
By Power Possessed

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Comment

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A commentary on Stokely Carmichael's "Toward Black Liberation" in *The Massachusetts Review*, Autumn 1966.

Milton Mayer

MORRIS COHEN of C.C.N.Y. was lecturing at Chicago in 1941 (prior to December 7) and his old friend Irving Salmon (like Cohen a Jew) was giving a reception for him at the University. The small talk was large and loud with the European war. Salmon, a rabid interventionist, was saying, "I just want to bash in a few Nazi heads before I die." "It seems to me, Irving," said Cohen, "that bashing heads is for the ninety-six per cent—not for the four per cent."

Now Stokely Carmichael is not for bashing in heads—though I don't suppose it's excluded, since White Power doesn't exclude it. And I think I comprehend what he means by Black Power. What I don't apprehend is how he thinks Black Power will be come by and what he thinks it will do. His counsel of desperation is no better counsel for being a reflexive response to a condition he and I find unendurable; any more than the starving man's theft of bread is a meaningful attack on *his* condition.

Nor do Stokely Carmichael's references (outside his essay) to Irish Power enlighten me. The Kennedys could shuck their Irish skins—even their Catholic skins, which, incidentally, put them into the 25-30 per cent Power bracket—and emerge as rich and beautiful young Americans with plenty of everything. Rich, young, beautiful—and White. The Negro has plenty of nothing, and when he has plenty of everything—jobs, houses, schools, votes—he will still be Black: the one discernible *other* in a society whose Know-Nothings were never able to close the door altogether against the "Irish." The discriminable Negro is the uniquely irresistible object of discrimination.

The Kennedys represent a majority amalgam of special interests. The Carmichaels represent the Negro (who is poor) and nobody else; least of all the poor White. The Negro's is a special interest in which

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nobody else is interested. His special interest is, to be sure, *intelligible* to a rich society which rocks along without any consuming concern for the common good, but the small special interest (like the corner grocer's) is increasingly inconsequential in the age of amalgamation.

Irish Power never mobilized the white anglo-saxon Protestants, except sectionally and sporadically; and they were so sharply divided among themselves that they could not focus their hostility on the Irish. But Black Power mobilizes the Whites in an ad hoc alliance in which (as is usual in such situations) they sink their differences and gang up. If Stokely Carmichael means to pit the ten per cent's Power against the ninety per cent's, the ninety per cent will be delighted to accommodate him and see what it can do against the ten in a fair and free contest. "It is white power that makes the laws," he says, as if he were somehow arguing *for* his position, "and it is violent white power in the form of armed white cops that enforces those laws with guns and nightsticks."

Let us suppose, contrary to likelihood, that the ten per cent comes out on top in the contest. What will it be and do then? It is not beyond a reasonable doubt that coercive triumph, over the centuries, has improved the triumphant Wasps. Nor has modern triumph over the Wasps much improved the Irish beyond putting lace curtains in their windows. Whatever the Wasps did in their day, the Irish (and the Portuguese, the Poles, and the Patagonians) do in theirs; and this is not necessarily improvement. Socrates, Acton, and Fulbright all seem to be saying that Power is not an unmixed blessing, and the statesman of ancient days said of the horrors of his triumphant Rome, "All that we do, we do because Power compels us."

What makes Stokely Carmichael think that the Negroes will use Power to better advantage than the Whites have been able to use it? I know there is no great point in describing the disappointments of freedom to the untutored slave. But Stokely Carmichael is a tutored slave. He may hope that the Negro would master Power rather than be mastered by it, but his tutoring must have acquainted him with the dictum of Confucius: "He who says, 'Rich men are fools, but when I am rich I will not be a fool,' is already a fool."

I say "would," rather than "will," because I cannot see how Black Power, as I understand it, will come into its own until Blacks are thirty, or forty, or fifty-one per cent of the whole society. It will elect a sheriff where it is fifty-one per cent of the electorate; but there are not many such counties, and still fewer states. White Power will fight for its commercial control of the "inner city"—where the Negro already has fifty-one (or eighty-five) per cent of the overnight populace; and when

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it surrenders what will we have then, except the ghetto unpolluted, with the Negro completing the wall the White began?

The exploitation of the huddled "nationality" neighborhoods, Irish, Italian, Jewish, German, Polish, Swedish, and Bohemian, tore our metropolitan communities to pieces three-quarters of a century ago. Their "leaders" delivered them en bloc to the boodlers and got them a statue of Kosciusko in exchange. Stokely Carmichael has to convince us that his high hope will be realized; that the Negroes will be an exception to the classic pattern and their inner city serve the welfare of its inhabitants and the general welfare on which the particular ultimately depends. It will not be radical idealists like Stokely Carmichael or Martin King who will do what has always had to be done to win American elections. It is much more likely that the present Congressman from Harlem will be the mayor of Stokely Carmichael's New New York.

Stokely Carmichael is righter than he is wrong. Integration does mean what he says it means—the assimilation of the psychologically suicidal Negro into the White man's society on the White man's intolerable and unenviable terms. And he is right in suggesting that the White's guilt is collective—I and all the other "friends of the Negro" have exploited him; and not through our grandfathers, either. We travel as effortlessly as we do because we, not our grandfathers, are riding on the Black man's back.

