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DONALD J. McCORMACK

Stokely Carmichael is an ex-existential hero, a black man who became disillusioned during the last half of the 1960s with the unrelenting anguish and circumscription of the process of "becoming." Traveling a rather belabored and often tortuous route, he made the intellectual odyssey through Albert Camus to Frantz Fanon and then George Padmore.¹ And comfortably nestled now

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¹ The individual works by each writer which seem to have most impressed Carmichael are: Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1956), Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), and George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*

in the "correct ideology," his clarion voice once again invites black America to unchain itself, this time in a protracted liberation struggle buttressed with the salvatory doctrine of Pan-Africanism. The one time apotheosis of youthful black leadership, still supremely confident in his avowed role as student and teacher of politics, is convinced that this encompassing doctrine provides programmatic succor for the tattered remnants of the black-power movement—indeed for all Africans in the diaspora.

Carmichael's position, and particularly *how* he arrived there deserves careful analysis. Few would argue with the contention that Carmichael was not only a product of, but a leading contributor to, the direction of the black liberation struggle; that his story is not his alone, but "also serves to some extent as a history of the 'Black Movement' during the past six years."² Not much has been said, however, about why "black power" failed to become a political ideology. It is my hope that by probing the detours in his itinerary I may uncover some clues to this failure.

I

This essay will outline and critically explore Carmichael's political thinking as it developed and was modified during his three distinct stages as: (1) existential rebel, (2) interest-group pluralist, and (3) black revolutionary. Prior to the summer of 1966, in the first period, Carmichael voiced the existential sentiment for action in civil-rights activity while disavowing the necessity for an instructive or guiding ideology. The second stage, a short transi-

(London: Dennis Dobson, 1956). Carmichael's admiration for Camus becomes tempered, however, when he concludes that the French writer "cops out" on the issue of the utility of violence. See his speech, "The Dialectics of Liberation" delivered in London during July 1967 in Stokely Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1971), 92. Also, in Carmichael's well-publicized response to David Frost's query about the white man in the world he most admired, Camus is the first name he utters. But, again, Camus is dismissed as having copped out, and Carmichael then stuns the studio audience with his selection of Adolph Hitler as a man to be admired for his "genius." David Frost Show, April 13, 1970.

² See the editor's preface in Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks*, x.

tional period from May 1966 to January 1967, was characterized by his paradoxical combination of rhetoric rejecting American institutions and the promulgation of a distinctly American brand of pluralism. During the final period, post-January 1967, Carmichael's unequivocal conviction of the necessity for armed struggle was crystallized; also, this stage was marked by a shift in emphasis after January 1969 from his concern for Third World solidarity to Pan-Africanism.

More specifically, the aim of this paper is to offer a different perspective on Carmichael's political thought; an assessment which disputes the rather glib and uncritical interpretation that his conversion to Pan-Africanism evolved smoothly and inexorably as the "highest political expression of Black Power."³ Rejected herein is the proposition that Carmichael's sojourns as Mississippi Delta civil-rights activist, as roving ambassador of Third World liberation movements, and as Kwame Nkrumah's apostle were stages of a "logical growth"; that the core ideas already expressed in 1965-66 were merely nourished, strengthened, and brought to fruition under the tutelage received in Conakry, Guinea.⁴ Indeed, the more plausible explanation is that Carmichael's intellectual "growth" came in groping spurts, in an effort not only to blunt the barbs of his critics, both black and white, but even more pointedly to escape the restraints of a self-created, theoretical cul-de-sac. Carmichael's passage to his rather cursory version of Pan-Africanism was not so much a *consistent* refinement of earlier ideas as it was a maneuver to transcend an intellectual impasse, to broach the inherently contradictory assertions that the tactics of pluralism, as he developed them, paved the way to black power and a restructured social order.

³ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴ Carmichael's volume, *Stokely Speaks*, presents in chronological order a collection of his articles and speeches which purport to demonstrate the ideological maturation of the author—"his consistent growth and development as a revolutionary activist and theoretician from 1965 until the present, 1971." *Ibid.*, ix. Yet, the 15 selections appear almost idly, as if in a vacuum. The provision of dates and places of publication or delivery of speeches never anchors them within a firm framework. Presumably a few persistent themes—for example, anticapitalism or institutionalized racism—are supposed to provide the unifying thread, a concatenation which flowers in the conceptual symmetry of Pan-Africanism.

Between May 1966 and January 1967, the period on which the bulk of this exposition will focus, the then touted heir apparent of Malcolm X had painted himself into an ideological corner.

It was a time of transition. On the "Meredith March" through Mississippi the visceral cry for black power became a catalyst for embroiling strong racial passions, immediately galvanizing emotions throughout America. For Carmichael, this period marked an important step in his political growth, a critical hiatus between Camus and Fanon.

