Black Power and the Liberal Conscience

by Lucy McCabe

Norman Mailer has been travelling the lecture circuit with Stokely Carmichael this winter. At dinner one evening, a friend of mine tells me, Mailer said he had begun the tour expecting to support 'Black Power' in a general way, but introducing a few cautionary phrases. After the first question period, he realized that he was 'way to the left of Stokely.' Many white liberals react like this, criticizing Black Power for its betrayal of the radical ideals they have associated with the civil rights movement. Non-violence is one of these vicarious ideals: very few white Americans are non-violent for themselves, their right to defend themselves or their families has never been called into question. But they had admired Martin Luther King for loving his enemies and turning the other cheek. Now they were hearing Stokely Carmichael's voice, growing testy at constant requests for reassurance saying 'I have never rejected violence'. He has two tones of voice, one for white living rooms and one for black crowds and the same words have different overtones. He has a standard response to a question about violence. It goes something like this. 'If you don't mess with me, I'll leave you alone'. Pause. 'But if you move to strike me, I'll break your arm.' Then, on a rising tone, 'and I might break the other one too.' When this is greeted by wild cheers, whites come away pretty shaken.

The fact is that the white liberal does not *live* way to the left of Stokely, he just *feels* that way. The liberal conscience honourably impelled people to participate in the 1963 march on Washington, in the Selma march, and in occasional demonstrations in between, but it did not have to cope with the day to day decisions of Negro life in the South. Stokely Carmichael wants action from whites on this everyday level, and uses some unloving language to say so. 'Racism in America,' he says, quoted in *Ebony*, 'is a white problem, not a Negro problem. And we are trying to force white people to move into the white communities to deal with that problem.' And again: 'Every white man in this country can announce that he is "our friend." Well, from now on we are going to pick our own friends. We're going to decide whether a white man can be our friend or not. We don't want to hear any more words: we want to see what they are going to do. The price of being the black man's friend has gone up.' White liberals are finding it increasingly hard to pay the price. The recent confrontation of Floyd McKissick, chairman of CORE,[1] and Robert Kennedy, noted liberal, highlighted something of the divergence. They agreed about ultimate aims, mostly, but Kennedy balked at Black Power. It sounded disruptive; and it is. The question is, will liberals stay alienated, or will they as McKissick hopes, attempt to come to an understanding of Black Power and make some accommodation with it?

This word liberal is a familiar confusion for English readers when it refers to America. It is confusing because Americans are not clear themselves what it means. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, or Ann Arbor, Michigan, it used to mean just about everybody, except for a small, eccentric radical fringe. But the rise of the student left in the last two years has tended to weaken the word's currency, as has the collapse of the war on poverty, a characteristically liberal programme now usually spoken of in the past tense. In the East, 'liberal' has acquired a middle-of-the-road, gradualist flavour – though this is not true of the South, as a recent trip there revealed to me; to most white southerners, the liberals are still a dangerous threat to the status quo.

Active liberals, like active anything else, are a small group. They organize, they copy addresses on cards, they bother their friends for funds or for signatures to support causes that either die quickly or become acceptable to a larger group. Then the cause becomes a trend, a surge of opinion, something in fact that vote-seeking politicians have to take notice of. Current liberal causes are elimination of prayer in the public schools, wider availability of contraceptive information, safety in car design, civilian police review boards, 'open housing', fair employment practices. Of course, not all activism is liberal. Typical non-liberal causes include cleaning up the movies, cracking down on street crime, saving the neighbourhood school. Liberals and non-liberals in fact agree on quite a few things – it would be hard, for instance, to mount a campaign in favour of air pollution; but there is a major difference in method. The liberal is genuinely interested in popular support, something to put up against the powerful economic and political interests that automatically oppose him. The non-liberal will work through the existing power-structure, wants to clear everything with city hall.