Stokely Carmichael is righter than he is wrong; but he is mortally wrong. He is mortally wrong because he accepts the White definition of Power and ignores the demonstrable (if mystifying) fact that there is a kind of power that a majority (be it all men but one) cannot handily dispose of. I speak of nonviolent noncooperation, nonviolent resistance, and nonviolent action undertaken in a nonviolent spirit.

Even on the White man's view of power, the Negro may get some mileage out of nonviolence. American society can live easier every year without menial labor, but for a few years or decades yet it cannot live in the manner to which it is accustomed without the Negro ten per cent. They perform its filthiest jobs and return the profit on its filthiest property. At excruciating cost to themselves, but in solid self-interest, they can leave some of its filth unswept and unprofitable. They still have a small margin of muscle in noncooperation, and by muscle I mean nothing more exalted than Stokely Carmichael or the White man means.

But the margin, in a society which cannot employ its Whites, and does not need to, is shrinking. It is the powerlessness inherent in nonviolent noncooperation that the Negro can, perhaps—I say only "perhaps"—turn to account as a peculiar form of power. The Whites are

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guilty. And they would rather fight than switch to expiation. If the Negro can find a weapon that will take the fight out of them, the Whites' only remaining course may be justice, not only for the Negro but for every other oppressed minority.

In his *Massachusetts Review* statement, where he purports to present the essentials of the matter, Stokely Carmichael seems never to have heard of Martin King, or of Greensboro. Or of Rosa Parks—who brought Martin King and Greensboro and *Stokely Carmichael* into being. Rosa Parks had something less than ten per cent of the Power (as Stokely Carmichael reckons it) when she could not bring herself to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery. But without the strange power she exercised that day in 1955, Stokely Carmichael would not have the familiar power he has now.

Her power wasn't Black. It was human (and, for all any of us know, divine by virtue of its being human). It was the power to heap coals of fire on the heads of the Powerful until they would *want* to do differently than they were doing. It was the power of redemption, and it came out of the most impotent segment of American society, the psalm-singing Southern Negro with his childlike power to believe that he would overcome some day. Out of that power came the Movement; out of the Movement came all that came in the next decade; and out of the deliquescence of the Movement, as it went North to the unbelieving Negro, comes the present vacuum into which Stokely Carmichael would proceed with hopeless weapons instead of none. The analogy with India is colossally imperfect, but it has this much application: We do not *know* that the American White man is less susceptible of being civilized than the British were at Amritsar.

Stokely Carmichael pointedly ignores the power that gave him birth, and he divides the Negroes into the unaccepting (like himself) and the acceptable "passers." He cannot possibly be unconscious of the singular phenomenon of our time and of all time—the power of one powerless person, neither murderer nor victim, neither combatant nor suppliant, to overcome; and, what is more, to win supporters from the ranks of the enemy. Until Montgomery nothing else had ever moved the White man's church at all. And without moved and uncoerced allies the ten per cent will never make it in the halls of Congress or the streets of Selma or any other center of Stokely Carmichael's kind of power.

The Movement is failing, if it is failing, because it has gone North, where the Negro is who doesn't see why he, of all people, should have to be better than the White man. The primitive Negro of the South sees why. Washed in the blood of the Lamb, he sees why he has to be

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responsible, not for the Negro, not for the White man, but for Man and the salvation of Man through sorrow and suffering and endurance to the end. But moving mountains is slow going, and Stokely Carmichael sounds like Marx's London businessman who would cut off his own right arm for a short-term profit. The short-term Negro will not even get the profit; he hasn't enough to invest.

The redemptive love to which men are called—and to which the Psalm-singing Negro responded—is not assured of a profit either. Its prospect of short-term success is slight, but the slightest prospect is better than no prospect at all, and Stokely Carmichael's way has been tried (by the White man) again and again and again. It has failed.

Its very failure may be a sign that men are not bad, and that treating them (and oneself) as if they were is therefore inefficacious. "We have repeatedly seen," says Stokely Carmichael, "that political alliances based on appeals to conscience and decency are chancy things, simply because institutions and political organizations have no consciences outside their own special interests." ("Men are bad," says Machiavelli, "and if you do not break faith with them, they will break faith with you.") If Stokely Carmichael is right, his way is no worse than Martin King's, only more tiresome as a spectacle; except that Martin King's is directed to the refinement of our sensibilities and Stokely Carmichael's is not.

The issue between them is the issue of knowing. Stokely Carmichael knows, and Martin King doesn't. Martin King doesn't know what power may be within us, or working through us, or what we can and cannot do. William Penn was the first White man the Indians had ever seen without a gun. He went to them, saying to his followers, "Let us try what love will do, for if they see that we love them they will not want to injure us," and on that occasion, and as long as Penn and his successors governed Pennsylvania, and in Pennsylvania alone, the prospect proved to have been splendidly justified. But it was so slight that it took faith above all knowing.

Stokely Carmichael does not display that faith. For all the good his having become a Southern Negro has done him, he might as well have been a White man. He appropriates the White man's racism as the Black's and adopts the White man's Power without either God *or* the big battalions. So far is he from supposing that there may be an omnipotence which empowers its votaries, that he has got to settle in the end, not for God, or even for man, but for brute. Count clubs or noses—and if men are brutes, it matters not which—coercion carries the day in the jungle. Whoever chooses the jungle had better be a lion.