmichael argues that acting as a unified community allows black people to leverage their power saying that organizations like the SNCC “must speak in the tone of that community, not as somebody else’s buffer zone” (Carmichael, p 420). He goes on to assert that by speaking in the words they intend and not those the white community wants to hear will solidify black power “as a slogan” and not a divisive philosophy (Carmichael, p 420). Carmichael’s advocacy for black power attacks the narrative offered by the national press and instead focuses the slogan as a basis for significant community building within the black community. Carmichael states that black power grows from the earlier arguments of freedom from oppression in the early parts of the decade – greater representation in power centers and therefore an increased ability to achieve self-determination.

Stokely Carmichael’s argument that America is racist from “top to bottom” is furthered by critiques offered by other Black Power leaders and centers of influence throughout the period. Highlighting the many issues involved with the civil rights versus Black Power movements the SNCC’s Position Paper on Black Power illustrates some of the challenges faced in refining the messaging and goals of the converging movements. The SNCC paper defines the issues facing black Americans and offers a critique that the distrust of even well meaning whites by blacks leads to a type of self-censorship that stymies the progress of the greater community striving toward self-determination. The SNCC paper approaches the topic by arguing that the time for change has come, and that “whites who are sensitive to our problems will realize that we must determine our own destiny” (SNCC, p. 427). The SNCC goes on to say that the “day-to-day life of the ghetto Negro has not been improved by the various judicial and legislative measures of the past decade…” (SNCC, p. 432).

While the SNCC paper, King, and Carmichael may have different in their approaches toward increasing access to equity in American society the war in Vietnam became a major point of where they all seemingly identified the hypocrisy of the conflict abroad. Decrying the irony of the war, Bayard Rustin supports King’s late 1960s messaging on the topic by highlighting the fact that “more money is being spent on the war, while the anti-poverty program[s are] being cut” (Rustin, p. 433). King asserts that the United States is “spending close to five hundred thousand dollars to kill each enemy soldier but spent only a paltry thirty-five dollars a year to help a needy American in poverty” (Harding, Kelley, and Lewis p. 249). Carmichael concludes his *What We Want* editorial by saying, “We won’t fight to save the present society, in Vietnam or anywhere else. We are just going to work, in the way we see fit, and on goals we define, not for civil rights but for all our human rights” (Carmichael, p. 425). While the Vietnam era was a time of convergent views on the state of the black community in America it was also a time where views like those espoused by Rustin and Carmichael seemingly hit home in decrying the irony of fighting abroad for the freedom of an oppressed group only to return to American soil, once again, repressed and resented.

King’s book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* was timely considering the debate that had been raging between civil rights leaders and their experimentation with coalition politics and the Black Power movement’s push for African community building. Following King’s assassination, the narrative commonly asserted by the Pan Africanist intellectuals was further evidenced by colonial conflicts abroad. The war in Vietnam and the support of the American government bolstering the Portuguese colonial hold on Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Angola was viewed by many as further evidence of America’s aim to maintain white control over black communities. Back at home; the inner city communities around America were reeling from racial violence and brutal police interventions (Harding, Kelley, and Lewis p. 252).

The convergence of ideas between the civil rights leaders of the period and Black Power advocates continuing the developing debate between coalition and community based power and politics. Economic policy continued to be a point of contention for many within the Black Power movement and those who continued to support the themes of coalition as the best means for inclusion. Building upon the legacy left by Dr. King, political coalitions such as the Kerner Commission argued for greater support for communities of color arguing that by helping communities of color the political elites could “…shape a future that is compatible with the historic ideals of American society” (Harding, Kelley, and Lewis p. 252). While this approach might have been previously successful, the death of King and leadership changes at CORE allowed for the message to become muddled. Floyd McKissick’s leadership at CORE allowed for the debate over self-determination to become more entwined with the beliefs of the greater Black Power movement. In a speech titled *Why the Negro Must Rebel*, McKissick argues that the tenants of American society are fundamentally unfair and that the deck is always and will always be stacked against black Americans. McKissick says the words of the National Anthem and Declaration of Independence “were never intended to mean anything for black people” further lamenting that the words were “written when we were still slaves” (McKissick, p. 436). These rhetorical shifts in the messaging of the civil rights and Black Power communities further illustrate a coming together of ideas and rhetorical appeals following the murder of King.

The readings associated with Professor Joseph’s engaging lectures on the Black Power movement and modern struggles within the African American community of the United States were engaging and illustrated both the divisions and points of unity between the civil rights and Black Power movements. When comparing the treatments of the primary and secondary source reading with that of the high school textbook of my school I was struck with the level of care the textbook editors put into the framing of the debate between civil rights and Black Power. The textbook offers a stunningly synthesized position of the entire Black Power movement in a short two pages sandwiched between the civil rights sit-ins and the assassination of Dr. King and Robert Kennedy.

The major differences I noticed between the primary and secondary source assigned readings and the textbook were that the textbook very aggressively condenses the Black Power movement into three sections: the SNCC shift toward a more radical perspective, the emergence of the Black Panther party, and the race riots across urban centers in America. This oversimplification of the extent of divergent views within the Black Power movement does not fully allow for the varied internal debates within the variety of groups that influenced the larger Black Power movement. The textbook says, “As Carmichael rose to SNCC leadership, the group became more radical” the book goes on to quote Carmichael’s speech as, “We … want … black … power,” which is obviously an oversimplification of the meticulous message of Carmichael detailed in his primary source (Prentice Hall America, p. 724).

Another departure is the implied connection between the rhetoric of Carmichael and the Black Panther’s aims in New York and elsewhere. The textbook again oversimplifies the message of Carmichael by equating his call to support African American led organizations with the rise of the Black Panther party. The textbook asserts that the SNCC and Black Panthers were both radical groups primarily based on the leadership role of Carmichael this seems to be an issue considering the complexity of the debates within the greater African American community at the time and the changing aims from regional battles to more national battles for economic self-sufficiency.

Overall, the Black Power movement is one that had developed over half a century and had many historic influencers and diverging points of view on what should be the state of the African American community. While many in the civil rights movement worked to increase the legitimacy of African American power in the political sphere many of those now viewed as leaders within the Black Power movement. Although it wasn’t discussed much in the primary or secondary source material the assumption still remains present that the shifting nature of the population during this period also had a very important impact on the rise of the Black Power movement within the urban centers of America. The changing populous and rise of white flight would have forced the African American community to work, once again, as community builders to protect their people from the segregation of the American political establishment and majority population. While the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a profound impact on us as Americans the Black Power movement’s aim toward increased self-sufficiency and greater access to the spoils of American society are important issues that continue to be debated to this date.

**Works Cited**

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