The Evolution of a Revolution: Stokely Carmichael and the Rhetoric of Black Power

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The unrealistic dreams of perfect social orders that permeate social movement rhetoric heighten expectations and demands that remain only dreams after years of struggle and suffering. Frustration builds within new generations of activists who become increasingly disaffected with social movement establishments which preach uninstitutionalized versions of patience and gradualism. The evolution of a revolution may await leaders who can take advantage of opportunities, recreate and redefine social reality, offer new dreams, and energize a new generation of true believers. Stokely Carmichael's rhetoric of black power can best be understood as a striving for evolutionary changes within the civil rights movement that would replace integration with black power and a passive, common ground rhetoric with a militant, confrontational rhetoric better suited to his generation, growing disaffection with the movement, and the search of black Americans for their African roots. The result would be a more perfect social order for black Americans. **Key words:** evolution, perfection, black power, disillusionment, vision of reality, dialectical tension

During the past twenty years, a growing number of researchers have focused on how the rhetoric of social movements and social movement organizations changes over time in response to temporal changes, changing social values, challenges from within and without, and ideological refocusing. For instance, Charles Conrad studied the transformation of the “Old Feminist” movement from 1850 to 1878 by tracing changes in argument and identifying “a watershed moment” at the 1860 Woman’s Rights Convention “when feminism started to become suffragism.”1 James Darsey studied how the Anita Bryant-inspired referendum against gay rights, the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, the rise of the Moral Majority, and the “scourge of AIDS” served as “catalytic events” that altered the rhetoric of the gay liberation movement from 1977 to 1990.2 My study of the changes in the internal rhetoric of the Knights of Labor from 1879 to 1913 revealed how its leaders attempted to adjust to enormous increases and then decreases in membership, identification with the Haymarket Riot and anarchists, failure of its linchpin cooperatives, the rise of the American Federation of Labor, and the depression of the 1890s.3

While all social movements evolve and adapt to societal changes, significant departures from established movement norms and procedures seldom take place without internal conflict. If a movement evolves gradually over time—from woman’s rights to suffrage, from temperance to prohibition of alcoholic beverages, or from the humane treatment of animals to animal rights, internal conflict may be minimal. On the other hand, the emergence of new organizations, leaders, ideologies, or strategies may generate considerable internal conflict. Fred Powledge chronicles the jealousies, competition, and in-fighting within the civil rights movement.4 The rise of a young Martin Luther King, Jr., his leadership of the successful Montgomery bus boycott, creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, and enormous popularity threatened the status of older civil rights leaders and the principles and strategies of their long-established organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded in 1909, the National Urban League founded in
1910, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) founded in 1942. Similarly, the sit-ins that black college students conducted in South Carolina and the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960 challenged King’s leadership and increased his commitment to nonviolent, civil disobedience as the primary means to achieve integration. Most social movements not only survive internal conflicts but may find them nourishing and rejuvenating. For example, fragile coalitions among competing organizations, leaders, and ideologies may be critical for successful campaigns or to fend off outside assaults.

There are times, however, when internal conflicts differ fundamentally from gradual and peaceful evolutionary changes over time and squabbles over strategies, leadership, organizational policies, turf, or ideological purity. They are struggles from within that reject all that a movement has been, is, and promises to become in its moral crusade to end oppression, exploitation, and injustice. For example, Samuel Gompers led such a struggle within the labor movement when he and his infant American Federation of Labor challenged and eventually replaced the mighty Knights of Labor and its fundamental principle of industrial unionism that admitted all workers to membership, regardless of skill level or trade. Dave Foreman was the chief lobbyist for the Wilderness Society before becoming disillusioned with the slow pace, failures, tactics, and penchant for compromise of the environmental movement. He became a cofounder and leader of Earth First! that rejected the established movement and its principle of lobbying through institutions for acceptable environmental compromises. Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin founded and led the Youth International Party (Yippies) that radicalized and transformed the peace and counter-culture movements of the 1960s. And Stokely Carmichael, the chairman of SNCC, championed a “black power” ideology within the civil rights movement that repudiated the movement’s leaders, organizations, strategies, and emphasis on integration as the means to end oppression and injustice.

I believe Conrad identifies a fundamental cause of evolutionary struggles within social movements when he writes that “Implicit in the origin of a movement are the dynamics of its development and its possible transformation.” Just as societal elements create social movements because of frustration and disillusionment with the failure of institutional establishments to meet needs and rising expectations, so do elements within movements—particularly new generations of activists—become frustrated and disillusioned with the failure of social movement establishments to satisfy urgent needs and rising expectations. The resulting internal conflict is intended to perfect the movement through purges of the movement’s failed leadership, organizations, strategies, and principles. We can understand such rhetorical conflicts best if we see them as evolutionary struggles from within rather than conflicts with external institutions, gradual evolutions from one central principle or goal to another, or new social movements.

The unrealistic dreams of perfect social orders that permeate social movement rhetoric heighten expectations and demands that remain only dreams after years of struggle and suffering. Frustration builds within new generations of activists who become increasingly disaffected with social movement establishments which preach messages of patience and gradualism, the rhetorical staple of the institutional opposition. An evolutionary struggle awaits events that provoke a significant number of movement members to cry “Enough!” and leaders who appreciate the importance of timing, address members’ frustrations, recreate and redefine social reality, offer new dreams, and identify with a new generation of true believers. Stokely Carmichael’s rhetoric of black power
can best be understood as such an evolutionary struggle within the civil rights movement that grew out of increasing disaffection with established civil rights movement organizations and leaders, the philosophy of integration, and passive, nonviolent, civil disobedience that had produced little apparent change after a decade of hope, struggle, and suffering. Black power was not a new social movement but an effort to transform the civil rights revolution to make it more effective and acceptable to a new generation of protestors.

