

BLACKS and JEWS in the CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: The CASE of SNCC

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I am unsure whether any further discussions of African American–Jewish relations would be productive. To merely describe the mutually supportive relations that have existed and continue to exist between some African Americans and some Jews would probably not reduce the mutually hostile relations that have existed and continue to exist between other blacks and other Jews. Thus, despite the fact that no major civil rights group—and certainly not the NAACP—has ever taken an official position that was hostile toward Jews or toward Israel, considerable attention has been directed toward black individuals and non-civil rights groups that have taken such positions. African Americans and Jews who wish to cooperate should do so, but, for reasons rooted in history, many of those who wish to cooperate often cannot avoid focusing their attention on those who do not.

This is clearly evident, for example, in the ever-growing body of writings by African Americans about black anti-Semitism. During the past forty years, a highly stylized ritual has reoccurred as African American writers explain why anti-Jewish sentiments exist in African American communities. The avowed purpose of these writers is to reassure Jews, but the fact that reassurance is not lasting and that the process is repetitive suggests that other motives might be involved. James Baldwin's article, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," published in 1967, added little of substance that had not already been stated in Lawrence Reddick's article, "Anti-Semitism among Negroes," published in 1942, or Kenneth Clark's "Candor in Negro-Jewish Relations," published in 1946.¹ Each writer realized that his or her Jewish friends would not be completely reassured by statements against anti-Semitism combined with insightful explorations of the sources of anti-Jewish sentiments in the life experiences of millions of African Americans.² Such writings have succeeded more in publicizing black-Jewish controversies than in altering the attitudes each group holds toward the other.

Can we move beyond ritualistic disavowals of anti-Semitism by black intellectuals and equally ritualistic efforts by them to explain why other blacks express anti-Jewish attitudes? Can a black person comment on the problem of black-Jewish conflict without becoming part

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of the problem? I am not sure about the answers to these questions but suspect that previous writings have focused too much on what blacks and Jews think of each other and too little on the intragroup factors that influence intergroup attitudes. This essay examines an episode of black-Jewish conflict during the late 1960s precipitated by the controversial stands taken by the black militants of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) regarding the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and other issues of concern to American Jews. The conflicting public statements of blacks and Jews often referred to the history of Israeli-Palestinian relations, but the controversy that engulfed SNCC can best be explained as a outgrowth of internal tensions and conflicts within the black and Jewish political communities in the United States. Rather than simply a conflict between blacks and Jews, this controversy revealed the extent to which the issues that divided blacks and Jews were often related to long-standing ideological tensions that divided both groups.

An ironical aspect of SNCC's role in the black-Jewish conflict of the late 1960s was that many Jewish political activists saw SNCC as the most open and receptive of the groups involved in the southern civil rights struggle. Founded by southern black students who led the lunch counter sit-ins of 1960, SNCC evolved into a cadre of full-time activists and organizers, who judged newcomers on the basis of the depth of their commitment to militant direct action. Initially most SNCC workers were southern blacks. Even the handful of Northern Whites were, during the early 1960s, more often Christian than Jews. Publicist Dotty Miller, a graduate of Queens College, and advisor Howard Zinn, then a professor at Spelman College, were in this early period of SNCC's development among a small number of Jews directly involved in SNCC's work. Even after an influx of Jewish volunteers during the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, Jews working full time in with SNCC were outnumbered by white Protestants and even more by blacks, northern and southern.

The small number of Jewish activists on SNCC's staff exerted an influence out of proportion to their numbers, however, because they were more likely than other white students to sympathize with and encourage SNCC's gradual movement toward greater radicalism. During the period before 1965, this radicalism took the form of an acceptance of a tactical and rhetorical militancy that was rooted in the shared African American-Jewish radical culture that was centered in New York. This culture was the product of a long history of cultural and historical interactions between blacks and Jews, particularly in the Communist party during the 1930s. Although SNCC's early southern black leaders initially directed their appeals for support to the northern Christian students movement, SNCC's radicalization brought an increasing reliance on the support of northern Jews.

This shift was evident first in the network of SNCC's financial supporters. During SNCC's early years, for example, crucial support came from leftist lawyer Victor Rabinowitz. Subsequently, Rabinowitz and other Jewish lawyers associated with the National Lawyers Guild made it possible for SNCC to avoid becoming dependent upon the more ideologically restrictive legal assistance of Jack Greenberg's NAACP Legal Defense Fund. From 1963 through 1966, SNCC's New York office, headed by Elizabeth Sutherland, concentrated its efforts on attracting Jewish support and succeeded in raising far more contributions than any other SNCC office. At least one-fourth and sometimes more than half of the monthly contributions SNCC received during this period came from the New York area.³ A symbiotic relationship developed between SNCC, which needed financial support yet refused to compromise its militancy in return for that support, and a radical minority of leftist Jews, who were

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attracted by SNCC's uncompromising militancy and by its singular willingness to accept help from sources, such as former Communist Party members, that would have been viewed with suspicion by more moderate civil rights groups.