More interesting, though, is the distinction to be made between liberals and radicals. To situate the American liberal in the context of the ongoing debate in *New Blackfriars*, one could turn to Terry Eagleton's statement about radical politics 'summoning and activating a fundamental belief about the nature of human relationship,' and the constant reference made to 'an alternative version of man in society.' American liberals do not think on these lines.[2] They want an end to racial discrimination, poverty, corruption – an ideal welfare state – but are content to work for this piecemeal within the political system. Some existing social and political structures are used to transform others; liberal achievment is often a patchwork of half-measures. On the other hand, American liberals would accept Brian Wicker's contention that it *is* through the transformation of institutions, through political activity in fact, rather than through an extension of personal loyalties, that a new community will be established. Thus far, American liberals, using the clumsy tools of contemporary politics, have not brought this community within reach.

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[1] Congress of Racial Equality.

[2] And neither do the advocates of Black Power. The Black Muslims have an alternative vision and want no part of American political life. Lewis X recommends that the Negro wait out the inevitable demise of white society in America.

The language of the student left seemed a hopeful sign to liberals, when after the Mississippi summer of 1964 radical criticisms of the American way of life was loudly vociferated. But a movement like Student for a Democratic Society (SDS) did not seek or hold liberal interest. SDS seemed merely romantic, the 'blurt of protest', lacking as it did any formulated programme, and smacking as it did of anarchist sympathies. The radicals' own interventions in politics appear amateur and ill-timed to the liberals. A typical recent case was the radical quarrel with Thomas Adams, a well-known peace-candidate for the U.S. Senate, because he wanted to run in the Democratic primary, instead of standing as an independent. Adams' loss of radical support, something on which all peace candidates rely heavily, and his subsequent poor showing made it easy for Senators and Congressmen to write off the peace issue as negligible. The dilemma here is a familiar political one, and is very familiar to recent readers of *New Blackfriars*. In what degree is the better enemy of the best? American liberals have given up on the best, plug away at the better, and accept the barter and compromise of everyday politics.

The compromise of everyday politics is pretty corrupt, as Bernard Bergonzi pointed out in *New Blackfriars*, but liberal activists see this as the only means of effecting change. Some societies, like the Union of South Africa, have suppressed any machinery for change, leaving extra-political revolutionary methods as the only choice. The Watts rioters were in a similar situation; they could find no means within the existing system of improving their life. Their view – if a store cheats you, burn it down – has an immediate appeal; as a radical programme, however, it has not caught on. Not simply because too many people own stores. But because there was no political formation among the rioters, no spokesman. The community was not organized to pursue its protest once the fires had died down. Of course, the Watts-type ghetto is the greatest challenge the American political system has today, a challenge to which the civil rights movement is a small and inadequate response.

Unlike the radicals, liberals in America are organized. They have access to power, in Congress, in newspapers, in strong pressure groups like the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Faced with the race issue, liberals have joined the civil rights movement. But the liberal approach and the political techniques so far utilized have not provided a reasonable human life for most Negroes. Radical revolutionary postures are tempting.

It was precisely this dissatisfaction with liberal achievement that first attracted liberals to the movement in which the phrase Black Power was born, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC or Snick). It afforded the opportunity for what might be called vicarious radicalism. One could encourage, without risking very much, a small number of idealistic revolutionaries who were willing to suffer and engage in marches, non-violent demonstrations, even civil disobedience, all activities outside party politics. This left the liberals in control of the existing political machinery of change, such as it was. When Snick developed the idea of Black Power and entered the political arena, Stokely Carmichael began to talk like this: 'As for the welfare program, I wouldn't bother trying to improve it. I would organize to take it over . . . We must take over and control our resources and our programs. If we don't, we are going to wake up tomorrow morning, still black, still poor, and still singing We Shall Overcome.' Liberals began to feel threatened. In taking over the welfare program, for example, the Negro would be taking over from them.