This study provides insights into the evolutionary nature of social movement rhetoric as new generations of leaders strive to adjust ideologies to members’ rising expectations and demands for the long-promised, perfect social orders.\textsuperscript{10} It is based on histories of the civil rights movement, essays that have analyzed the rhetoric of black power, accounts of people who were associated with Carmichael or attended his speeches, essays Carmichael wrote to explain black power, his co-authored book with Charles V. Hamilton entitled \textit{Black Power: The Politics of Liberation}, and six of Carmichael’s speeches delivered to both predominantly white and predominantly black audiences during 1966 and 1967. Part one reviews the growing disillusionment within the civil rights movement during the mid-1960s that set the stage for major evolutionary change. Part two reveals how Carmichael and others seized the moment to instigate evolutionary changes within the movement that had struggled so long to end the oppression of black Americans and attain the justice denied them. Part three describes the emergence of Stokely Carmichael as the charismatic champion of black power. Part four analyzes the conflicting visions of reality presented in the rhetoric of traditional movement rhetors and Carmichael. And part five discusses the dialectical tension that erupted between Carmichael and black power advocates on the one hand and institutional and movement establishments on the other.

Growing Disillusionment Within the Civil Rights Movement

More than 250,000 leaders, members, and sympathizers of the civil rights movement gathered in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963 both to celebrate the movement’s achievements and to demand “Freedom Now!” They applauded and cheered Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and speeches of several other leaders. They cheered and shouted “We demand!” as Bayard Rustin, a founder of CORE and SCLC, challenged them to “carry the demands of this revolution forward,” proclaimed this was a “time for you to act,” and recited a list of movement demands.\textsuperscript{11} And they shouted “I do pledge” to the pledge A. Phillip Randolph, a black labor leader, introduced with the words, “I pledge that I will not relax until victory is won.”\textsuperscript{12} The quarter of a million marchers went home with renewed hope and imbued with a new zeal to achieve final victory.

The euphoria of the massive gathering in Washington was to be short-lived, however. Three weeks after the march, racists bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, a center of movement activity, during Sunday services and killed four young girls. Observers began to detect a “new militance” and disillusionment within the movement after this tragedy and the continuing terror campaign against civil rights workers and supporters throughout the south. During the Freedom Summer of 1964, there were six murders, thirty-five shootings, sixty-five bombings and burnings of homes, businesses, and churches, and at least eighty recorded beatings.\textsuperscript{13} The murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi, two of them white, outraged the nation. In Malcolm
X's words, the dream had become a nightmare. Malcolm X toured the country during the spring and summer of 1964 giving differing versions of "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech in which he addressed the growing frustrations of black Americans with the failure of government, white liberals, the civil rights movement, and integration to bring about meaningful changes for black Americans. A favorite target was the march of the previous summer that he referred to as the "circus" or the "Farce on Washington." In a speech in Detroit, he ridiculed the march and addressed a new generation of activists:

What can the white man use, now, to fool us, after he put down that march on Washington, and you see all through that now. He tricked you, had you marching down to Washington. Yes, had you marching back and forth between the feet of a dead man named Lincoln and another dead man named George Washington, singing "We shall overcome." He made a chump out of you. He made a fool out of you. He made you think you were going somewhere and you ended up going nowhere but between Lincoln and Washington. So today our people are disillusioned. They have become disenchanted. They have become dissatisfied. And in their frustrations they want action. You see this young black man, this new generation, asking for the ballot or the bullet. That old Uncle Tom action is outdated.

As the movement spread to northern states and the ghettos of large northern cities, riots and demonstrations in nine northern cities between July 18 and September 7, 1964 revealed a growing militancy, anger, and despair within black communities and the movement. In August 1964, the Democratic Party convened in Atlantic City and outraged members of the movement when the regular Mississippi delegation was seated in spite of evidence of massive discrimination against black voters in Mississippi and an interracial slate presented by activists. Fred Powledge writes that "The experience of political reality at Atlantic City showed the younger Movement activists, who saw the challenge outcome as a defeat and an insult, just how weary they had become." Disillusionment with movement leaders and their white liberal allies escalateed in March 1965 when participants in the Selma to Montgomery march were beaten and Martin Luther King, Jr. turned the March around a few days later rather than risk bloodshed from heavily armed police waiting for the marchers. Many members of SNCC, who were mostly young and militant, felt betrayed by a movement leadership believed to have made a deal with the Justice Department not to proceed. To them, it was "a sellout." Malcolm X, who had relatively few followers but a powerful message, was assassinated on February 21 while speaking in New York City. The Watts riot of August 11 to 16 shocked the nation and widened the fissures in the civil rights movement, particularly its relationship with white liberals in the north.

In early 1966, CORE and SNCC deepened the fissures within the movement when they advocated armed self-defense and SNCC became an all black organization. There was growing disillusionment with integration as the way to attain freedom and equality for black Americans. Stokely Carmichael became chairman of SNCC and shifted the organization from nonviolent, civil disobedience to more militant and separatist stances, tactics, and demands. In many ways, Carmichael was a mirror image of the young, angry, militant leaders in the student rights, peace, and counter-culture movements of the time. These movements had considerable influences upon one another and were led and populated heavily by young activists who were becoming, in Wilson's words, "tired of being sick and tired." For instance, Mario Savio has been credited with starting the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley, the beginning of the
student rights movement, following a summer in the south conducting voter registration campaigns and freedom schools. Martin Luther King, Jr. was finding it increasingly difficult to convince other movement leaders and members that nonviolent, civil disobedience, and alliance with white Americans were the most effective methods of attaining freedom and justice.\(^{21}\) Growing numbers of militants questioned both the tactics and the goals of the movement. Orde Coombs, a contributing editor of *Essence*, wrote that:

Its members [SNCC] were young, idealistic, brave and very dissatisfied with the older civil-rights leaders. Those men had grown up when lynching was a spectator sport, and they knew the resiliency of American racism. The young thought that commitment, passion and courage were enough to transform their land, and when it did not turn out that way a bitterness began to congeal among them.\(^{22}\)