II

Before the summer of 1966, Carmichael had often said, ". . . don't worry about ideology. I always say that my work is my ideology. You will find that after you get going your ideology will develop out of your struggle."⁵ He had been the rebel shouting "NO!" And his message for black Americans was simply translated—define yourselves in action. Carmichael had preached the "moderation" taught by Camus: "Rebellion is by nature limited in scope. It is no more than an incoherent pronouncement . . . rebellion is only the movement that leads from individual experience into the realm of ideas."⁶ Or, as Carmichael himself would say, "We don't have any master plans. We just believe in putting power in the hands of the poor and letting them make their own plans."⁷ But it didn't happen; at least it didn't happen soon enough for Carmichael. Action abounded, yet somehow the praxis remained resolutely barren—the realm of ideas lay fallow. Experience, it appeared, might also be little more than a constraint, a prison to

⁵See, for example, the comments made by Carmichael while recounting his experience in the South as a civil-rights organizer. Eldridge Cleaver, "My Father and Stokely Carmichael," *Ramparts*, 5 (April 1967), 12-13. For a glimpse of Carmichael's existential attitude before his "Bible," Camus' *The Rebel*, had been supplanted by Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, see the informative interview Carmichael granted Robert Penn Warren in 1965. Warren, "Two for SNCC," *Commentary*, 39 (April 1965), 38-48. Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1965), 390-404.

⁶Camus, *The Rebel*, 106.

⁷*New York Times*, May 22, 1966, 4E.

obscure one's vision. And Carmichael, apparently frustrated and dismayed, began to take "refuge in doctrine"; he crossed the line from revolt to revolution. He left Camus for Fanon's Third World wars of national liberation.

But one point must again be emphasized. The transition of Carmichael from man in revolt to revolutionary advocate did not become starkly apparent until the summer of 1967—more specifically until his trip to Cuba. In fact, there was a brief interruption in this transformation, a critical and confusing juncture which occurred during the incubation stage of the contemporary black-power movement, the period under discussion here which is roughly bracketed by the Meredith March on one end and the exclusion of Adam C. Powell from Congress on the other.

Between May 1966 and January 1967 the inscrutable slogan "black power," particularly as it was being defined by Stokely Carmichael, stood essentially for the employment of conventional group-theory tactics to attain greater political and economic benefits. Moreover, during this period, the ambiguity of the slogan itself was very much a source of its vitality. In succeeding years, as the impulse to construct an ideology intensified, the ambiguity, once a source of strength, became a distinct weakness. Instead of contributing to a coherent ideological schema, efforts after January 1967 can most generously be described as yielding a proliferation of definitions of the term "black power." And this definitional proliferation which enhanced its ambiguity made the concept of black power vulnerable to rhetorical co-optation by its opponents. Neither Richard Nixon nor Whitney Young, among others, exhibited much discomfiture when, after initial misgivings, they eventually endorsed, if not in fact prescribed, certain brands of black power. (Of course some of the opposition—for example, Roy Wilkins, who withstood several challenges on this issue from within the NAACP—remained steadfast in their repudiation of the concept.)

Thus, to the extent that Carmichael was indeed a leading architect in formulating an incipient black-power ideology, he was in good measure a contributor to the accelerating frustration and futility of the confusing dialogue on black power during 1967-68. Perhaps it is impossible to divorce Carmichael, the civil-rights activist, from Carmichael, the social theorist, but it is doubtful

that the accolades he so deservedly earned in the South as the "magnificent barbarian" were equally warranted for his role as creative political thinker. The bravado, élan, and inspirational courage displayed in the face of personal danger did not infuse his ideas with greater truthfulness.

Before we take a closer look at Carmichael's thinking during this period, one possible source of confusion should be addressed. His first book, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, co-authored with political scientist Charles Hamilton, was published in November, 1967, ten months after the exclusion of Adam C. Powell. Appearing when it did, the book misleadingly contributed to the sense of confluence and continuity in the development of Carmichael's ideas, obscuring the significant leap he had made. History by-passed printing technology. The drama of the Newark and Detroit uprisings had unfolded, the landmark Black Power Conference in Newark had assembled and adjourned, and Carmichael had traveled abroad. When the book was published, it was outdated, for its own author had moved well beyond it. In the Preface, for example, Carmichael says,

... this book does not discuss at length the international situation, the relationship of our black liberation struggle to the rest of the world. But Black Power means that black people see themselves as part of a new force, sometimes called the "Third World;" that we see our struggle as closely related to liberation struggles around the world. We must hook up with these struggles.⁸

At the time of publication, however, this topic, which was not discussed at length and treated only cursorily at best, had become Carmichael's primary preoccupation. In the latter part of January 1967, Carmichael had journeyed to Puerto Rico where he signed a "protocol of co-operation" between SNCC and the Puerto Rican Pro-Independence Movement; later he toured Europe and then visited Cuba. Almost every public speech he delivered during the summer and fall of 1967 focused on his proposed linkage with the "Third World." One of many illustrations was the heralded

⁸ Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1967), x-xi.

broadcast over Havana Radio on the second anniversary of the Watts revolt. In part, he said:

Comrades of the third world of Asia, Africa and Latin America, I want you to know that Afro-North Americans within the United States are fighting for their liberation. It is a struggle of total revolution in which we propose to change the imperialist, capitalist and racist structure of the United States which oppresses you outside and us within. We have *no other alternative but to take up arms* and struggle for our total liberation and total revolution in the United States.⁹

Significantly, the third world liberation struggles mentioned by Carmichael in the preface of his book were quite specifically characterized in this speech as Fanon-like armed struggles.