Snick is unique in that it began amongst poor Southern Negroes. The NAACP[3] is mainly middle class, as is the Urban League. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and CORE were begun by preachers and teachers; Black Muslims are northern city people. The college students who came South for the Mississippi summer of 1964 brought the publicity, but the organizers of the movement, the young people who, since as long ago as 1961, had been tramping the dusty back roads of the South, persuading Negroes to register to vote, who were beaten and jailed and tortured with electric cattle prods, were in the majority from poor Southern Negro families. Some Snick activists were white, or came from middle-class backgrounds, but they quickly adopted the style of the Southern Negroes who had felt the full weight of the 'system', who had been born and raised in places just as bad as Lowndes county, Alabama, where a major Snick thrust is in progress, a county where even in 1965 not a single Negro was registered to vote, where the median family income for the Negro today is $935.[4] Stokely Carmichael said, 'The Negro

[3] National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People.

[4] Howard Zinn in his book *SNCC, The New Abolitionists*: '. . . these young people are not middle class reformers who became somehow concerned about others. They come themselves from the ranks of the victims, not just because they are mostly Negroes, but because for the most part their fathers are janitors and laborers, their mothers maids and factory workers.'

today has two problems, he is poor and he is black.' Snick from the beginning has lived and worked in the heart of these problems.

The American Negro poor are always segregated. Whether they are physically near whites, as often in the South, or separated in ghettos, as in Northern cities, the poor black man shares his life, his leisure time, his church, his job if he has one, with other poor black men. Integration in any complete sense is for the prosperous few, and it is rarely genuine. It means that the Negro accepts white modes of life, white bourgeois values and behaviour. Some small groups (many white jazz players, for instance,) have accepted Negro life, have integrated the other way, but I think it is safe to say that the fully integrated, colour-blind society does not exist in the United States. This segregated community, then, of poor black people is the focus of Snick activity.

Snick workers – a characteristically contentious bunch – solidly agree that community organization means encouraging people to do things for themselves. Leadership for the long climb up from poverty must come from within the community; the Snick worker's job is to help the people face and articulate their needs, to form their own structures for group action – political parties, neighbourhood societies, co-ops, marketing clubs, whatever is the most pressing requirement – and to build the confidence to use them. Snick involves people in immediate situations – police brutality, bad schools, discriminatory hiring – situations that will often improve under community pressure.

Snick first aimed at the vote. There were registration drives, the 1965 voting rights bill passed, and despite intimidation and violence, mounting numbers of Southern Negroes are now on the rolls. But so far this has changed very little in the black man's life (except for those who have lost homes and jobs for political activity). In several districts in the South, political power is within reach, but it has not, with very few exceptions, been used to elect Negroes. Carmichael quotes an Alabama Negro who voted for a white candidate for sheriff: 'We aren't ready to have a coloured sheriff. The white folks wouldn't have liked that a bit.' Snick combats this mentality that accepts a menial and third-best life as the only possible one for Negroes; long before Black Power appeared as a slogan, Snick was trying to create it as a reality.

In its early days Snick rejected affluent America, its comforts as well as its values. The average Snick staff member makes about $25 a week, although it has been as low as $9, infrequently paid, in a lean season. But although well-known anarchists, communists and radicals welcomed Snick as the first sign of revolution, Snick workers themselves have usually avoided committing themselves to the traditional radical language of protest, as they have avoided the structured marxist 'cadre' for their organization. Even the word organization could only be very loosely applied to the usual Snick office; the spirit known as 'freedom high' militated against any discipline or orthodoxy from the beginning. 'You can walk out the door any time,' explained one Snick field secretary, 'you can go where the spirit says go.' The presiding officer of any Snick office was whoever had the key that week; no one had authority over anyone else.

Arguments in The Lovin' Spoonful, a favourite Atlanta coffee house in those early days, carried Snick members into a serious debate about a new basis for society. They soon rejected the usual goal of the upward bound Negro, integration into white bourgeois life with its implied acceptance of Madison Avenue culture. Why integrate with the Bull Connors and the Al Lingos; could not Negroes build their own society, free of racism and capitalist materialism? They looked closely at new African nations, read socialist and marxist literature, without agreeing on any long-range program. 'Would to God there were Communists in Snick,' Charles Morgan of the American Civil Liberties Union could say at that time, 'they would be a moderating influence.' Snick workers felt and acted like the shock troops of a revolution, but no one could say which direction the movement would take.