**Seizing the Moment**

In June 1966 James Meredith, a civil rights legend who had desegregated the University of Mississippi and was now a law student at Columbia University, began a 220-mile pilgrimage across Mississippi to urge black citizens to register to vote and to demonstrate that blacks no longer had to fear white violence. On the second day of his march, Meredith was shot from ambush by a white racist. Although he was not seriously injured, Meredith could not continue, and several civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. of the SCLC, Floyd McKissick of CORE, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the Nation Urban League, and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC, met to discuss continuing Meredith's march for him. Immediate divisions resulted from differences over white participation and the involvement of the Louisiana-based Deacons of Defense who carried guns. In the end, Wilkins and Young refused to take part in the march, and less than 200 people, including King and Carmichael, took up the march.\(^{23}\)

Each evening the leaders of the renewed march spoke at rallies, with most in attendance wanting to see and hear King and Carmichael. The press noted that Willie Ricks, the field secretary of SNCC, was heard to shout a catchy new phrase, "Black Power!"\(^{24}\) The controversial U.S. Representative Adam Clayton Powell had reportedly used the phrase on earlier occasions. Carmichael later admitted that he had intended to introduce the nation to "black power" during the march and was biding "my time till the moment was ripe."\(^{25}\) That moment arrived on June 17 in Greenwood, Mississippi—the heart of SNCC country—when state troopers decided that marchers could not put up their sleeping tent on the grounds of a black high school, even though they had permission to do so, and arrested Stokely Carmichael when he ignored their order. That night's rally attracted some 3,000 people, five times the usual number, and Carmichael was released minutes before the rally began. The pressures for change that had been building for years within the civil rights movement were about to culminate in a significant evolution of the struggle for black rights. According to Cleveland Sellers, a participant that evening and program secretary for SNCC, speeches by King, McKissick, and Ricks "were particularly militant" and set the tone for what followed:

> When Stokely moved forward to speak, the crowd greeted him with a huge roar. He acknowledged his reception with a raised arm and clenched fist. Realizing that he was in his element, with his people, Stokely let it all hang out.

> "This is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested—and I ain't going to jail no more!" The crowd exploded into cheers and clapping.
"The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin us is to take over. We have been saying freedom for six years and we ain’t got nothin. What we gonna start saying now is BLACK POWER!"

The crowd was right with him. They picked up his thoughts immediately. "BLACK POWER!" they roared in unison.

Willie Ricks, who was as good at orchestrating the emotions of a crowd as anyone I have ever seen, sprang into action. Jumping to the platform with Stokely, he yelled to the crowd, "What do you Want?"

"BLACK POWER!"

“What do you want?”

“BLACK POWER!”

“What do you want?”

“BLACK POWER!! BLACK POWER!!! BLACK POWER!!!!”

Everything that happened afterward was a response to that moment. More than anything, it assured that the Meredith March Against Fear would go down in history as one of the major turning points in the black liberation struggle.26

The civil rights movement would never be the same in tone, demands, tactics, and relationships. A new generation of activists, goaded by frustration with the lack of progress for black Americans in the rural south and the urban north and the perceived failure of established movement organizations and leaders to bring about real and lasting changes, was taking center stage and challenging the heart and soul of the movement. As Lerone Bennett writes, “Black power, in essence, is his [Stokely Carmichael] attempt—and the attempt of many who share his vision—to change the dimensions and direction of the civil rights movement and restructure it around new axes and new power bases.”27

No single catalytic or triggering event brought about the evolution of the civil rights movement, but a long series of events, crises, and failures to meet rising expectations fostered by movement rhetoric resulted in widespread disaffection with both institutional and movement establishments. Stokely Carmichael was not the first black leader to advocate separatism, the notions of black power, or the slogan itself. Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Adam Clayton Powell, Eldridge Cleaver, and Malcolm X preceded him, but neither the country nor the movement was ready for their militancy, ideas, and language.28 However, Carmichael was the right person, at the right place, at the right time. He sensed the mood of the movement, seized the moment, and mounted the stage set by others to launch major evolutionary changes in the movement.

**The Emergence of a Charismatic Leader**

Stokely Carmichael was the ideal charismatic leader of the black power struggle within the civil rights movement. He was not an outsider like Malcolm X of the Black Muslims or Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panthers, but an insider as a member and chairman of SNCC who had paid his dues literally and figuratively. He had been active in the mainstream of the civil rights movement for six years, since he was a high school student, and had been in the front lines of sit-ins, marches, freedom rides, and demonstrations, including the Summer Project in Mississippi and the Democratic National Convention in 1964. He was often seen in the presence of Martin Luther King, Jr. He had exhibited bravery and heroism during numerous arrests, beatings, and threats, witnessed the murder of friends, and expected to be killed before he turned thirty.29 When he attacked the old movement to which he had been committed, including its leaders, methods, goals, and achievements, his audiences listened in part because he was a respected veteran of their age speaking from his war experiences and advocating urgent changes
that would bring meaningful results and end their frustrations and disappointments. He had tried the old ways and found them wanting.

Stokely Carmichael’s appearance and dress, in contrast to older movement leaders, exuded charisma with the young audiences he spoke to most often. He was young, tall at six-foot-one, built like a basketball guard, dark, handsome, and virile. SNCC associates dubbed him the “Magnificent Barbarian,” and a writer noted that he was the sculptor’s ideal model for “a statue of a Nubian god.” Unlike the older, more conservative leaders, Carmichael dressed to suit the occasion, sometimes in tee shirt and jeans, sometimes in bib overalls, and when he was giving formal speeches, a blue-gray or dark suit, blue shirt, striped tie, Italian boots, and sun glasses. Carmichael, like many young leaders of the 1960s, understood what his youthful audiences wanted and was skilled at adaptation and identification. Others, such as Willie Ricks and Floyd McKissick, could set the stage, but he was the star performer.