Thus the often-noted parallels between the Biblical stories of Jewish oppression and the travails of African Americans were less significant in accounting for SNCC-Jewish ties than were the common experiences of a small minority of blacks and Jews: those whose attitudes were shaped by awareness of secular radicalism and political dissent, from labor organizing in the 1930s to more isolated protest activity during the 1940s and 1950s. To refer to the outgrowths of these common experiences as a culture may stretch the term somewhat, but I would argue that a number of blacks and Jews became similarly alienated from prevailing white cultural values to the point that they became more like each other than like the most culturally distinctive members of their own group.

One does not have to accept Harold Cruse's conclusions about the damaging consequences of African American-Jewish interactions within the Communist party to recognize the validity of his view that African American-Jewish radicalism never encompassed Jewish culture, for that was known to be the preserve of Jews alone.⁴ Because Cruse was so determined to condemn black radical intellectuals for separating themselves from black nationalist culture, he was reluctant to admit the understandable appeal, particularly during the period from Garvey's fall to Malcolm X's emergence, of a dynamic, activist-oriented, intellectually vibrant, black-Jewish radicalism over a moribund, accommodationist, intellectually stagnant Black nationalism.

Jewish radicals rejected the staid, thoroughly WASPish, approaches of the Socialist party and actively sought black support even after the Communist party lost its effectiveness as a vehicle for radical activism. Especially in New York, a black-Jewish radical community survived occasional internal conflicts during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s to become a seedbed for civil rights activism during the 1960s. It was in this radical community that blacks gained awareness of protest and propaganda techniques and a faith that these techniques, despite the fact that they were used by small numbers of radicals, might someday change American society. No comparable faith existed among black nationalists of the period after Garvey.

Although he was by the 1950s a staunch anti-Communist, Bayard Rustin was a crucial link between this African American-Jewish radical culture and the most radical of the civil rights groups of the 1960s: SNCC. Because his political life bridged the years from the radicalism of the 1930s to the rebirth of black militancy in the 1950s, Rustin was a central fixture in the civil rights coalition that developed in New York after World War II. He also influenced several of the activists who would later steer SNCC toward a radical course. In the early 1960s, when Rustin was organizing New York support for Martin Luther King, Jr., he noticed the dedication of a young black teacher at Horace Mann School, Bob Moses, who patiently worked stuffing envelopes and doing other mundane chores.

It was Rustin who sent Moses to Atlanta to work with Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. After Moses spent the summer of 1960 working alongside student activists in the SCLC office in Atlanta, he returned the following summer to begin SNCC's Mississippi Summer Project. Rustin also influenced several of the Howard University students who would later play crucial roles in SNCC's transformation, through his meetings with members of the Nonviolent Action Group at Howard University. Influential NAG members included Tom Kahn, a Jewish socialist who had worked closely with Rustin in New York,

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and Stokely Carmichael, who was himself a product of the New York black-Jewish culture of radicalism.

That Carmichael could be both a product of this culture and also a central figure in the African American-Jewish conflicts after 1966 may require some explanation but also should not be surprising. The black-Jewish radical culture is an urban culture, but in urban centers it coexists with a resilient black separatist culture (and also, for that matter, with an irrepressible Jewish separatist culture). Although Carmichael moved toward a black nationalist philosophy, his ideological development was initially more strongly influenced by Jewish radicalism. In this respect, he followed a pattern similar to that of West Coast black nationalist Ron Karenga, who also developed his initial political awareness as a result of extensive contacts with Jewish socialists in Los Angeles.⁵ Like Moses, Carmichael's political development was influenced by the Jews he met after winning admittance into one of New York's selective secondary schools—in Carmichael's case, Bronx High School of Science.

He envied the greater intellectual awareness of his white classmates. "All the other kids I went to school with, their fathers were professors, doctors; they were the smartest kids in the world," he later told Howard Zinn.⁶ One of his best friends was Gene Dennis, the son of a New York Communist party leader and a resident of Harlem—unlike Carmichael, whose family lived in an otherwise all-white neighborhood in the Bronx. Carmichael associated with various socialist and communist youth groups while in high school. His first demonstration was on behalf of Israel. He later recalled: "Someone at the U.N. had said something anti-Semitic; I can't exactly remember who, but [the Young Peoples Socialist League] drew up a big picket-line at the U.N."⁷

Ironically, it was through Carmichael's contacts with Jews, especially Dennis, that he became acquainted with Benjamin Davis and other black radicals who were themselves products of the African American-Jewish political culture that developed inside the Communist party. By the end of Carmichael's high school years, his world view had clearly been shaped by his contacts with Jews. His ambition was to go to Brandeis University and become a teacher. Only the attraction of being near the sit-in protests led Carmichael to give in to his parents wishes that he attend a black school. After arriving at Howard in the fall of 1960, Carmichael, like other northern blacks, was attracted to those aspects of SNCC that corresponded to the values of the urban radical culture.