Considering that Snick developed no charismatic leader like Martin Luther King to catch the public imagination[5] and that there were only about 155 full-time workers at best, they found a surprising amount of financial support. In 1963, the budget was $250,000. And there were not only dollars, but people. Northern students responded, about 700 of them, and joined the Mississippi Summer Project, organized by Snick and CORE. They taught in Freedom schools, ran community centres with varying degrees of success, discovered the enormous communications gap between white and black, and between the full-time Snick worker and the summer volunteers. They discovered what Professor James Silver has called in his book the 'closed society of Mississippi.' Their letters home and their experiences produced interest and sympathy for Snick.[6] Friends of SNCC groups sprang up in some Northern cities and created a nucleus of liberal support outside the South. In this period, Snick supporters sang 'black and white together we shall overcome,' and Bob Moses could say, 'the one thing we can do for the country that no one else can do is to be above race.' White liberals, though they were not risking their lives in the Southern backwoods, could feel part of the movement, part of what was beginning to be called the Negro revolution.

As battle-scarred 'Snick kids' appeared at fund-raising evenings

[5] Snick once fought openly against anything like a cult of personality. Bob Moses, an early leader in the movement, found the groups of followers singing and shouting outside his many jails so unsettling that he changed his name.

[6] They found it difficult to get medical care from Mississippi doctors, and the Medical Commission for Human Rights, a small group of militant doctors was organized to care for them.

in the North and told their often horrifying stories with simplicity and dignity and the kind of 'cool' that made Adam Clayton Powell call them 'a new breed of cats,' liberal supporters began to feel that Snick could produce the radical programme that would genuinely transform, revitalize and even purify American society. Nothing seemed to stop them. Their dedication, their acceptance of pain and of the fear of death, radiated in comfortable middle-class living rooms, and Northern liberals – Protestant ministers, university teachers, students, a large group of Jews (and an extremely small group of Catholics) – would pay from 10 to 50 dollars a head to listen to them.

Then came Black Power, and the liberal press reacted with what John Leo of *Commonweal* has called 'one continuous quiver.' Doubts and dissensions in the Negro movement, hietherto kept discreetly under cover, became sharp and loud. Support for Snick declined disastrously. 'Mob hysteria' became a familiar caption under photographs of Stokely Carmichael waving his arms. The whole civil rights movement felt the chill. Ralph McGill, a white Atlanta editor who had supported Martin Luther King from the beginning, (and this took some courage), hinted darkly at guns from Havana. Northern newspapers denounced 'racism in reverse'; the New York *Times* blamed Black Power for 'white backlash', for, that is, the defeat of the 1966 civil rights bill and the good showing of a series of reactionary candidates around the country. The *Times*, incidentally, also very recently carried a report that even among university students involvement in civil rights agitation is suddenly out of fashion.

Stokely Carmichael denies that the stiffening opposition to the movement and the decline of white support is something new. 'American society is racist', he has said, 'top to bottom.' In his opinion, the feelings and attitudes that have recently come to the surface and found political expression have been there all the time. The Negro Revolution was only popular when it was small and somewhere else. Martin Luther King's experience in Chicago would seem to bear this out. Before the slogan Black Power appeared, King had already begun his arduous campaign to improve the slums in Chicago. He reports that as soon as he arrived, financial contributions from Chicago dropped, and once the marches to the white suburbs began, this support evaporated completely. The evaporation included the support of the liberal archbishop of Chicago, who tried to persuade Martin Luther King to stop the marches.