Carmichael’s speaking style differed markedly from the “preacher style” of the older leaders of the civil rights movement. He and others like him were “secularizing” the movement. He was an actor-showman with a gift for histronics. At one moment he was a sophisticated and soft-spoken academic explaining the economics or philosophy of black power; at another he was a poor old southern boy with a southern drawl; at another he was a shouting, threatening militant; and at another he was “imitating the sound of horses’ hoofs, straddling an imaginary steed, bouncing up and down in a simulated gallop” to set the scene of historic conflicts between red men and white men. His audiences cheered, shouted, laughed, clapped, and danced. Larry Richardson compared Carmichael’s style and interaction with his audience to jazz artists, “I think Jazz men perform better when interaction is strong; they will always go ‘one more time’ when the crowd is ‘digging.’ Stokely Carmichael, in my view, similarly elicits overt audience response in the form of applause, laughter, or audience comment, and then he reacts to the response, thereby generating more response.” He brought life, excitement, optimism, and a feeling of involvement into the aging civil rights movement. Expectations could rise again.

Carmichael was a master of adapting language and materials to each audience. Before predominantly white, college student audiences, he might read one of his essays from the Massachusetts Review or the New York Review of Books. Both language and manner would be sophisticated and scholarly and, as a university graduate, he was one of them. Before predominantly black, non-college student audiences, he would employ a hip style of the in-group, speak with a southern accent, and select materials well-suited to their experiences. As a member of SNCC and a resident of Harlem and the Bronx, he was one of them. He identified with the youthfulness of both audiences by attacking the war in Vietnam and all establishments. He pulled no rhetorical punches when discussing the situation facing young black and white Americans and was cheered for “telling it like it is.”

Stokely Carmichael did not create the mood for change within the civil rights movement, nor did he create the phrase “black power.” He did serve as the charismatic catalyst to commence the black power phase of the evolution of the movement. Bennett writes that:

Black Power did not spring full-blown from the head of Stokely Carmichael. It was in the air; it was in the heads and hearts of long-suffering men who had paid an enormous price for minuscule gains. Although other men had used the words Black Power (notably Adam Powell), it was the
genius of Stokely Carmichael to sense the mood gestating in the depths of the black psyche and
to give tongue to it.\textsuperscript{35}

Rebellion had been brewing for some time within the civil rights movement, but
Carmichael had the movement credentials, charisma, following, skills, and determina-
tion necessary to make the rebellion happen. And the timing was right.

Conflicting Visions of Reality

Social movements must persuade a significant number of people that the generally
accepted view of reality—past, present, and future—is erroneous and that major changes
are warranted to bring about a more perfect society, a reality that matches expectations.\textsuperscript{36}
Rhetors who foster the evolution of a social movement, then, must define and construct a
social reality that (1) differs markedly from that maintained by both established institu-
tions and established social movement organizations and leaders and (2) “rings true”
with audiences. Stokely Carmichael’s messages provided this redefinition and reconstruc-
tion of social reality for his audiences in terms and experiences they understood well.

The Past and Present

Carmichael’s rhetoric struck at the foundations of the social reality prevalent in the
civil rights movement and much of society during the mid-1960s, that the United States
was evolving into a color blind society through integration of the races with steady and
substantial gains for black Americans. On the contrary, he claimed, a thoroughly racist
society existed after years of struggle and suffering to gain freedom and equality, and the
black community was the “victim of white imperialism and colonial exploitation.”\textsuperscript{37}
American society remained an exclusive rather than inclusive society and continued to
value property rights over human rights. More than a century after the Emancipation
Proclamation he was still regarded as 3/5ths of a man, Carmichael would exclaim, and
then feign difficulty in saying the word “constitution,” asking audiences to help him
because he could enunciate only 3/5ths of the word.\textsuperscript{38} White institutions and individuals
continued to control everything in black communities, including resources, political
decisions, law enforcement, housing standards, and ownership of land, housing, and
stores. How could black people “make it” in this racist society? “The majority view is a
lie,” he argued, because it is “based on a premise of an upward mobility that doesn’t exist
for most Americans.”\textsuperscript{39} Of the five traditional means that had allowed past immigrants to
make it in America—unskilled jobs, small shops, having money, knowing people, and
being highly educated—the first four did not exist for black Americans and the fifth was a
false panacea because it was getting harder for the poor to get an education. “For the
Negro, there is an additional problem,” Carmichael noted, “He is not psychologically
attuned to think of college as a goal. Society has taught him to set short sights for himself,
and so he does.”\textsuperscript{40} America was now offering a sixth alternative, however, Vietnam.
“This country has reduced us, black people, to such a state,” he exclaimed in Detroit,
“that the only way our black youths can have a decent life is to become a hired killer in
the army.”\textsuperscript{41}

The gains made through the old ways and coalitions were too little for too few.
Carmichael characterized the prevailing vision of social justice through integration as an
“insidious subterfuge” dreamed up by a “tiny group of Negroes who had middle class
aspirations,” “were already just a little ahead,” never wanted to be black in the first place,
and were interested in merely loosening "up the restrictions barring the entry of Black people into the white community." The goals of old civil rights leaders—open accommodations, housing, education, and job opportunities at the executive level, Carmichael charged, were meaningful only to a "small chosen class" of black Americans, the occasional black who had made it. Such goals were irrelevant to the black masses in the rural south and the ghettos of the north. The "dream street" offered under the guise of integration, Carmichael argued, "siphoned off" only the few most acceptable and qualified "individuals" from the black community. You "had to be the best" to enter the white community, the five or six best from each black school, a "tokenism" that amounted to only 6 percent nationwide and 15 percent in the south, while "they leave the rest of our children to stay in the filthy ghettos that they took the money from." After more than a decade of struggling for integration, he concluded, "Civil rights protest has not materially benefited the masses" of black people, only "those who were already just a little ahead." The Future