Interestingly, one indirect consequence of this third world pre-occupation was Carmichael's statement, written in August and inserted in his book on the page preceding the Preface. This statement made the claim that his book presented a political ideology.¹⁰ Carmichael had pointedly written it in response to a James Reston editorial done in Havana while both he and Carmichael were attending a meeting of the Organization of Latin-American Solidarity. Reston had taken Carmichael to task for foregoing the black struggle in the United States and indulging himself in ersatz fantasies of Guevaraesque guerilla confrontations.¹¹

⁹ *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1967, 17. (Italics added.) See also his address, "Solidarity with Latin America," in Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks*, 101-110.

¹⁰ The full statement reads: "This book presents a political framework and ideology which represents the last reasonable opportunity for this society to work out its racial problems short of prolonged destructive guerilla warfare. That such violent warfare may be unavoidable is not herein denied. But if there is the slightest chance to avoid it, the politics of Black Power as described in this book is seen as the only viable hope."

¹¹ A sampling of the provoking editorial follows: "Stokely Carmichael is playing a miserable game down here. He is not only condemning his own country abroad, but he is misleading Fidel Castro and the other revolutionary Communists from Latin America about the condition and power of the Negro in America. The facts are plain. His black power policy has not gained popular support among the Negro community in the United States. He has lost his base as head of SNCC . . . , and he is strutting around Havana as a symbol of the American Negro, most of whom have rejected his leader-

But one need not only compare Carmichael's Third World speeches with the content of his first book. For further confirmation that this book, *Black Power*, reflects ideas articulated in the interim or pre-Fanon period, one should compare it with the major essays he wrote then, between May 1966 and January 1967. A remarkable quality about Carmichael's work at the time is its repetitiveness and redundancy. Metaphors, illustrations, quotations from other authors frequently reappear—often without acknowledgment of prior use—word for word or with slight modification as he restates his position on such basic themes as integration, racial pride, nonviolence, coalitions, and the like. Actually, this repetition is not surprising. During this period Carmichael was an unqualified activist. The potential for retreating to a scholarly refuge was nil. However understandable, his observance of the copyright laws was very casual. The first three chapters of the book are in large measure a patchwork of previously made statements, some used verbatim, others rephrased. The reiteration is particularly evident in chapter 2, "Black Power: Its Need and Substance," probably the most important theoretical chapter in the book, and one which draws heavily, though without acknowledgment, from his landmark articles, "What We Want" in *The New York Review of Books*, September 22, 1966, and "Toward Black Liberation," *The Massachusetts Review*, Autumn 1966.¹² (Both articles are reprinted in his new book, *Stokely Speaks*, the former under the title "Power and Racism.")

Other, more specific passages could be cited. However, the

ship. . . . Carmichael is too intelligent and cynical not to know what he is doing. *He has given up on trying to persuade the Negroes at home to follow his Black Power thesis.*" *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 1967, 36. (Italics added.)

¹² For the flavor of this transplantation, compare page 50 in *Black Power* with the beginning of "What We Want," *The New York Review of Books* Sept. 22, 1966, 5. See also Stokely Carmichael, "Negro Rights and the American Future (A Symposium)," *The Negro Digest*, 15 (October 1966), 57-60; Stokely Carmichael, "Talking About it: Black Power: The Widening Dialogue," *New South*, 21 (Summer 1966), 64-80; John Benson, "Interview With New SNCC Chairman," *Militant*, May 23, 1966, 8; William Price, "SNCC's Path? Carmichael Answers," *National Guardian*, June 4, 1966, 1, 8-9; Kenneth Nordin, "Carmichael Voices Militancy," *Christian Science Monitor*, Sept. 22, 1966, 10.

purpose of such comparisons is not to demonstrate Carmichael's facile literary mileage, nor to record those passages he seemed to feel warranted multiple usage. Rather, it is to fix his first book firmly in the interim period, at least to the extent that the ideas expressed therein reflected his advocacy, at that time, of the group theory of politics. Again, Carmichael had moved beyond his own book by the time it was published. Obviously his progression contributed to the confusion in the ranks of the black-power movement; one recalls puzzled students thumbing through *Black Power* in search of the slogan's essence, trying to penetrate the definitional pandemonium that was to last through 1968. But, the intent here is not to accuse Carmichael of conceptual philandering. Indeed, the argument that Carmichael's Pan-Africanism has a traceable lineage to his earlier doctrine of black power is accepted; what is being questioned is the newfound conventional wisdom that the former is essentially a refinement of the latter. Instead, it is suggested here that Carmichael's doctrine of Pan-Africanism is an effort to free himself from, or at least transcend the *reductio ad absurdum* contained within his group-theory promulgation of black power—race as the determinant of “categoric groups.” What had Carmichael really said in this interim period?

III

In the interlude between rebel and revolutionary, Stokely Carmichael assiduously advocated orthodox Americanism. When he was pressed to define black power and its challenge to America, his response was quite remarkable. In effect, his interpretation of black power carried with it a tacit endorsement of some fundamental premises of American liberal ideology, or what has been most aptly labeled “interest group liberalism.”¹³ If one peels to the core of his initial demand for black power, what stands revealed is not a basic challenge to the American system, but quite ironically a call for more of the same. As the Black Panthers

¹³ See, for example, how this phrase is used by Theodore J. Lowi in his excellent book, *The End of Liberalism: Ideology, Policy and the Crisis of Public Authority* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 68-79.

would somewhat gratuitously charge after their split with Carmichael, he wanted to "fight fire with fire."