Whatever the reason for the retreat of the liberals from Black Power and from the movement in general, it is not the result of the movement having accomplished what it set out to do. Negroes today are poorer, live in worse slums and go to more highly segregated schools than in 1954. They are, except as employees of the Federal Government, less likely to have a job, any job. The marches and speeches and good feeling have not produced a program that can keep pace with the climb of the unemployment figures, with the failure of the educational system to train Negroes for jobs in the automated computer-run industry that is now hiring, or for that matter in the increasingly mechanized agriculture, where the large investment in machinery is prohibitive to poor people, white or black, who want to go into farming. In the schools themselves, despite an occasional much-pyblicized break-through the position is no better. As an editorial in the *Nation* last summer put it: 'The school integration decision has been the law of the land for twelve years and less than 5% of Negroes of the South are attending integrated schools . . .' Why is it then that liberals like Senator Mansfield say, 'things have moved too fast.' Why did the liberals give up so easily?

One answer is fear of violence. Violence brought Black Power to the national press last June when James Meredith was shot in broad daylight by a white man who came out in full view of newsmen. Meredith, after a brief recovery period, remarked that he would carry a gun next time. This statement dramatized a similar switch away from non-violence in Snick and other Negro organizations. The protest march that ensued, which went in several directions at once and was notable for the squabbles between its various leaders, ended with crowds of Negroes chanting Black Power and reporters breathlessly quoting Stokely Carmichael, who easily won the spotlight when he refused to abjure violence. Nervous liberals, who had never been clubbed on the head for standing quietly on a sidewalk, a common experience for Snick workers, could be heard saying that Snick was losing its idealism. In the months that followed, the popular press raised the bogey of the Mau Mau.

In another context, however, violence did not really frighten liberals. The reaction of the liberal press to the Watts riot showed how far they were willing to go in understanding arson and assault when they were expressions of the frustrations of the poor. But of course violence erupting in Los Angeles was no threat to the liberal establishment, centred in the East. It only showed how badly conservatives were managing things out there. This Olympian tolerance was in sharp contrast to the outraged squeaks that Black Power elicited from the same liberal writers. David Danzig, in *Commentary*, asked pertinently, 'Are violent outbreaks such as Watts less frightening than the vision of a powerfully organized Negro bloc?' I think the answer is yes. To understand this, one has to review some of the history of integrated political activity in the South.

Selma was the high point of the liberal conscience in action. Here the well-meaning liberals were meddling to good purpose, mobilising with simple courage to defeat brutality and to defend the poor and weak. Local Negroes expressed their gratitude, especially to the nuns. In reference to the tear gas and beatings, they said, 'It would never have happened if you had been here.' Many participants in the march have said that it was a turning point in their lives to experience so much shared danger for a noble cause, so much goodwill and brotherhood. How can the Negro turn his back on all this good feeling, ask many liberals today. Snick would answer that Selma is no pattern for everyday life – the Negro can't be forever calling out the nuns. Negroes who live with the system must deal with the sheriffs in less dramatic fashion; for example, by electing some new ones.

In retrospect, Negroes who depended on whites to help them out of their troubles have come off second best. The Negro has had white collaborators in politics before, and in the light of today, only the original abolitionists, with their comparatively clear cut message, come off at all well. Even they, however, thought their job was done when slavery was ended, and most of them thought the Negro was an inferior being. After the civil war the Radical party in the North protected the Negro's newly-won rights for a while, but when they found they could manage without Southern Negro votes, their interest declined. When the Federal troops were recalled from the South, the freedmen attempted to develop an integrated political power base with the Southerners who took over the state governments. In fact, a significant number of Negro officeholders appear in Southern state governments in the 1880s and 90s, testifying to the partial success of this alliance, but the Negro was never offered a program of real equality, and he was not organized or strong enough to demand one. Most promising of a true Negro-white alliance was the Populist explosion in the 90s which produced the possibility of a real coalition based on the common interest of all the poor, something which Stokely Carmichael looks forward to one day. He says, in the *New York Review of Books*, 'We hope to see, eventually, a coalition between poor whites and poor blacks.' A Texas populist, quoted by C. Vann Woodward in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, said of the Negro 'They are in the ditch just like we are.' But this brief experiment was scuttled by a combination of terror and fraud which allowed the racist elements in the South to take over, to introduce the Jim Crow laws, to disfranchise the Negro, and to establish a whites-only political system which still functions.[7] By 1900, Negroes in the South could neither vote nor hold office. These unhappy attempts to achieve even basic citizenship by combining with whites – and this has usually meant white leadership – show that when the whites abandon the coalition, the Negro is left disorganized and weak. The proponents of Black Power are using their aggressive language to build up Negro confidence and organization to where they will no longer be poor and weak, no longer dependent upon the uncertain goodwill of whites.