For Stokely Carmichael, black power was a new day, a new awakening, and a time for a new militancy. "We know what's happening," he exclaimed in Detroit, "Brother, it's 1966 and we been here for years and our eyes are open wide. And we seeing you clear through, and you're nothing but a racist country...." The posture of the civil rights movement was that of the dependent, the supplicant," he wrote in The Massachusetts Review. White America would give nothing away, so black people had to stop begging, stand tall, fight back, stop singing "We Shall Overcome," and "take what belongs to us." It was time to tell whites to "move on over, or we're going to move on over you." In Detroit he exclaimed, "Baby, it's time we stayed here and fight it out here" rather than become a hired killer in Vietnam. "It's time to get some black power," he shouted again and again. To the delight of his audiences at Tougaloo Southern Christian College and Morgan State College, Carmichael declared that we are "going to right wrongs in this generation" and, "Following in Mr. [Frederick] Douglass's footsteps we intend to strike our first blow for our liberation, and we will let the chips fall where they may."

The "liberation" of black Americans and creation of a more perfect social order would come about in several ways. First, blacks had to take control of language and definitions. "It is very, very important," he said, "because people who can define are the masters"; "The power to define is the most important power that we have." White people had used definitions and words to contain the black community. "If we allow white people to define us by calling us Negroes, which means apathetic, lazy, stupid, and all those other things," he warned, "then we accept those definitions." Echoing other movements of the time, Carmichael told his audience at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater that we "shall have to struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves and our relationship to the society, and to have these terms recognized. This is the first necessity of a free people, and the first right that any oppressor must suspend." Carmichael admonished audiences, "don't you ever call those things riots," as white liberals and civil rights leaders did, "because they are rebellions, that's what they are."

Second, it was "time for the black freedom movement to stop pandering to the fears and anxieties of the white middle class ... and return to the ghetto to organize these communities to control themselves." Carmichael challenged black physicians and
lawyers to abandon the big money and prestige they had achieved among whites "uptown" and come back into their communities and use their skills to help the masses of black people. He challenged Morgan State students to "stop being ashamed of being black and come on home" because their parents had not worked hard for years so they "could scrub floors and be Uncle Toms." "Can you be aggressive," he asked, "Or are you afraid?" He tried to shame students into action: "You came here to learn how to help your people of Baltimore in the ghettos, and then you turn your backs on them as soon as you get a chance."

Third, the only way to achieve meaningful and lasting change was for black people to take care of and control their own communities. "Black people must be in positions of power, doing and articulating for themselves," Carmichael declared; they needed to understand that they would have to "go it alone" because that is what they had been "doing for lo these four hundred years." "That's not reverse racism," he argued, "it is moving onto healthy ground." Once black people had gained control of their communities and a power base, they could move to better their schools, "tell everyone in this country that we're not going to your damn war [Vietnam] period," and "if they touch one black man in California . . . we will move to disrupt this whole damn country." Power and control would come through organizing the ghettos. "Can the ghettos in fact be organized," Carmichael asked? "The answer is that this organization must be successful, because there are no viable alternatives . . . And 'integration' is meaningful only to a small chosen class within the community."

Fourth, unlike integration, black power would not abolish the black community but retain its rich heritage. "The racial and cultural personality of the black community must be preserved," Carmichael exclaimed, "and the community must win its freedom while preserving its cultural integrity. This is the essential difference between integration as it is currently being practiced and the concept of Black Power." Carmichael objected to the phrase "culturally deprived" common at the time. Since culture is anything man-made, "How the hell can I be culturally deprived?" he asked. "You deny my very existence, to use that term." He castigated "Negroes" for imitating white society, and explained that "Our concern for Black Power addresses itself directly to this problem, the necessity to reclaim our history and our identity from the cultural terrorism and depredation of self-justifying white-guilt." White society, he exclaimed at UCLA and Morgan State, had censored history and maintained control by making "us ashamed of being black." Carmichael often introduced a syllogism to raise black consciousness and enhance a new self-identity and pride. The syllogism went this way in his Detroit speech:

Sounds a bit absurd; I'm disturbed by a lot of black people going around saying, "Oh, man, anything all black, it ain't no good." I want to talk to that man. . . . There's a thing called a syllogism. And it says like, if you're born in Detroit, you're beautiful; that's the major premise. The minor premise is—I am born in Detroit. Therefore, I am beautiful. Anything all black is bad—major premise. Minor premise—I am all black. Therefore [long pause], yeah, yeah, yeah. You're all out there, and the man telling you that anything all black is bad, and you talking about yourself, and you don't even know it. You ain't never heard no white people say that anything all white is bad. You ain't never heard them say it.

Carmichael's audiences would laugh and applaud with a new awareness and perhaps a new self-image.

If a major criterion for reconstructing and redefining social reality is believability, that the alternative reality "rings true" to audiences and strikes a "responsive chord,"
Carmichael was masterful. He targeted a new generation of civil rights activists who were frustrated with the lack of meaningful social change and disillusioned with the timidity and passivity of older movement leaders who preached patience, caution, and gradualism. He tapped into growing cynicism of audiences by labeling integration as both a failure and a fraud perpetrated upon the black masses by the movement itself. His messages mirrored audience experiences with token integration, white-flight to the suburbs, cautious leaders, growth of the ghettos, poor schools, violence in black communities, low self-respect, political powerlessness, stifled expectations, and the escalating brutality of the war in Vietnam in which black Americans were represented disproportionately.

