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Old Wine in New Bottles : The Kerner Commission's Misgivings about Black Power

Amelia Benner
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Abstract

The relentless heat seemed to breed violence during the summer of 1967, as the simmering resentment in the overcrowded ghettos of American cities finally boiled over into the sun-baked streets. Disputes between local residents and police erupted into scenes of looting and vandalism in Newark and Detroit and conjured up disquieting memories of the 1965 Watts riots. Rioting had also taken place in Tampa, Cincinnati, and Atlanta earlier that summer. In July, troubled by a growing sense of urban lawlessness, President Lyndon Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, more commonly called the Kerner Commission after its chairman, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner. Johnson instructed the commission to provide a fair assessment of the tide of racially-motivated violence that was sweeping American cities. Their findings, published a year later, were prefaced with a sobering warning: "Our Nation is moving toward two societies," they wrote, "one black, one white—separate and unequal." This assessment came at a time when white Americans were becoming increasingly concerned by the call for "Black Power," a slogan often associated with militant groups such as the Black Panthers. The Kerner Commission's findings reflect their misgivings about Black Power and their concern that the doctrine would lead to increased racial tensions in American cities and make the goal of integration impossible.

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Black Power was hard to define, but its appeal to African-Americans was undeniable. The Kerner Commission likened it to "old wine in new bottles," and

¹ National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 1.

suggested that “what is new about Black Power is phraseology rather than substance.”²

In their report, the commission attributed the popularity of the slogan to the weakening of the civil rights movement and a growing disenchantment with nonviolence:

Powerless to make any fundamental changes in the life of the masses...many advocates of Black Power have retreated into an unreal world, where they see an outnumbered and poverty-stricken minority organizing itself entirely separately from whites and creating sufficient power to force white America to grant its demands.³

However, black Americans saw things differently. In his 1967 book *Black Power and Urban Unrest*, written in response to the summer’s riots, Dr. Nathan Wright, Jr., defined Black Power in a more positive light: “The thrust of Black Power is toward freeing the latent power of Negroes to enrich the life of the whole nation.”⁴ Stokely Carmichael, who is credited with coining the term “Black Power” during the 1966 Meredith March, called on African-Americans to reject the promises of integration and seek power on their own terms.⁵ But most white Americans shared the Kerner Commission’s mistrust of Black Power, interpreting it as a call to arms against the established social order. The escalation of urban violence at the height of the doctrine’s popularity led many to believe that Black Power was a threat to the American way of life.

The Kerner Commission noted with concern the role of Black Power in the urban riots. They cited the “frustrations of powerlessness” among the causes of the incidents, adding that the “frustrations are reflected in alienation and hostility toward the institutions of law and government and the white society which controls them, and in the

² Ibid., 111.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nathan Wright, Jr., *Black Power and Urban Unrest* (New York: Hawthorn, 1967), 7.

⁵ Stokely Carmichael, “Toward Black Liberation” in *The American Civil Rights Movement: Readings and Interpretations*, ed. Raymond D’Angelo (New York: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2001), 436.

reach toward racial consciousness and solidarity reflected in the slogan ‘Black Power.’”⁶ Interestingly, the report’s only record of the slogan’s use during an urban confrontation is by a child. In New Brunswick, New Jersey, where violence threatened to spread from nearby Plainfield and crowds of angry residents gathered in the streets, a black minister attempted to intercept a group of marching teenagers. Suddenly “a small boy, about 13 years old, looked up at the minister: ‘Black power, baby!’ he said.”⁷ According to civil rights worker Tom Hayden, groups of teenagers in Newark chanted “Black Power!” as they broke shop windows.⁸ These anecdotes illustrate the extraordinary energy behind Black Power; unlike Martin Luther King’s teachings of nonviolence, Black Power had risen beyond a mere civil rights tactic, transferring effectively from Carmichael’s speeches to the streets of Northern cities. Even children knew the phrase “Black Power.”

The commission’s profile of the average riot participant also suggests the significance of Black Power in American cities. The commission rejected the media’s portrayal of rioters as criminals and deviants, depicting the typical participant as a “Negro, unmarried male between the ages of 15 and 24,” working as an unskilled laborer. However, the average rioter was usually slightly better-educated than his peers, and “feels strongly that he deserves a better job and that he is barred from achieving it...because of discrimination by employers.”⁹ But most significantly, the commission found that rioters were more likely to follow current events and were more knowledgeable about politics than many of their counterparts. The average rioter was also likely to be involved in civil rights, but was “extremely distrustful of the political

⁶ *Report*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸ Tom Hayden, *Rebellion in Newark: Official Violence and Ghetto Response* (New York: Random House, 1967), 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

system and of political leaders.”¹⁰ This average rioter, a disenfranchised young man, suspicious of both the white power structure and traditional black leaders, was the ideal audience for Stokely Carmichael’s call for Black Power. Black Power made traditional African-American leaders obsolete and questioned the effectiveness of the existing civil rights movement, just as the commission’s profiled rioters did.¹¹ In his account of the riots in Newark, Hayden noted that although most of that city’s rioters were not actively involved in the civil rights movement, they “liked and understood the slogan ‘black power.’”¹²

The commission also discovered that riot participants subscribed to another aspect of the Black Power ideology: pride in their heritage. Surveys conducted in Detroit and Newark also revealed strong feelings of racial pride and superiority among rioters. One respondent said that when he participated in the disturbances he was “feeling proud, man, at the fact that I was a Negro...I didn’t feel ashamed of my race because of what [rioters] did.”¹³ The commission noted that the typical rioter “takes great pride in his race and believes that in some respects Negroes are superior to whites.”¹⁴ This attitude also aligns with the growth of Black Power, which emphasized black pride and self-reliance. Black Power also rejected the goal of integration, a goal that must have seemed pointless to ghetto-dwellers in the supposedly-integrated North.¹⁵

The Kerner Commission viewed Black Power as a major part of the problem in racial violence. But could it also offer a solution? No, the commission concluded. They

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Wright, *Urban Unrest*, 2-3.