Carmichael's election as SNCC's chairman in May 1966 marked the culmination of the displacement of southern black activists, such as former chairman John Lewis, by northern blacks who saw Lewis as too moderate and as lacking the kind of political sophistication they saw in themselves. Many of SNCC's new leaders were directly or indirectly influenced by the northern tradition of African American-Jewish radicalism, although by 1966 they also reflected the influence of northern black nationalism. More than other civil rights groups, SNCC increasingly rejected bourgeois culture; it demanded a moralistic commitment to sacrifice one's welfare on behalf of oppressed people; it stressed the value of rigorous discourse as a component of political action. It distrusted the prevailing white-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant liberalism that made civility and respectability preconditions for effective political action, and, most importantly, it saw the black struggle as a necessary component of fundamental social change.

The newly elected head of SNCC's International Affairs office, James Forman, had become involved in civil rights activities while living in Chicago, but as SNCC's executive secretary,

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he had guided the development of the group's northern fund-raising network. His move to New York during 1966 was part of a general drift of SNCC personnel from the rural South to the urban North and part of a gradual shift of SNCC's emphasis from civil rights goals to broader economic and political objectives. Although this shift would ultimately result in conflict between SNCC and Jewish leftists, SNCC failed to recognize quickly the implications of the conflict between its objectives and its financial base. It remained permeated by the complex mixture of socialistic and nationalistic ideas advocated by Carmichael, Moses, Forman, Courtland Cox, Ivanhoe Donaldson, and many other northern black activists.

Although these black activists were moving toward black nationalist ideas, which they hoped would allow them to express the sentiments of the urban black masses, they had initially stressed the need for socialistic economic reforms. By 1966, Carmichael and Cox had broken with Rustin and Kahn, but they were still part of a group of blacks, including Forman but no longer Bob Moses, who believed that interracial alliances were possible, if not probable, and still served as SNCC's primary links with northern Jewish supporters.

After Carmichael's election as chairman and his subsequent highly publicized use of the "Black Power" slogan on the Mississippi march of June 1966, Carmichael was portrayed as a proponent of black nationalism, but he is more accurately seen as a man who stood uneasily between an urban black nationalist tradition with which he had little personal contact and the radical culture that continued to shape his rhetoric. In his "Black Power" speeches he often pointed to parallels in African American and Jewish experiences, sometimes misreading the historical evidence but always seeking to place blacks in the historical continuum of militant ethnic politics. He often mentioned Jews as a group that African Americans should emulate while seeking to build a basis for social power.

Carmichael reflected earlier currents of black-Jewish radicalism in his verbal attacks on the hypocrisy of conventional liberalism and middle-class values. At the same time, he departed from that tradition by bringing to the fore issues of racial and ethnic identity that had always been a problematical, though still significant, part of the black-Jewish radical tradition. Significantly, Carmichael did not refer to the Jewish model in his discussion of the need for black cultural autonomy, perhaps recognizing that to do so would be to suggest that black separatism might become as conservative as were some forms of Jewish Zionism.

Carmichael's expressed goals at the time did not extend much beyond the pluralism best articulated by Jewish liberals. Having abandoned Jewish socialism, Carmichael's views unwittingly converged with those of sociologist Nathan Glazer, who in 1964 had revealed the divisions among Jews regarding civil rights reforms by pointing to the conflicting interests of African Americans and Jews, because, he argued, African Americans sought equality of economic results while Jews sought equality of opportunity. Carmichael also foreshadowed the black consciousness theme by suggesting that Blacks should not continue to break down the legitimate barriers imposed by surrounding ethnic groups while failing to preserve what was valuable to their own group.⁸

Despite his public reputation, within SNCC Carmichael was a firm advocate of maintaining contacts with those whites who were sufficiently alienated from the white majority to support SNCC on terms set by blacks. He remained on close terms with individual white activists and supported the use of SNCC funds to help white organizers found the Southern Students Organizing Committee and resisted efforts to expel whites from SNCC.

Carmichael's efforts to translate the new black militancy into terms SNCC's former

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white supporters could understand took the form of articles in the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Republic*, not forums designed to reach the black masses. It also took the form of numerous appearances at predominantly white colleges and on radio and television shows, including extended interviews on "Face the Nation" and on the David Susskind show.

Many Jews, like other former SNCC supporters, were not willing to accept the new militancy, but Carmichael's background helps account for the successes he had in making black power a topic worthy of serious discussion within the Jewish Left. For some Jews, continued support for SNCC brought them into conflict with more conservative Jews who were only too willing to use SNCC as an example of the terrible consequences of Jewish radicalism. Despite their growing vulnerability to attack from other Jews, many Jewish SNCC supporters remained optimistic that SNCC would continue to be worthy of support.