Carmichael created a symbolic realignment within the movement by replacing words such as Negro, Negro people, ghetto, segregation, and integration with black, black masses, colony, colonialism, and liberation that altered how audiences saw the ghettos of large American cities and American institutions and linked the civil rights movement with the African movements for independence from colonial powers. A minority in this country became part of a worldwide majority. Like other young leaders of social movements in the 1960s, Carmichael understood the importance and power of words, that whoever controls language controls the world. His attacks on the Vietnam War and the cultural imperialism of white society linked black power with the anti-Vietnam War, student, and counter-culture movements. Carmichael understood that the struggle was moving from the rural south to the ever-growing ghettos of northern cities and filled a void long ignored or ineffectively addressed by older civil rights leaders. Black Americans might achieve the perfect society sought for so long if they remained where they were. Carmichael spoke to the black masses in cities such as Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Baltimore rather than black individuals in the rural south and tapped into two slogans prevalent in movements at the time, “all power to the people” and “all power to black people.” He associated “integration” with failure, apathy, shame, begging, tokenism, and subservience and “black power” with real change, commitment, pride, taking, and self-determination—all mainline American values. Above all, Carmichael’s militant black power rhetoric provided his generation with a new dream of a more perfect order (even if an ambiguous one), new hope, a new self-identity, and pride in being black.

Dialectical Tension in the Moral Arena

Carmichael’s rhetoric polarized society into enlightened, young, black militants and everyone else. Unlike traditional civil rights leaders who emphasized the inherent goodness of most white Americans and the essential coalition with white liberals, Carmichael asserted that white Americans see themselves as a “master race,” as “masters of the world,” and “think they’re God.” This white supremacist attitude was readily apparent in actions within the United States, Africa, and Asia, particularly in Vietnam.

But Carmichael’s rhetoric was not aimed primarily at white racists and espousers of segregation, the traditional targets of civil rights activists. His main targets were within the civil rights movement. His harshest rhetoric rained down on the movement’s white allies, the white liberals and modern day missionaries who were allowed to say “only through me shall you have better things.” “That’s what is called integration,” he said, “You do what I tell you to do and we’ll let you sit at the table with us.” If these whites were really interested in integration, Carmichael declared, they would move out of their
white suburbs into the ghettos such as Watts, send their “lily-white” children to overcrowded schools, enroll blacks in labor unions, and “share their salaries with the economically insecure black people they so much love.”74 Even young, northern whites who had risked their lives working for integration and voter registration in the South were butts of his wrath. Carmichael told listeners in Detroit they had “to examine our white liberal friends,” the adults who could afford to come to Mississippi to work for integration because black mothers were cleaning their houses and taking care of their children, and the white, liberal students who could come south because they had plenty of money and were fighting to smoke pot and wear beards rather than for their lives.75 At University of California at Berkeley he asked, “Can the white activist stop trying to be a Pepsi generation who comes alive in the black community, and be a man who’s willing to move into the white community and start organizing where the organization is needed?”76

Well-known, white civil rights supporters were special targets. In Detroit, he called labor leader Walter Reuther “the great white father of Detroit” and the “master-captain-bossman.”77 At UCLA Carmichael called President Lyndon Johnson a “buffoon” and Vice President Hubert Humphrey a “handkerchief head,” a yes-man worse than an Uncle Tom.78

Carmichael’s polarization was not only black versus white but “black” versus “Negro.” He referred to all integrationists and older leaders as “Negroes,” a code name for Uncle Toms who were passive, self-centered, greedy, and ashamed of being black. They were a tiny minority wanting desperately to make it in the white community, to be accepted by whites. They cared little about the black masses. Carmichael noted, for instance, that the president of the black college from which he had graduated was trying so hard to become white that he was now in favor of the Vietnam War; “he’s made it in this society, he’s integrated fully. Let him stay there.”79 Famous black Americans such as Ralph Bunch, Carl Rowan, and George Schuyler were now indistinguishable from whites. He often declared “I’m no Negro leader,” even though he was chairman of SNCC until mid-1967, to disassociate himself from “Negro leaders.” He accused these leaders of allowing whites to define integration as wanting to marry white girls, jumping to deplore violence whenever there was a black “rebellion” (but not white violence), and being more responsible to white political machines than black communities.80 Carmichael and Hamilton wrote in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* that “None of its [civil rights movement] so-called leaders could go into a rioting community and be listened to. In a sense, the blame must be shared—along with the mass media—by those leaders for what happened in Watts, Harlem, Chicago, Cleveland and other places. . . . We had nothing to offer that they could see, except to go out and be beaten again. We helped to build their frustration.”81

What Robert Cathcart calls a “dialectical enjoinder in the moral arena” erupted immediately after Carmichael’s speech in Greenwood, Mississippi and escalated as he wrote essays and spoke throughout the country. Cathcart argues that:

> The enactment of confrontation gives a movement its identity, its substance and its form. No movement for radical change can be taken seriously without acts of confrontation. . . . Confrontational rhetoric shouts “Stop!” at the system, saying, “You cannot go on assuming you are the true and correct order; you must see yourself as the evil thing you are.”82

Carmichael was confronting two systems at once with little rhetorical restraint, the established order and the established social movement. As might be expected, segrega-
tionists and the press reacted in kind to Stokely Carmichael and the militancy of black power advocates. When he spoke in Nashville, Tennessee, for example, American Legion Post 5 denounced him as one of the “warped idiots” who “reek with scum.” The Tennessee State Senate passed a resolution condemning Carmichael for spreading “race hate and incitement to violence,” while the Tennessee House of Representatives adopted a resolution demanding “deportation proceedings against Mr. Stokely Carmichael, who seems to hate this country so much.” When riots broke out in Nashville a few hours after a Carmichael speech, the Nashville Banner declared they were the result of “Carmichael’s devised deviltry” and his speeches of “sedition, insurrection, anarchy, murder, and arson.” The announcer of radio station WKNR’s documentary series “Project Detroit” reflected widespread reaction to Carmichael and black power when he introduced a replay of Carmichael’s July 30, 1966 speech in Detroit with these words: 

Much has been said and written of late concerning the term black power. Originally thrust upon the head of American idiom during the Meredith march in Mississippi, black power has been damned by most, praised by few if any. . . . Most have interpreted Carmichael’s term in basic ways: “the greatest setback for the cause of the Negro and civil rights in this century.” Others, and they are few, argue that all Carmichael means is economic and political power—the Negro population uniting. The controversy continues.