Carmichael accepted the group basis of politics. The importance of groups in the social order has long been recognized—exalted by some, damned by others, but usually there as a deified object of continuous speculation. A classic American statement on the subject is the well-known *Federalist No. 10* by James Madison. It is both a descriptive and normative statement. The fact that men combine in social groupings to satisfy wants is recognized, but these so-called "factions" are viewed negatively—as having "adverse" effects on the "rights of other citizens" and on the "aggregate interests of the community." Yet Madison offered advice on how the "violence of faction" might best be controlled. Integral to the solution for this onerous problem was a republican form of government.

Interestingly, Stokely Carmichael, as he worked in the civil-rights movement prior to the 1964 Democratic Convention, was following Madison's counsel. Whether he was conscious of it or not, his efforts in the voter-registration drive were a manifestation of the Madisonian dictum. Broadening the base of the electorate not only enhances the possibility of electing more worthy representatives; even more significantly, it "renders factious combinations less to be dreaded" because it extends spheres. As Madison observed: "Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other."¹⁴ In the South in 1964, republican government was contingent on the response of the Democratic Party; it could have been the vehicle for extending spheres. But it all fell apart in Atlantic City.

The rebuff of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Democratic convention was a pivotal experience for Carmichael, one which should not be underestimated. The deep-felt sense of bitterness, despair, and anger over what he considered an overt act

¹⁴ Jacob E. Cooke, ed., *The Federalist* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1964), 64.

to deprive black people of representative government has been poignantly discussed in his first book, *Black Power*, as well as elsewhere.

After this encounter, Carmichael became a vociferous proponent of a rather conventional pluralism. Groups were a fact of life. But Madison was misguided. One does not control their effects by inhibiting coalescence and group solidarity—the goal of republican government. Just the opposite. Countervailing power is the answer, but the black man must not wait forlornly for it to materialize. Give the “invisible hand” or self-correcting process a black boost. An additional well-organized group or opposing collective is the antidote for mitigating the adverse effects of faction. This remedy is needed because white society, as Carmichael perceives it, “. . . has no intention of giving up willingly or easily its position of priority and authority.”¹⁵ The active pursuit of group self-interest is *the* reality of the social order, and on this point Carmichael is most forthright: “. . . man’s politics is determined by his evaluation of material good and evil. Politics result from a conflict of interests, not consciences.”¹⁶

The essence of Stokely Carmichael’s position after the Mississippi March was the recognition and endorsement of interest-group liberalism. He reminded black people that they “. . . have not suffered as individuals but as members of a group; therefore, their liberation lies in group action.” Yet, he acknowledged that black people must begin with the fundamental task of coalescence, “. . . to consolidate behind their own.” Perhaps no single passage captures more succinctly Carmichael’s message during this period than that in which he first unabashedly lauds the “adoption” of the concept of black power and then casually defines it. “It is a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations. It is a call to reject the racist institutions and values of this society.”¹⁷ Then comes the critical statement, that passage which affords the keenest insight into the thinking of Stokely Carmichael during this

¹⁵ Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, vii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

time of transition: "The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: *Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks.* By this we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society."¹⁸ This premise is basic, underlying Carmichael's ideas; group solidarity is necessary and essential and must be achieved immediately. The then controversial ideas for which he was severely rebuked—for example, the exaltation of blackness, the repudiation of integration and nonviolence, and the criticism of prominent black leaders—were in large measure corollary propositions. Much of the bitter public debate never penetrated these surface arguments. These corollary propositions were, in essence, techniques or the means Carmichael felt to be most effective for achieving the more basic goal of group strength. They were the devices for increasing the size of the group, and for intensifying its cohesiveness or sense of commonality. And a paradox was nourished in the failure by many of Carmichael's supporters as well as his adversaries to differentiate between the substructure and surface argument. In a very fundamental way, Carmichael's ideas were misinterpreted by both sides.

During this period his critics condemned him for allegedly repudiating the democratic principles and goals of the American system. Later, fervent black-power disciples canonized "Saint Stokely" and sifted through his ideas for the key to redemption. They also looked at those ideas he had articulated between May 1966 and January 1967, those statements permeated with rhetoric about rejecting the "basic institutions" of society. Ironically, both sides saw in his ideas a call for the destruction of the American system, although during this period Carmichael was in effect advocating the ultra-Americanism of equality and freedom through interest-group liberalism. With some gratification he had noted on several occasions the new changing mood among black college students who had for too long been "... a conservative group with standard Horatio Alger dreams, imitating white America at its worst."¹⁹ Such remarks were revealing. The avaricious, competitive in-

¹⁸ *Ibid.* (Italics in the original.)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

dividualism which Horatio Alger symbolizes and which Carmichael found so detestable was largely myth. What Carmichael actually relished was the development of a pluralistic Horatio Alger—in black. He sought group competition, but he refrained from condemning this obvious mimicry of white America. Black men must be realistic; they must recognize the path followed by the Irish, Italians, and Jews, and then pragmatically chart their own course. (Carmichael did not transcend the conceptual model of the open, pluralistic society and settle exclusively on the colonial analogy until 1967.) Yet pragmatism can be a subterfuge. It essentially leaves intact the prevailing paradigm of the social order.