Jewish Currents was among the journals to defend SNCC, arguing in 1966 that it was "particularly important for Jews, who are so alert to the dangers of racism as it affects them, to avoid misjudging an idealistic, heroic movement like SNCC, which is dedicated consciously to abolishing racism."⁹ Journalist I. F. Stone saw the cry for black power as "psychological therapy" rather than "practical politics," but nonetheless he applauded SNCC's opposition to the Vietnam War and expressed hope that black militancy would prod the nation into eliminating ghetto poverty.¹⁰

Although some Jews cut off their support to SNCC during 1966, most did so because they, like many former non-Jewish supporters, disagreed with SNCC's antiwar stance and with Carmichael's inflammatory rhetoric. I located only one letter in SNCC's files that suggested that Jewish supporters saw anti-Semitic overtones in the black power rhetoric. SNCC responded to this note from a New York attorney in a polite letter claiming that nothing in its policies or programs suggested anti-Semitism, adding that the organization was "very aware of the support it has received, both 'physical' and financial from American Jews and appreciates it."¹¹ In contrast to this one negative letter were those like the one from a sixty-six-year-old Los Angeles Jew who wrote Carmichael to object to what he considered to be the effort by Susskind to inject the issue of anti-Semitism into Carmichael's discussion of black power.¹²

SNCC files also contain a revealing letter from the executive secretary of a Chicago temple, who gently chided Carmichael after the SNCC chairman had quoted Hillel and incorrectly referred to him as a German. Carmichael's apologetic reply insisted that he had quickly recognized his own mistake and that it did not betray a general lack of understanding of Jewish history.¹³ It is likely that continued Jewish support of SNCC, even after it began promoting black power, was the result of the extensive history of personal contacts between SNCC workers and Jewish supporters. Thus, the support SNCC received from Rabbi Irving Ganz in California was at least partially the result of the fact that Ganz's son, Marshall, had worked with SNCC in Mississippi. Rabbi Harold Saperstein of Temple Emanu-El of Lynbrook, New York, who had worked for a brief time with Carmichael in Lowndes County, was one of those who did not agree with the black power theme but still understood SNCC workers' frustrations and continued to support the organization.¹⁴

Carmichael, Forman, and other blacks who remained close to the white Left during 1966 faced enormous pressures from SNCC's black separatists, however, and these pressures resulted in bitter internal conflicts that would have profound impact on SNCC's relations with an outside world that included Jews. At a staff meeting held in upstate New York during December 1966, SNCC's veteran leaders came under strong attack from separatists in SNCC's

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recently established Atlanta Project. Several of the Atlanta separatists were themselves from northern backgrounds, but their ideological orientation was more strongly influenced by the black nationalist tradition than were the veterans. In place of an economic emphasis, they argued for greater recognition of the importance of racial identity; rather than to Marx, they looked to Franz Fanon or Malcolm X for ideological guidance. Rejecting the previously dominant view that struggle itself was SNCC's reason for being, they insisted that ideological conversion was a necessary precondition for future struggles.

In their effort to purify SNCC of all white influences, the Atlanta separatists used as weapons the charge that SNCC's leaders had not cut themselves off from white people. Interestingly, just as SNCC's ties with the white New Left were based on common positions on foreign policy issues, the tenuous threads that held together SNCC's factions were more often support for Third World alliances than common positions about strategies for achieving black power. Although SNCC's officers hoped that the few remaining whites on the staff would not become an issue dividing black staff members, the Atlanta separatists were willing to disrupt the New York staff meeting until they had achieved their goal. Carmichael argued at the start of the meeting that SNCC needed white financial support and a "buffer zone" of white liberals to forestall repression, but the separatists repeatedly insisted "whites had to go."

After days of seemingly endless discussion, a vote was finally taken. Nineteen staff members voted for expulsion, eighteen against, and twenty-four, including most officers and all whites, abstained. Despite the expulsion, however, SNCC remained divided as the separatists continued to deny the racial loyalty of SNCC's leaders and sought to undermine their authority. During the winter of 1967, after repeated acts of insubordination, Carmichael fired or suspended all members of the Atlanta Project. This firing was upheld at the March Central Committee meeting, but when the entire staff met in June a member of the Atlanta staff came to lambast those who had betrayed the cause of "blackness." His outburst established an atmosphere of hostility that permeated the rest of the meeting. It was in this tense atmosphere that the issue of SNCC's position in the Arab-Israeli conflict was raised.

Staff members elected H. Rap Brown as chairman, believing that he could remove SNCC from public controversy. They also voted to declare that SNCC would henceforth be a "Human Rights Organization" that would "encourage and support the liberation struggles against colonization, racism, and economic exploitation" around the world. In addition, they proclaimed a position of "positive non-alignment" in world affairs, indicating their willingness to meet with Third World governments and liberation groups and authorizing an application for Non-Government Organization status on the United Nations Economic and Security Council. To coordinate these activities, SNCC established an International Affairs Commission headed by Jim Forman. These actions to establish international ties were taken despite the almost total collapse of SNCC projects in African American communities; indeed the redirection of SNCC's interests into those of the Third World served as a cohesive theme for a divided group, still torn between its roots in an interracial culture of dissent and its search for the illusive ideas that would unify African Americans.

Reacting to the separatist demand that SNCC break its umbilical cord to white supporters, most of the seventy-six remaining staff members agreed that SNCC support for the Third World should extend to the Palestinians. They did not agree, however, about whether the group should allow the Palestinian issue to further separate SNCC from its declining body of White financial supporters.