American history is full of campaigns for reform which depended for their initial impetus upon altruism, like that shown at Selma. But major political changes have not taken place without organized pressure from the people who expected to benefit from the change. There is the obvious parallel of the labour movement. College students, white collar leftists, sons and daughters of employers took their places on picket lines in the 1930s. But the working men and women made the unions, and the power of the labour movement remains in their hands. In the same way, the proponents of Black Power are organizing the Negro community for its own self-interest; an approach that affronts liberals. They smell Tammany Hall. But this is not a pattern for violent revolution, a Jacobin or a Bolshevik programme. It is the classic tradition of American politics, which has worked for the Italians and the Irish, and liberals have felt able to work with such groups in the past. The New Deal, for example, limited though its accomplishments seem today, would have foundered completely without the support of organized minorities. Carmichael says, 'Black Power on the state or national level means "we need X million dollars to fix our roads and we have X million votes behind us". Without power they can only say "please, we need it".'

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[7] In the elections last November in Lowndes country, for example, it was observed that there is a total white population of 1906, and there are 2823 registered white voters.

Of course, not all liberal criticism of Black Power can be put down to hurt feelings, or crypto-racism, or fear of violence or even disagreement over practical politics. To some, Black Power seems a backward step in the march towards a fully integrated society. The Supreme Court has decided that separate but equal schools are inferior, what about separate but equal societies, or parasocieties? Now of course we have separate and unequal societies. Floyd McKissick has questioned whether any of the methods now proposed for integration of these societies will not do more harm than good. For example, racially imbalanced schools are inevitable in all big cities unless the flight of whites to the suburbs is reversed. Until then, integrating schools means transporting Negroes each day to the suburbs. McKissick questions whether the better education available to these children is worth the loss of self-respect they will experience; won't they feel that the white school is better because it is white? Another approach would be to abandon integration as a proximate goal, to build good schools in the ghetto, schools that will eventually attract children of all colours. Stokely Carmichael believes that integration can only take place among equals. 'How,' he asks, 'are you going to integrate a sharecropper making $3 a day with a plantation owner making $20,000 a year?' The choice seems to lie between exploitation and paternalism.

Jack Newfield lists Snick among radical organizations in America. He also talks of American culture's 'spongelike genius for either absorbing or merchandizing all dissent.' As Snick is being absorbed into the mainstream of American political life, its radicalism is disappearing into the sponge. It is also being merchandized. The

Negro poor have never had an effective political voice in this country. This is the group that periodically explodes in riots in the city, sinks into despair and apathy in the rural South. Carmichael hopes to sell them his program, Black Power. No one yet knows if they will buy, nor if they do whether it will turn out to be a lemon, whether Black Power can deliver what Carmichael and McKissick hope it can. A lot might depend on what the liberals do.

In their attempt to win power by using the traditional methods of the American political system, Negroes are putting that system to a severe test. Liberals who share their goals, in theory anyway, and who have a vested interest in American politics as one of its established powers, should logically want to see them succeed. Those who would like the more idealistic Selma spirit to prevail are asking for the continuation of a paternalism that has marred liberal involvement in Negro activities, or else for an effective radicalism which does not exist, for the moment anyway. Right now Black Power is where the action is. To quote a phrase collected in Chicago last summer, 'it hits those cats where they're at'.

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