Indeed, Carmichael had been extremely uncritical in his endorsement of the group theory of politics; few if any of the underlying premises of this concept were considered. He had championed the group theory of politics although he was apparently unaware of the controversy over the value structure on which this theory is said to rest.²⁰ For many critics, group theory is “subsystem oriented”; it can not handle notions such as the “national interest” or “justice.” In fact, this theory deems that the public interest ineluctably appears through an almost felicitous process of group conflict. Friction is muted because there exists a “habit background” or agreement on the rules of the game, and the byproduct of the competitive process within this framework is the good and just society. Group theory, in other words, favors the status quo at the most fundamental levels. The group theory of politics, or interest-group liberalism, is in one very profound sense the progeny

²⁰ For some respected discussion of this theory, including several critiques, see: Arthur Bentley, *The Process of Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908); David Truman, *The Governmental Process* (1951; reprint ed., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962); Earl Latham, *The Group Basis of Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1952); V. O. Key, Jr., *Politics, Parties and Pressure Groups* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1964); John Kenneth Galbraith, *American Capitalism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1952); Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956); Lowi, *End of Liberalism*; Charles McCoy and John Playford, eds., *Apolitical Politics* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1967); Henry S. Kariel, *The Promise of Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966); Michael Parenti, “Power and Pluralism: A View from the Bottom,” *Journal of Politics*, 32 (August 1970), 501-530.

of contemporary liberalism. Despite a forsaken connotation of atomistic individualism, liberalism has bequeathed to these models its very essence—process. Substantive goals are subordinated to procedure. Its means are in large measure its ends. Group competition has superseded individual competition, yet the “invisible hand” still reigns. (In real terms, of course, the purity of pluralistic competition was defiled. This peculiar “. . . amalgam of capitalism, statism and pluralism” which emerged from the New Deal effected a political equilibrium that was attained at the expense of certain groups, particularly black Americans.)

Even in the abstract, however, could such political thinking be of help to black Americans who were to pose basic questions concerning the substantive nature of “justice,” “legitimacy,” and “sovereignty”? Growing anomie in the black community would precipitate a fundamental questioning of the *ultimate goals* as well as procedures within the American system. Certainly, Carmichael claimed that American society was in dire need of “total revamping.” The unanswered question, then, was how can the process which helped to forge the inequities and perversions of our society also become its savior. Carmichael glibly proclaimed, “. . . while we endorse the *procedure* of group solidarity and identity for the purpose of attaining certain goals in the body politic, this does not mean that black people should strive for the same kinds of rewards (i.e. results) obtained by the white society.”²¹ Carmichael, however, failed to explain how the same procedures would yield different results. At best, he could point to the communal spirit of black people, the spirit which he saw manifested in their references to each other as “soul-brother” and “soul-sister.” While this camaraderie might reflect a qualitatively enriched intragroup relationship, such symbolism offers little hope that intergroup domination and exploitation will disappear, leading the way to a more humane social order.

Furthermore, Carmichael's intellectual legacy contained an additional complication, a dubious caveat which undermined the plausibility of his interpretation of the group basis of power conflicts. He had flatly stated: “American pluralism quickly becomes a monolithic

²¹ Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 47.

structure on issues of race. When faced with demands from black people, the multifaction whites unite and present a common front. This is especially true when the black group increases in number."²²

In short, Carmichael had advocated the pursuit of group action in a pluralistic society although he admitted that the sine qua non principle of the group theory of politics was inoperable; race, in his scheme, was the basis for static, unfluctuating, or "categoric" groups. The flux, movement, or interchange of individuals between groups, which is supposedly a precipitant in the shifting power relationships among these same groups, is terminated. Impenetrable racial barriers do exist. Carmichael turned down a theoretical dead end. The pluralist's contention that society is the "mosaic of groups" which compose it, that society, in the words of a prominent group theorist, is ". . . a single universe of groups which combine, break, federate, and form coalitions and constellations of power in a flux of restless alterations" is denied.²³ The advocacy of solidifying a "categoric" group is at least understandable if the group in question is definitely a majority faction. In other words, this group can expect to secure a permanent position of dominance. But to call, as Carmichael did, for the solidification of a "categoric" group which is, by any standard, a distinct minority, was theoretical suicide. Given Carmichael's premises, one might very well have concluded that blacks—after retreating from the "bargaining process" to become a highly cohesive, solidified group possessing a profound sense of group identity—would find upon their return to the pluralist's arena that they had organized themselves into a permanent niche of powerlessness.

Carmichael, himself, seemed at the time to be aware of this flaw. This cognizance became apparent as he addressed the crucial question of where could the "open society" be successfully breached if, in fact, black solidarity had been achieved. His directive was predictable; political power, particularly electoral power is most vulnerable to the concerted efforts of a cohesive group. Political power held the "key to self-determination," and with it the constraints of economic bondage might be broken. However, Car-

²² *Ibid.*, 70.

²³ Latham, *Group Basis of Politics*, 49.

michael faced a dilemma with his choice of political models—for example, Lowndes County.