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Shortly before leaving on a trip to Africa, Forman cautioned Stanley Wise, who had replaced him as SNCC's Executive Secretary, about the dangers of taking an anti-Israel stand. Forman noted that such a stand would result in "a certain isolation from the press." Forman warned against adopting "a reactionary position that even the Syrians and the Egyptians do not articulate: namely a hatred for the people of Israel." He suggested that SNCC must begin to build bases of financial support in African American communities to replace Jewish support if SNCC were to take a position against Israel. Forman also expressed sympathy for leaders of CORE, who had refused to take a stand on the issue for fear of dividing their organization. He stressed the need for staff members to educate themselves regarding the dispute and asked that SNCC be placed on the mailing lists of all the Arab nations. He argued that a public stand should not be taken until the staff became more knowledgeable and a special meeting was held to discuss the issue.¹⁵

Forman's cautionary admonitions were stated even more strongly in the first published statement by a staff member on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Veteran SNCC worker Fred Meely wrote an article for a SNCC newsletter called *African American News for You*, in which he suggested that black leaders should not take a stand on the crisis, for they were "already under enough pressure" as a result of the black power controversy. "We black people neither need [nor] deserve the wrath of Arab or Jew, for we are even denied access to this debate that may well affect the future of all mankind."¹⁶

Soon after Forman wrote to Wise, SNCC's Central Committee, meeting in the midst of Israel's six-day victory over Arab forces in June 1967, requested that SNCC's search and communications staff investigate the background of the conflict. Ethel Minor, editor of SNCC's newsletter, volunteered for this task. She recalled that the committee wanted an "objective critique of the facts." Minor was not impartial on the issue, however, for she had been close friends with Palestinian students during her college years and was acquainted with the urban black nationalist tradition through her involvement with the Nation of Islam. Minor never wrote a position paper, nor did SNCC ever conduct an extended discussion of the Middle Eastern dispute.

Nonetheless, SNCC suddenly found itself at the center of a bitter conflict with former allies when Minor published a piece that she claimed would provide staff members with information not available in the "white press." In the *SNCC Newsletter*, she listed thirty-two "documented facts" regarding "the Palestine Problem," including assertions that the Arab-Israeli war was an effort to regain Palestinian land and that during the 1948 war, "Zionists conquered the Arab homes and land through terror, force, and massacres." By itself, the *Newsletter* article would have provoked controversy, but accompanying photographs and drawings by SNCC artist Kofi Bailey heightened its emotional impact through clearly anti-Semitic drawings. The caption on one of the photographs, which portrayed Zionists shooting Arab victims who were lined up against a wall, noted "This is the Gaza Strip, Palestine, not Dachau, Germany."¹⁷

Although Minor later claimed that those who prepared the article intended it for internal education rather than as a policy stand, other SNCC workers, particularly in the New York fund-raising office, realized immediately that the article would bring swift condemnations from Jewish leaders. Johnny Wilson, most recently installed as head of the office and unaware that the article would be published, called a press conference to announce that the article did not present SNCC's official position. Wilson's disclaimer went unnoticed in the subsequent

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press reports, however, because Minor and other workers at SNCC headquarters quickly called their own press conference to reiterate the anti-Israel position. Program Director Ralph Featherstone explained to reporters in Atlanta that the article did not indicate that SNCC was anti-Semitic, but he inflamed the emotions of Jews by criticizing Jewish store owners in African American ghettos. Forman, still out of the country when the newsletter was published, privately expressed his dismay that his counsel of caution had been ignored, but publicly backed the stand against Israel. He decided that SNCC should support the Arabs on the Palestinian question "regardless of how ragged the formulation of our position" and concluded that "no formulations of our position would have satisfied the Zionists and many Jews."¹⁸

Whether Forman was correct is disputable, but the strength of the negative response to the Minor article suggests that it symbolized more than it said. Actual incidents of publicly expressed Black anti-Semitism were few in number, and none involved persons who still identified themselves as civil rights leaders. Most such incidents would not have gained much notice if they had not been brought to public attention by Jews who saw them as indications of a trend, despite the fact that no civil rights group ever took an official anti-Israeli or anti-Jewish stand.

For blacks in SNCC, the anti-Israel stand was a test of their willingness to demonstrate SNCC's break from its civil rights past and a reconfirmation that ties with Whites were inconsistent with their desire to express racial aspirations and frustrations without restraint. Veteran staff member Cleveland Sellers later acknowledged that afterward many donations "from white sources just stopped coming in," but he added: "Rather than breaking our will, this made us more convinced than ever that we were correct when we accused the majority of America's whites of being racists."¹⁹

Forman might have succeeded for a time in convincing SNCC's Jewish supporters to ignore or downplay the existence of private anti-Israel sentiments in SNCC, except that Jews who had long been hostile to SNCC quickly directed national attention to the Minor article. The executive director of the American Jewish Congress labeled the article "shocking and vicious anti-Semitism." Similar criticisms came from the heads of other Jewish groups and from black leaders Whitney Young, A. Philip Randolph, and Bayard Rustin. Theodore Bikel and author Harry Golden added to the furor by announcing publicly that they were resigning from SNCC—an organization to which they did not belong. Bikel mentioned the sacrifice of Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, who had been lynched in Mississippi during the summer of 1964, saying that SNCC had no right to "spit on their tomb."²⁰ More restrained was the response of Rabbi Saperstein, who privately informed SNCC leaders that he could not continue to support a group that "so readily allowed itself to become a mouthpiece of malicious Arab propaganda."²¹