The media highlighted Carmichael’s attacks on white liberals, Negro leaders, honkey cops, the “thalidomide drug of integration,” and apparent threats of retaliatory violence such as “if you touch us with your hand, we’re going to break your arm” and “if you play like Nazis, we’re not going to play Jew this time around.” A study of media interpretations and published reactions to Carmichael and black power led Wayne Brockriede and Robert Scott to conclude that “one meaning and one image thoroughly has engulfed the public mind and has dominated the attitudes of most white liberals: Black Power is violent racism in reverse, and Stokely Carmichael is a monster.”

Carmichael achieved the moral confrontation essential for social movements because he threatened white supremacy, institutional control, and the moderate civil rights movement with which many institutional leaders and members of the media had become comfortable, if not supportive. But this rhetorical conflict was not the typical struggle between institutions and movement; it was a major conflict in the moral arena between established social movement leaders and black power advocates, most notably Stokely Carmichael. He did not try to convert older leaders and followers but to delegitimize them and provoke their retaliation in words and actions.

Established civil rights leaders and supporters could not tolerate Carmichael’s attacks on their integrity and everything they had strived for and attained since the mid-1950s. He was challenging their legitimacy as movement leaders, particularly their abilities to control identification, communication channels, language, and moral suasion. Roy Wilkins, in his keynote address at the NAACP convention, declared: “No matter how endlessly they try to explain it, the term ‘black power’ means antiwhite power. . . . It has to mean ‘going it alone.’ It has to mean separatism. . . . We of the NAACP will have none of this. We have fought it too long. It is the ranging of race against race on the irrelevant basis of skin color.” Vice President Hubert Humphrey, an outspoken proponent of civil rights for decades, exclaimed at the same convention:

It seems to me fundamental that we cannot embrace the dogma of the oppressor—the notion that somehow a person’s skin color determines his worthiness or unworthiness. Yes, racism is
rational—and there is no room in America for racism of any color. We must reject calls for racism, whether they come from a throat that is white or one that is black.  

Even the great conciliator and coalition builder Martin Luther King, Jr. had difficulties with what he saw as a dangerous new slogan for the civil rights movement, even though he understood the growing disillusionment from within. He wrote, "But revolution, though born of despair, cannot be long sustained by despair. This is the ultimate contradiction of the Black Power movement." And in his presidential address at the 1967 convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King proclaimed, "Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout 'White Power!'—when nobody will shout 'Black Power!'—but everybody will talk about God's power and human power."

Racism was the moral ground over which this evolutionary challenge was being fought, and both established institutions and movement leaders painted black power as nothing less than racism in reverse, one evil attacking another evil from which nothing good could emerge. Black power was a dangerous, radical doctrine that would tear the nation and the movement apart. Carmichael and Hamilton rejected the racism in reverse charge as a "deliberate and absurd lie." They argued, "There is no analogy—by any stretch of definition or imagination—between the advocates of Black Power and white racists. Racism is not merely exclusion on the basis of race but exclusion for the purpose of subjugating or maintaining subjugation." "The black people of this country, Carmichael and Hamilton wrote, "have not lynched whites, bombed their churches, murdered their children and manipulated laws and institutions to maintain oppression." The charge of racism in reverse was offered as further evidence of how out of step older movement leaders were with the needs and aspirations of black Americans.

Thus, Carmichael's charisma with militant, young audiences and his confrontational rhetoric provoked the conflict necessary for evolutionary change within the civil rights movement. If as Simons, Mechling, and Scheier claim, a "partial explanation for the success of many social movements" is the opposition they encounter, then Carmichael's rhetoric was doubly successful because it provoked opposition from two establishments, institutional and social movement. Undoubtedly Carmichael gained legitimacy with militant audience members because the movement establishment appeared to be siding with institutions and racists in attacking this articulate, young fighter who was telling it like it was. Simons's observation, that "Whereas the moderate might regard authority figures as 'misguided' though 'legitimate,' the militant would tend to regard these figures as 'willfully self-serving' and 'illegitimate,'" is an accurate description of Carmichael's rhetoric. He succeeded in raising a critical question within the minds of his young, militant audiences: were established civil rights leaders and white liberals, including the President and Vice President of the United States, attacking Carmichael and black power because it was racism in reverse, or were they trying to maintain legitimacy, control of the movement, and put down a dangerous rebellion appealing to a new generation of activists disillusioned with the old?

Conclusion

If Stokely Carmichael's rhetoric of black power struck a highly responsive chord within his targeted young, militant audiences, what happened to the evolutionary struggle preached with such revolutionary zeal? The rhetorical situation that made his
message possible and attractive also mitigated against the massive evolutionary change he sought within the movement. First, the civil rights movement was exhausted and splintered, but in the sweep of history, the struggle for social justice was just beginning. The Meredith march marked the last time movement organizations and leaders united in a demonstration or campaign. Second, the nation’s preoccupation with the war in Vietnam soon engulfed all movements of the time and drained them of energy and support. Third, Carmichael provided abundant symbolic satisfactions but few tangible ideas and no tangible plans for accomplishing societal perfection through black power. What was to replace integration efforts in housing, education, employment, and government? Fourth, Carmichael refused to take on the role of leader, to use SNCC as an organizational and power base, or to create a new organization to carry out campaigns for black power. Like an old fashioned tent meeting revivalist, Carmichael came to town, stirred up a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm, made conversions, and then left for the next town. In his absence and with no leadership or structure left behind, the newly energized and converted soon returned to life as usual. And fifth, Carmichael changed his name to Kwame Ture (after Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Toure of Guinea), chose a larger stage by organizing the All African People Revolutionary Party in 1967, and moved to the People’s Republic of Guinea in 1968. Without a charismatic leader to replace him, the black power struggle within the civil rights movement failed to reach its potential.