Most of his analysis was geared to the municipal and county level, to setting up independent political parties in southern cities and counties—particularly the 11 counties in the black belt of Alabama where blacks in 1966 had a potential voting majority. Furthermore, he was steadfastly committed at this time to majority rule. Carmichael adamantly demanded black political control where black men were in a majority. But if blacks did not have a majority? To this question he offered a reply which was vague and rather inadequate: "Where Negroes lack a majority, black power means *proper representation* and sharing of control."²⁴ This response to a critical problem is fatuous because as one moves from the smaller to the larger political units the chance of fashioning a black majority decreases. Political subdivisions, be they city, county, or even state, do not exist in a power vacuum, but Carmichael was treating them in this way. Seemingly, he desired the analytical luxury of viewing local units as independent, self-contained political fiefdoms. But the problem of power relationships between political units in the federal system was and is a persisting and nagging reality which cannot be simply wished away. When asked in an early interview what he planned beyond Lowndes County, Carmichael replied, "Right now we're concentrating on the county level. I feel strongly about organizing on the local level. *At the state and federal level things get confused* and you have to make too many compromises."²⁵ But it is not simply a matter of confusion or even a question of making compromises. Carmichael was keenly aware that as political boundaries expand, the status of blacks as a minority group becomes more pronounced, or, to be more blunt, Carmichael knew there was an inverse relationship between the size of a political unit and the prospect of that unit ceding to black political control. A few excerpts from his work will help to illuminate this difficulty in his analysis, especially in light of his premises concerning the group basis of politics.

²⁴ Carmichael, "What We Want," 5.

²⁵ Benson, "Interview with New SNCC Chairman," 8. (Italics added.)

At one point, he is discussing the need for independent black organizations, his "rule of politics," and he remarks with some annoyance: "The standard argument presented against independent political organizations is 'But you are only 10%.' I cannot see the relevance of this observation, since no one is talking about taking over the country, but taking control over our own communities."²⁶ He glibly avoids the issue, because the real issue is not whether a nation-wide minority of 11 to 13 percent can take over the country, but whether members of this minority can actually gain effective control even in those smaller political units where they are a majority. It was not a problem completely foreign to Carmichael. Julian Bond, his co-worker in SNCC, was twice prevented from representing his Atlanta constituents in the state legislature. And Carmichael was well aware that a white majority in the state of Alabama had thwarted the potential for black control in Macon County where blacks had become a voting majority.²⁷ Indeed, in the paragraph which follows the above quotation, Carmichael indirectly alludes to this superseding capacity and, in so doing, underscores the weakness of his own assumptions about the feasibility of exercising black control on the local level. He adds:

The fact is that the Negro population, 10% or not, is very strategically placed because—ironically—of segregation. What is also true is that Negroes have never been able to utilize the full voting potential of our numbers. Where we could vote, the case has always been that the *white political machine stacks and gerrymanders the political subdivisions in Negro neighborhoods so the true voting strength is never reflected in political strength.*²⁸

Furthermore, the gerrymander is but one of many techniques the white majority could employ to dissipate potential black political control. Reform of the electoral college (that is, abolishment of the unit rule), "revenue sharing," and the strengthening of regional government are only a few of the devices for undermining what Carmichael refers to as the strategic placement of Negroes—a reference to the growing concentration of blacks in several

²⁶ Carmichael, "Toward Black Liberation," 649.

²⁷ Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, chap. 4.

²⁸ Carmichael, "Toward Black Liberation," 649. (Italics added.)

major cities. The critical question is whether Carmichael's scheme would place blacks in the web of ever-widening, concentric political systems to which whites have recourse whenever their majority is threatened. Again, Carmichael is aware of this difficulty and is flustered by his inability to deal with it, as the following excerpt from a symposium so sharply reveals:

Q: I'd like to ask Stokely what strategy would SNCC take or what would happen to black power if Governor Wallace and his government abolished the county unit . . . system.

MR. CARMICHAEL: Well, it seems to me the question is not: what we will do—the question is what you will do. What will all the freedom-loving people in this country do if he does that?

Q: So, you'd say this would be a crisis?

MR. CARMICHAEL: No, it will not be a crisis because I know what will happen because I'm black. What I'm saying is what will white people in this country do?

Q: I'm asking you what SNCC would do.

MR. CARMICHAEL: What SNCC would do? Well we won't tell you; you just wait and see. The question is not what we will do, but the question that people will have to raise in their minds is if in fact they've let Wallace reign lo, these many years and let Eastland reign lo, these many years and all other racists in government . . . in the democratic system what will they do if he takes a step to abolish candidates who've been elected through *your* democratic process? What will you do to uphold *your* democracy? Not what will we do because there's not much choice for us.²⁹

Carmichael was stymied; his recourse to the all too familiar we-know-but-won't-tell chorus is ill-feigned. His personal jibe at the white questioner is perhaps most revealing of the fragility of his position. Given his premises about politics as the conflict of group interests, Carmichael's question, "What will you do?" is ironic. First, it involves an appeal to conscience which Carmichael had already dismissed as irrelevant nonsense in political affairs. More importantly, his query seems to imply that the white questioner should be antagonistic or at least at odds with Governor Wallace and other "racists" who would tamper with political procedures in order to dilute black political control at the local level. But such an assumption is really precluded by Carmichael's premises.

²⁹ Carmichael, "Talking About It," 71.