Although the highly publicized controversy over the *Newsletter* article was described in the press as a split in the civil rights movement, it was actually a more complex event. For some time, SNCC's goals had extended beyond civil rights, a fact confirmed by its self-definition as a human rights organization seeking ties with the Third World. Many SNCC workers had once shared a wide range of values with SNCC's Jewish supporters, but they had gradually and self-consciously separated themselves from that culture, because its values were not shared by the black masses whose support they sought. In retrospect, it is easy to see that the Pan-Africanism toward which SNCC workers were moving would not automatically guarantee the support of Jews. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

political climate of 1967. SNCC workers were surprised at how rapidly and completely they had destroyed the bridges to their ideological past, but historical continuity was evident in their firmly held belief that it was their destiny, even as a small minority, to bring into being a better world.

Having destroyed their bridges, SNCC workers tried to build new ones in the less-known cultural territory of the Third World. Reacting to the criticisms of the earlier article, a *SNCC Newsletter* article in the fall of 1967 stated that SNCC had

placed itself squarely on the side of oppressed peoples and liberation movements. . . . Perhaps we have taken the liberal Jewish community or certain segments of it as far as it can go. If so, this is tragic, not for us but for the liberal Jewish community. For the world is in a revolutionary ferment. . . . Our message to conscious people everywhere is "Don't get caught on the wrong side of the revolution."²²

Even after SNCC workers had burned their bridges, however, they continued to insist that they were not anti-Semitic. Their defense of themselves rested on the semantic issue of whether attacks against Israel or against the role of Jewish businessmen in black communities necessarily constituted anti-Semitism. On occasion SNCC workers used the facile argument that Arabs were also Semitic peoples. Such arguments did little to bridge the gulf between SNCC and Jews, and SNCC workers were undoubtedly far more interested in establishing new ties to angry urban blacks than in reestablishing old ties with angered Jews. Whether SNCC could have found a way of expressing its opposition to Israeli policies without making itself vulnerable to the charge of anti-Semitism is an interesting question, but there is little evidence that SNCC workers expended much effort searching for such a way or that Jews expended much effort aiding in the search. For many Jews, there was no proper way for blacks to condemn Israel.

During the summer of 1967, Forman and SNCC's new chairman, H. Rap Brown, led a successful Black effort at the National Convention for New Politics to gain adoption of an anti-Israeli policy stand. The fact that the resolution contained a statement that the condemnation of Zionist expansion did "not imply anti-Semitism" was not nearly as significant for Jews as the fact that it was introduced by the Black Caucus at the convention. An issue that, at the beginning of the summer of 1967, had unexpectedly cost SNCC needed financial support became by the end of the summer the central issue by which SNCC militants demonstrated their own militancy and tested the loyalty of their erstwhile white allies in the New Left.

Thus it happened that a few dozen black activists became the first, and for some time the only, major black organization to take a stand against Israel in the Middle-East dispute. SNCC itself rapidly disintegrated after the summer. Deprived of former sources of financial support and weakened by internal conflicts and external repression, it lost black support and access to power even as it made black power its central focus. The small SNCC staff had lost the ability to serve as a catalyst for massive mobilizations of black people, but they retained the ability to serve as a catalyst for a major disruption of the African American-Jewish reform alliance of the post-World War II period. As ideological consistency gained priority over the goal of political effectiveness, they eagerly sought opportunities to display their independence from the constraints of alliances.

Many SNCC workers refused even to accept the constraints of working within their own organization and left it rather than compromise their militancy. Carmichael rejected SNCC's

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efforts to control his actions while touring the Third World in 1967, and after his return moved gradually away from SNCC until making a final break in July 1968. Forman was forced to resign a year later. There was a considerable degree of irony in Earl Raab's suggestion in the late 1960s that the black movement was "developing an anti-Semitic ideology,"²³ for it was only while the African American-Jewish civil rights alliance lived that it was possible to speak of a black movement coherent and unified enough to possess a single ideology.

The hostility that developed as a result of SNCC's anti-Israel stand survived longer than did SNCC, however, because the hostility had many sources in the web of African American-Jewish interactions. Once Jewish supporters of the civil rights movement had discovered evidence of what they deemed black anti-Semitism in SNCC, a group spawned by the African American-Jewish civil rights coalition, it became much easier to find evidence of anti-Semitism in the more alien black world outside of SNCC, where its expression was less likely to be inhibited than in SNCC.

The publicity focused on SNCC during the summer of 1967 was redirected toward other isolated anti-Jewish statements, and the publicity itself probably stimulated the anti-Semitism that it sought to denounce. There is little evidence that anti-Jewish sentiments among blacks increased substantially during the late 1960s, but it is apparent that anti-Israeli statements symbolized a new willingness among that minority of African Americans who had been part of the interracial civil rights movement to break with their past.