The rhetoric of black power was not without evolutionary influences, however. It forever replaced “Negro” with black and African-American. Blacks were more determined than ever to stand up, stop begging, and take what was rightfully theirs. A new militancy replaced passivity and creative suffering as strategies and rhetorical stances. The conflict over black power helped to instill a feeling of pride in being black and in black culture and heritage. The civil rights movement evolved into a struggle of, by, and for black Americans. And the movement became a national rather than a southern phenomenon.

Stokely Carmichael and his rhetoric of black power illustrate that a dynamic similar to that which gives rise to social movements may also instigate conflict within social movements and transform them in significant ways while sustaining the fundamental goals that brought the movement into existence. Years of suffering, crises, and unmet expectations—not a single catalytic event or Stokely Carmichael–created feelings of frustration, disillusionment, and cynicism within movement members and a growing disaffection with older civil rights organizations, leaders, strategies, and principles. Stokely Carmichael was the right person, at the right time, and in the right place to foment an evolution of the civil rights movement. Little in his rhetoric was original, and many of his speeches seem to borrow heavily from those of Malcolm X. But while Garvey, Du Bois, Powell, Malcolm X, and Cleaver, among others, had employed similar ideas, language, arguments, and attacks on both institutional and movement establishments, they were ahead of their time, were not in the mainstream of the movement, lacked an organizational base, or were unable to identify with a new generation of activists.

Carmichael was a master of expressing the frustrations and demands of a younger generation of civil rights activists with whom he identified in age, appearance, manner, language, and ideas. He was one of them and a mainstream civil rights leader who dared to tell it like it was and attack all elements that had formed alliances to espouse
integration and passive, civil disobedience as the paths to a more perfect social order. Carmichael, like many young movement leaders of the 1960s, understood the need for terministic control to achieve a symbolic realignment within both the movement and society. The word black instilled a new identity, pride, and cultural association among black Americans while the word Negro vanished from the American lexicon. The phrase "black power" communicated effectively with young audiences who were demanding "power to the people," while Malcolm X's "black nationalism" had failed to excite a significant following. Perhaps it sounded foreign or extreme to many. Carmichael understood and appealed to the symbolic back to Africa movement, not the literal one espoused by Garvey, among young black Americans who were adopting African names, dress, hairstyles, jewelry, dance, music, sculpture, and language. He offered his generation new hopes and dreams and confidence that they could do what the older generation had failed to do. Black power was not a new social movement but an attempt to achieve an evolution of the civil rights revolution to make it both more effective and palatable to a new generation of activists.

Notes

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9Conrad 297.

10This study also adds to our understanding of Stokely Carmichael's rhetoric in three important ways. First, it reveals that his rhetoric of black power was not original with him but evolved from decades of protest from leaders such as Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois, and Malcolm X. Second, it locates Carmichael as an evolutionary leader within the civil rights movement rather than as a creator of a competing social movement. Third, it supports the claims of Brockriede and Scott that the establishment assumed black power meant violence, that the media presented a partial and distorted picture of Carmichael and his message, and that white liberals and civil rights leaders reacted too quickly and thoughtlessly to the distortions of his speeches and writings. See Wayne Brockriede and Robert L. Scott, "Stokely Carmichael: Two Speeches on Black Power," Central States Speech Journal 19 (1968): 3–13.

11Bayard Rustin, audiotape rec. 28 Aug. 1963, Washington, D.C.


13Powledge 583.


16Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” audiotape rec. 3 April 1964, Detroit.
17Powledge 607.
18Powledge 624.
23Fairclough 314–315.
24Powledge 633.
27Bennett 27.
31Bennett 26.
35Bennett 32.
36Stewart, Smith, and Denton 45.
37Stokely Carmichael, audiotape rec. 24 May 1967, U. of California, Los Angeles; Brockriede and Scott 103.
41Stokely Carmichael, audiotape rec. 30 July 1966, Detroit.
42Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks* 47; Carmichael, U. of California, Los Angeles; Ture and Hamilton 53–54.
43Carmichael, U. of California, Los Angeles; Scott and Brockriede 107.
44Carmichael, Detroit.
46Carmichael, Detroit.
48Carmichael, Detroit.
49Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks* 60.
50Carmichael, Detroit.
51Carmichael, Detroit.
53Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks* 64, 66; Ture and Hamilton 36.
54Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks* 65.
55Scott and Brockriede 99.
56Carmichael, Detroit.
57Scott and Brockriede 108.
58Carmichael, Detroit.
60Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks* 52; Carmichael, Detroit.
61Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks* 52.
62Carmichael, Detroit.
63Scott and Brockriede 110–111.
64Scott and Brockriede 107; Ture and Hamilton 55–56.
Carmichael, Stokely Speaks 73.

Scott and Brockriede 99.

Carmichael, U. of California, Los Angeles; Carmichael, Stokely Speaks 62.

Carmichael, Detroit.


Carmichael, Detroit; Carmichael, Tougaloo.

Carmichael, Detroit.

Carmichael, Stokely Speaks 50.

Carmichael, Detroit; Carmichael, Stokely Speaks 54.

Carmichael, Detroit.

Carmichael, Stokely Speaks 51.

Carmichael, Detroit.

Carmichael, U. of California, Los Angeles.

Carmichael, Detroit.

Carmichael, Stokely Speaks 72, 65, 70–71; Carmichael, Tougaloo.

Ture and Hamilton 50.


Carmichael, Tougaloo; Carmichael, Stokely Speaks 47, 51.

Brockriede and Scott 4.


Martin Luther King, Jr., “The President’s Address to the Tenth Anniversary Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, August 16, 1967,” reprinted in Scott and Brockriede, “Stokely Carmichael” 164.

Ture and Hamilton 47.

Ture and Hamilton 47.