The questioner's group affiliation and ultimate loyalty has already been predetermined by virtue of the common characteristic he shares with its other members, whiteness. Carmichael appears to have locked himself into a Calhounesque straightjacket, but he has no key, no doctrine comparable to the "concurrent majority" for escaping the constraints of his minority predicament. Ostensibly, coalitions could have been the device by which Carmichael transcended the minority dilemma. Yet, when he finished laying the ground rules for the formation of "viable" coalitions, it was doubtful that any group was left to coalesce with. The only prospective coalition that Carmichael envisioned as "acceptable to us" was one uniting "poor blacks and poor whites." However, he added the seemingly obvious reservation that the actual prospects for the formation of this coalition in the near future were negligible. It was a "purely academic" proposition. On the other hand, Carmichael also insisted that it is a ". . . fallacious assumption that a viable coalition can be effected between the politically and economically secure and the politically and economically insecure."³⁰ Taken together, these two caveats alone were exhaustive; they precluded the possibility that any coalition would be formed. (Of course, Carmichael's skepticism of coalition formation remains undiminished. When resigning from the Black Panther Party in the summer of 1969 he cited his concern over the Panthers' "pre-mature alliance with white radicals.")

IV

Such was the intellectual legacy left for other black-power thinkers to wrestle with and build upon. Seeking guidance they would turn to Carmichael, but at the nexus of Carmichael's polemical didactics they would encounter a lodestar of considerable confusion.³¹ Carmichael himself, however, simply leaped to

³⁰ Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 80.

³¹ See, for example, the set of resolutions that emerged from the Black Power Conference, held in Newark immediately after the rebellion in that city. One reads the virulent condemnation of the "imperialist government of the United States," and then turns in astonishment to read under the rubric of economic and political development specific proposals which are in essence

the gospel of Fanon after realizing he had been straightjacketed by his own rhetoric. The change came swiftly. First, there was the dismaying election in November 1966; none of the "Freedom Party's" seven candidates was elected in Lowndes County. A month later at SNCC's conference, the factional infighting, normally characteristic of such staff meetings, seemed even more pronounced. Amid the soul-searching reassessments and atmosphere of ennui Carmichael mused aloud, "We're in a bind. How do we program black power?" And then came the unprecedented Adam C. Powell affair in January. It was a watershed for the aspiring architects of black power. They viewed the relative ease with which the rakish, bluntly-defiant Powell was stripped of his chairmanship and then excluded from the Ninetieth Congress. White power was manifest; black humiliation had been guaranteed with the shift to a more encompassing political arena. Despite black control of the eighteenth congressional district, the overwhelming support of Powell in black communities across the nation, and the unconstitutionality of the exclusion, the white majority had its way.

Thereafter, Carmichael sought an inversion of the ill-matched white-black control relationship by extending the arena of conflict; initially there was the reputed solidarity with the Third World, followed shortly by his commitment to Pan-Africanism. Group competition could be internationalized once black Americans recognized the "necessity of hooking up with the 900 million black people in the world today." Once the struggle becomes international, the Achilles' heel in his initial black-power formulation (that is, the positing of monolithic or "categoric" black or white groups) is neutralized, or at least the potential for transcending the dilemma is present.

His advocacy of the Third World struggle and its concomitant wars of national liberation came against a backdrop of flaming American cities; posturing at that time over guerilla warfare was *de rigueur*. But the magnetism of this relatively unfocused doctrine, the extent to which it could win the allegiance of the masses of

based on some fundamental ideological tenets of the American system. Continuations Committee, "Black Power Manifesto and Resolutions," mimeographed, July 1967, 1-7.

black Americans and enhance their group identity was questionable. Pan-Africanism, with the hovering, mystical image of Mother Africa at its core, was another matter. In January, 1969, Carmichael left the United States for a fourteen-month stay in Africa. Most importantly, he had the opportunity to study with Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the man he considered "the most brilliant in the world today." As Carmichael would later recall, ". . . it became clear to me that the black community was heading for political chaos. I knew that I didn't have the answers, so it was silly for me to stay here and keep rapping about what I didn't know. Why should I stay here to get up on television and yell a lot of nonsense? It would only cause confusion in my community. I don't want to do that. Confusion is the greatest enemy of revolution."³²

Shortly after arriving in Africa, Carmichael began voicing his enthusiasm for Pan-Africanism. Within one year, in his first major statement on the subject, he professed his unequivocal conviction that for black people in the United States, "our ideology must be Pan-Africanism, nothing else."³³ In this landmark article and subsequent works on the topic, he outlined an ambitious and long-range blueprint of ultimate goals which certainly raised more questions than were answered concerning the means of implementation. Nothing short of the unification of Africa is the final objective. And by unification he travels considerably beyond a federationist scheme, . . . "you have one state-Africa. Everybody speaks the same language, one government, one army."³⁴ Thus, it is somewhat vexing when Carmichael, to abet his audience in fleshing out the details of his Pan-Africanist vision, refers his readers or listeners to the writings of the doctrine's elder and eminent spokesmen. Usually, he recommends George Padmore's *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* and works by or about W. E. DuBois, Marcus Garvey and Dr. Nkrumah.³⁵ Yet, contained therein, the

³² Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks*, 185.