Former SNCC worker Julius Lester provides a final illustration of the complex motives that shaped black responses to issues of concern to Jews during the late 1960s. Lester was by no means a typical SNCC worker, if such a construct can ever exist, but his multifaceted experiences in the movement reflect many aspects of the dynamics of African American-Jewish relations during the late 1960s. That he found himself a central figure in African American-Jewish conflicts was both an accident of history and a consequence of historical trends that made such accidents inevitable. Lester was not exposed to the New York culture of radicalism until the early 1960s, when as a young folksinger and writer he came to New York with his new wife, a white socialist studying at the New School.

Despite growing up in the South and attending Fisk University, Lester had resisted joining the southern civil rights movement until 1964 when he discovered that he and SNCC were each moving toward a new sense of racial identity. Unlike the northern-born blacks who joined SNCC, Lester did not adopt Marxian ideas, and perhaps for this reason he did not feel compelled to supplant Marx with the "black" ideology of Fanon or Nkrumah or Malcolm X. In the spring of 1966, he left his wife to join the SNCC staff on a full-time basis as head of the photography department. Although he kept his feelings to himself during that spring, he was privately critical of the tendency of Moses and other SNCC activists to stress African American ties with Africa rather than identify with the unique racial consciousness that already existed among African Americans who had not been exposed to such large doses of white culture as had SNCC's college-educated black nationalists. He later attributed this tendency to the northern backgrounds of much of SNCC's leadership. Referring to his own upbringing, he was instructive:

Those of us from the South had lived outside the perimeter of white culture; northern blacks were infected with it. Their black militancy was so strident that I regarded them as recent converts to the race, and their rage at whites, misdirected self-hatred.²⁴

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Lester did not express his reservations at the time, however, and instead became one of the chief propagandists for the black power theme. Among the large number of his writings were "The Angry Children of Malcolm X," a classic essay of the 1960s and the popular tract, *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama*. Both these uncompromising statements of black militancy demonstrated the extent to which he became caught up in the angry mood of the time. They also demonstrated how completely he suppressed any feelings of doubt. Much later he would comment, "I was so determined to be a revolutionary that I refused to look at anything within me which might contradict who I wanted to be."²⁵

After leaving SNCC in 1967, Lester returned to New York, where he observed the eruption of African American–Jewish conflicts during the dispute over the firing of nine white teachers from the black-controlled Ocean-Hill–Brownsville school district. The teachers' union president, Albert Shanker, accused the local school board of anti-Semitism, a charge that led to bitter exchanges between striking Jewish teachers and black parents and students.

Lester invited a black teacher, Les Campbell, to appear on his weekly radio show, and when Campbell showed Lester an anti-Semitic poem that had been written by a Black student, Lester encouraged the teacher to read it on the air to indicate how the strike was affecting the attitudes of black youths. For two weeks after the broadcast, Lester heard no protests—probably a result of the limited nature of his audience—but early in 1969 the United Federation of Teachers announced that they were asking that the license of Lester's station be revoked because of the airing of the poem. As had been the case for SNCC in 1967, the controversy around the program intensified as Lester found that his refusal to condemn the poem encouraged some blacks to view the controversy as an opportunity to demonstrate to other blacks how completely they ignored Jewish and white sensibilities.

Soon afterward, a black high school student appeared on the show and offhandedly remarked, "Hitler didn't make enough lampshades out of them." Lester wrote that he "found the remark obscene and personally offensive, but [said he] lacked the maturity to know how to dissociate myself from it while upholding the student's First Amendment right to make it."²⁶ The student's remark prompted demonstrations at the station by the Jewish Defense League and further poisoned an already volatile atmosphere. When Lester replied to his critics on the air, his comments echoed those of Baldwin, Reddick, and Clark, for they superficially appealed for Jewish understanding while simultaneously providing a rationale for anti-Jewish sentiments among African Americans. He announced that the "old relationship" that had existed between African Americans and Jews had "been destroyed and the stage [was] set now for a real relationship where our feelings, our views of America and how to operate has to be given serious consideration."²⁷

Despite Lester's announcement of a new relationship, the continuities of history were displayed in interesting subtle ways. The board of the Pacific Foundation, which operated Lester's stations, stood firmly behind him throughout the controversy and no one remained more firm than board member Bob Goodman, a Jew and the father of Andrew Goodman, who had been lynched in Mississippi in 1964.

Even as the Lester controversy continued, Nathan Glazer provided an indication of the extent to which African American–Jewish conflict reflected intra-Jewish as well as intra-black conflicts. As in his earlier article mentioned above, Glazier continued to oppose Black militancy (although his definition of it had changed since 1964) and Jews who supported such militancy. In *Commentary*, he combined an attack on African American leaders, who he said

were guilty of "justifying and legitimizing" black anti-Semitism, with an even stronger attack against Jewish radicals, who "abetted and assisted and advised" black intellectuals.²⁸

Glazer may have exaggerated the degree of consensus among black militants about issues of concern to Jews, but his twofold attack on black militants and white radicals clearly demonstrated the close connection between the issue of African American-Jewish conflict and the broader political currents that brought the issue public attention during the late 1960s.