¹² Hayden, *Rebellion*, 16-17.

¹³ *Report*, 76.

¹⁴ Ibid., 73.

¹⁵ Carmichael, “Toward Black Liberation,” 436.

felt that the growth of Black Power would increase racial polarization and create a nation of “two societies.” As white residents flocked to the suburbs to escape urban blight, inner cities were becoming predominantly black. This meant that fewer tax dollars were available to support inner cities as middle-class residents moved away. Urban infrastructure continued to decay, and political power shifted away from the cities along with the wealthier middle and upper classes. Although many black leaders felt that predominantly black cities would lead to increased black leadership, the commission warned that by 1985, the segregated, inner-city black population would reach 21 million, a number larger than the 1967 population of every African nation except Nigeria:

If developing a racially integrated society is extraordinarily difficult today when 12.1 million Negroes live in central cities, then it is quite clearly going to be virtually impossible in 1985 when almost 21 million Negroes—still much poorer and less educated than most whites—will be living there.¹⁶

The commission offered three “choices for the future:” to continue with present policies (which would lead to increased poverty and unrest), to choose a process of enrichment (a process favored by proponents of Black Power), or to integrate. The Kerner Commission saw integration as the country’s only hope; however, they offered few practical suggestions on how to achieve this end.¹⁷

The “enrichment choice,” as the commission put it, would depend on social programs (such as those instituted by Johnson as part of his War on Poverty) to improve the quality of life in the inner city. This strategy, the report claims, aligned with the Black Power ideology in that it would allow African-Americans to gain leadership in their

¹⁶ *Report*, 220-1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 218-9.

communities and make decisions that would benefit themselves.¹⁸ However, the report fails to explain how adding more (presumably white-led) social programs to the existing power structure would enable inner-city blacks to take control of their own futures. The only certain outcome of the enrichment choice was demographical; by funding social programs in the inner cities instead of working for integration, whites would continue their migration to the suburbs while large cities would become overwhelmingly black. “In short,” the report said, “this argument would regard predominantly Negro central cities and predominantly white outlying areas not as harmful, but as an advantageous future.”¹⁹ Many blacks agreed. Civil rights workers emphasized the importance of black leadership in city government and community schools. While “enriching” the ghetto through federal dollars would help, they believed that power was the answer to ending inner-city poverty.²⁰ Stokely Carmichael used this argument to support his Black Power ideology:

...the society either pretends it doesn't know of [ghetto conditions], or is incapable of doing anything meaningful about it. And this resistance to doing anything meaningful about conditions in that ghetto comes from the fact that the ghetto is itself a product of a combination of forces and special interests in the white community, and the groups that have access to the resources and power to change that situation benefit, politically and economically, from the existence of that ghetto.

As Carmichael saw it, poor blacks needed to take control of their own communities because the white power structure could not be counted upon to address inner-city problems.

¹⁸ Ibid., 223.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Rebellion*, 6-7.

Kerner and his fellow commission members admitted that supporters of Black Power did have a point: “It is not surprising that some Black-Power [sic] advocates are denouncing integration and claiming that, given the hypocrisy and racism that pervade white society, life in a black society is, in fact, morally superior.”²¹ However, the commission believed that the “enrichment choice” was impractical and, at worst, dangerous to the country’s future. Increased social programs would cost billions of dollars, and Johnson’s idealistic War on Poverty was already competing for funds with the war in Vietnam. Furthermore, the implementation of these ambitious programs could take years, and the commission regarded American cities as ticking time bombs.²² Finally, the commission believed that integration was the only way to achieve racial equality. To keep blacks segregated in inner cities, even while funding programs to improve conditions in these areas, would be to return to a doctrine of “separate but equal.” If polarization continued, the commission warned, “the Negro society will be permanently relegated to its current status, possibly even if we expend great amounts of money and effort in trying to ‘gild’ the ghetto.”²³

When Johnson created the U.S. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in the wake of the Detroit riots in July 1967, he told the nation, “There will be attempts to interpret the events of the past few days. But when violence strikes, then those in public responsibility have an immediate and a very different job: not to analyze, but to end disorder.”²⁴ The Kerner Commission’s effectiveness in ending the disorder that gripped the nation’s cities is debatable. Its goal of integration has never been fully

²¹ *Report*, 223.

²² *Ibid.*, 222.

²³ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 297.

realized, and urban decay and “white flight” to the suburbs are still issues faced by today’s policy makers. Predominantly black schools still lag behind white schools in test scores and funding, and black citizens still fear police brutality. However, despite Johnson’s insistence that analysis was secondary to finding solutions, the Kerner Commission compiled a reasonable interpretation of the causes of the ghetto riots.

Although many supporters of Black Power insisted that it was not a violent or militant movement, the urban riots of the mid-1960s led white Americans to fear that a new race war was beginning on the nation’s city streets. The Kerner Commission shared this fear, and their 1968 report to President Johnson is evidence of their mistrust of Black Power. The commission continued its pursuit of the traditional goal of the civil rights movement—integration. But the movement itself had changed, and African-Americans no longer felt that integration was the magic solution to the race problem in the United States. Black Power, once an outgrowth of the movement, had become the movement itself as the battleground shifted from the fields of the south to the teeming ghettos of the urban north.