³³ Carmichael, "Pan-Africanism—Land and Power," *Black Scholar*, 1 (November 1969), 36-43.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁵ See, for example, W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961); "W.E.B. DuBois Memorial Issue," *Freedomways*, 5 (Winter 1965); Edmund Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of*

principles of Pan-Africanism which really have been nurtured throughout this century, retain an amorphous quality; workable solutions for surmounting the very real obstacles to its realization have not been supplied. Carmichael's sole innovation had been the proposal that concrete action be taken to restore the deposed Kwame Nkrumah to power in Ghana. This he believed was the most plausible first step toward the unification of Africa—it would provide a haven, the necessary "land base" from which the neo-colonialist regimes in other states could be expunged. Certainly this proposal was sketchy at best.³⁶ Only the most superficial treatment is given the long list of external and indigenous cleavages which Balkanize and hinder the long sought after dream of unity in the continent. (Some of the enervating divisions surfaced openly in the bitter clashes during the June 1971 meeting of the Organization of African Unity, held in Addis Ababa.) In a sweeping gesture of faith, and in words heretofore uncharacteristic of him, Carmichael prophesies the success of Pan-Africanism because it ". . . is written in the wind—the historical forces can not be

Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955); Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970); Bob Fitch and Mary Oppenheimer, *Ghana: End of An Illusion* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968); James R. Hooker, *Black Revolutionary: George Padmore's Path From Communism to Pan-Africanism* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1967).

³⁶ To date, Carmichael remains publicly silent about Dr. Nkrumah's death and what the absence of the man called "Osagyefo" or "Redeemer" means for his Pan-Africanist blueprint. It would seem that the void left by Nkrumah, who died in exile in April 1972, is one which very much guts Carmichael's program. In part, Carmichael's blithe treatment of the structural and attitudinal roadblocks to Pan-Africanism stems from his preoccupation with the "great man" in history: "We never understand history because history is always moved forward by a single person." Carmichael, "Pan-Africanism," 40. Apparently, Carmichael hoped that in the African continent Nkrumah would play a role placing him on the list of statesmen which includes the likes of Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi-minh, Charles De Gaulle, and Winston Churchill. At the moment, no one has the stature to replace Nkrumah in Carmichael's scheme except perhaps Sekou Touré, president of the West African nation, Guinea. And recently, even President Touré seems to be looking inward, consolidating his position after the abortive invasion attempt by alleged mercenaries and Guinean exiles in November 1970.

stopped." However, if the argument here is correct, then it is not surprising that Carmichael gives such shallow treatment to the very difficult problems impeding African unity.

Despite his professed long-range vision, his contention that the fight for liberation will require at least a "generation of struggle," Carmichael has not shaken free from the dead weight of his earlier political theorizing. His Pan-Africanism is captive to the group theory of politics. It looks backward to the task of remedying deficiencies in his previous ideological scheme, not to confronting the harsh realities of the present and future. When he outlines for black Americans the concrete steps they must now take, his advice is strikingly reminiscent of former, and presumably by his own admission, inadequate declarations. In his address on Pan-Africanism delivered at Morehouse College in April 1970, Carmichael briefly summarized his ideology and "tactics." "Africa becomes our priority, number one. We seek for unity within our community, number two. We seek to take over the political institutions within our community, number three, and we seek to develop independent economic bases wherever possible, starting with our organizations."³⁷ He had simply superimposed the goal of African unity, or at minimum, support for revolutionary states in Africa, on top of his old list of objectives.

In other words, the basic concept of politics is left intact; group competition remains as its essence. White America, he continues to maintain, is a monolithic structure on the issue of race. "What we know about white folks is that they're always united around one question—us." In Carmichael's most expansive formulation this confrontation is interpreted as inevitably pitting Europeans against non-Europeans.³⁸ Only now, by extending the sphere of the struggle, Carmichael has compensated for two glaring weaknesses in his original formulation: (1) the problem of gross numerical inferiority within the framework of "categoric" group conflict is nullified; and (2) the acquisition of sovereign control over the

³⁷ Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks*, 211.

³⁸ During a discussion with several black artists at the Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers, Carmichael flatly declared that a coalition between Russia and the United States was already a reality. "Don L. Lee Interviews Stokely Carmichael," *Journal of Black Poetry*, 1 (Pan-African Issue, 1970-71), 73.

vital "land base" becomes relatively more plausible—Ghana becomes the surrogate for the southern black belt.

Carmichael's high regard for his own political acumen is no secret. What he has done, in effect, is to eliminate the flaws in his political ideology, enhancing the logic and internal consistency of his proposals, by further removing himself from the conflicts he wishes controlled. The gap between thought and action is widened; the professed political ideology becomes less ideological (that is, less "action-related" for the masses of black America). Ironically, by extending the geographical and temporal dimensions of the conflict, Carmichael has placed himself in the position of those he once criticized. One significant demand of the black-power movement he led in 1966 was the call for new, audacious black leaders committed to securing immediate and tangible rewards for their brothers. Now, however, he seems to be appealing for trust and faith in those leaders who are correctly reading the "wind of history." Apparently, he deems it to be a time above all for political education. If confusion is indeed the greatest enemy of black people as Carmichael claims, then his own ideas on Pan-Africanism need to be subjected to a long, hard, critical look.