The lack of communication between black militants and Jewish critics of black militancy during this period is revealed in the contrasting conclusions drawn by Glazer and Lester. For Glazer, black militancy was infected with anti-Semitism and could be supported only by Jews who had a nihilistic view of American society and its political system. "All they can do is give the blacks guns, and allow themselves to become the first victims,"²⁹ he wrote. Lester followed a different route to arrive at a similar state of cynicism. While Glazer was defining his conditions for continued Jewish support of black civil rights efforts, Lester and other blacks were insisting that conditional White support was no longer acceptable. "Black anti-Semitism is not the problem," he answered his critics.

Jews have never suffered at the hands of black people. Individuals, yes. But en masse, no. The issue is not black anti-Semitism. This issue is what it has always been: racism. . . . If this fact cannot be faced, then there is little else to be said. It is this which black people understand. I guess it just comes down to questions of who's going to be on what side. If there are Jews and other white people out there who understand, never was there a more opportune time for them to let their voices be heard. All I hear is silence, and if that's all there's going to be, then so be it.³⁰

1. James Baldwin, "Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," *New York Times Magazine*, 9 April 1967, 26, 27ff.; L. D. Reddick, "Anti-Semitism among Negroes," *Negro Quarterly* 1 (Summer 1942): 112-22; Kenneth Clark, "Candor in the Negro-Jewish Relations," *Commentary*, February 1946, 8-14. See also bibliography in *Negro-Jewish Relations in the United States*, Papers and Proceedings of a conference convened by the Conference on Jewish Social Studies, New York City (New York: Citadel Press, 1966), 67-71.

2. Earl Rabb probably spoke for many Jews when he suggested that African American writers were in danger of crossing the fine line between explanation and rationalization.

Negroes trying to reassure Jewish audiences repeatedly and unwitting make the very point they are trying to refute. "This is not anti-Semitism," [black writers] say. "The hostility is toward the whites. When [blacks] say 'Jew,' they mean 'white.' But that is an exact and acute description of political anti-Semitism: 'The enemy' becomes the Jew, 'the man' becomes the Jew, the villain is not so much the actual Jewish merchant on the corner as the corporate Jew who stands symbolically for generic evil.

See Earl Rabb, "The Black Revolution & the Jewish Question," *Commentary*, January 1969, 29.

3. See SNCC Papers, Subgroup B, New York Office, Series III (Microfilm edition by Microfilming Corporation of America); and financial records in box 8, Civil Rights Movement in the United States Collection, University of California, Los Angeles.

4. Cf. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From Its Origins to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1967).

5. Karenga's political development is revealed in my extended interview with him, conducted on 4 October 1977.

6. Interview conducted in Mississippi during the summer of 1963.

7. Ibid.

8. See Nathan Glazer, "Negroes & Jews: The New Challenge to Pluralism," *Commentary*, December 1964, 29-34.

9. "Is SNCC Racist or Radical" (editorial), *Jewish Currents*, July-August 1966.

10. I. F. Stone, "Why They Cry Black Power" *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, 19 September 1966.

11. Myron Cohen to Stokely Carmichael, 9 November 1966; unsigned letter to Cohen, 11 November 1966. SNCC Papers, Series I, Chairman's Files, New York.

12. Fred Buch to Stokely Carmichael, 9 November 1966, SNCC Papers, Series I, Chairman's Files.
13. Mrs. Joseph Walzer to Stokely Carmichael, 17 January 1967, SNCC Papers, Series I, Chairman's Files.
14. See Rabbi Harold I. Saperstein to H. Rap Brown, 5 January 196[8], SNCC Papers I. Chairman's Files.
15. See letters in James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 492-96.
16. Fred Meely, "The Chicken or the Egg of the Middle East," *Aframerican News for You*, July 1967.
17. "Third World Round Up; The Palestine Problem: Test Your Knowledge," *SNCC Newsletter*, June-July 1967, 4-5.
18. Forman, *Black Revolutionaries*, p. 496; Jean Wiley interview with author, 11 May 1978, in Washington, D.C. See also "S. N. C. C. Charges Israel Atrocities," *New York Times*, 15 August 1967; "Zionism Assailed in Newsletter of SNCC," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 1967; "SNCC and the Jews," *Newsweek*, 29 August 1967.
19. Cleveland Sellers, with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 203.
20. "Bikel Scores Attack on Jews by S.N.C.C. and Quits the Group," *New York Times*, 17 July 1967; "Golden Criticizes S.N.C.C. and Quits," *New York Times*, 22 August 1967.
21. Saperstein to Brown, 5 January 196[8].
22. "The Mid-East and the Liberal Reaction," *SNCC Newsletter*, September-October 1967, 5.
23. Raab, "Black Revolution," 29.
24. Julius Lester, *All Is Well* (New York: William Morrow 1976), 130.
25. *Ibid.*, 131.
26. *Ibid.*, 153.
27. See text in Lester, *All Is Well*, 158.
28. Nathan Glazer, "Blacks, Jews & the Intellectuals," *Commentary*, April 1969, 33-39.
29. *Ibid.*, 39.
30. Lester, "A Response," in *Black Anti-Semitism and Jewish Racism* (New York: Richard W. Baron, 1969), 237.