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Voter registration drives initiated by civil rights activists following the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act led to a sharp increase in black voter registration and the subsequent election of black political figures at the local, state and even national levels. With the November 1968 elections, the 91st Congress saw the largest delegation of Black Elected Officials (BEOs) in the 20th century, with nine members sent to the House of Representatives, among them former civil rights activist William Clay (D-Missouri), Cleveland mayor’s brother Louis Stokes (D-Ohio) and the first African American woman, Shirley Chisholm (D-New York). The new BEOs would quickly found, under the leadership of Charles Diggs (D-Michigan), a Democratic Select Committee which would the same year develop into the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). The CBC would in turn build a black agenda in the defense of collective interests, so as to exercise some leverage within the larger realm of American politics. 1968 was thus yet another important transitional year.
in the process from protest to electoral politics. However, this is not the predominant narrative.

In fact, 1968 is mostly remembered as a highly disruptive year, which bears the scars of violent uprisings in more than 130 cities, the expression of rage and despair felt by black ghetto youth in the aftermath of King’s assassination, only four days after President Johnson had announced he would not seek reelection. Forty-three people were killed, 3,500 injured, and 23,700 federal troops as well as 34,900 National Guardsmen were sent to restore order nationwide (McAdam, 227). Who was to blame for this upsurge in violence? Certainly not the Blacks who were now holding office, since even though they expressed the same rage and despair as black ghetto youth, they expressed it only with words. Were the ones at fault those advocating “Black Power” with capital letters? Or those who claimed that integration, since it could not be attained, should not be the goal of the black struggle for liberation anymore, and that Blacks had to use “any means necessary”? Black Power advocates were definitely held responsible for the decline of the Civil Rights movement, the white backlash, and for a future without any hope of racial harmony. Black Power was associated with intense rebelliousness and even revolutionary anarchism, as the Black Panthers became highly visible in the media and demonstrated powerfully when the Black Power’s raised-fist salute, given by Tommie Smith and John Carlos during the Mexico City Olympics, was broadcasted on national television. The diabolizing of Black Power advocacy crossed racial lines, for Bayard Rustin had denounced it as early as 1966 in his most famous piece, published in *Commentary* in September, and entitled “Black Power and Coalition Politics”:

I contend not only that black power lacks any real value for the Civil Rights movement, but that its propagation is positively harmful. It diverts the movement from a meaningful debate over strategy and tactics, it isolates the Negro community and it encourages the growth of anti-Negro forces (Rustin 1966, 35).

Rustin’s view of the Black Power movement prevailed: even in contemporary historical narratives, the Black Power movement is to the Civil Rights movement what Mister Hyde is to Doctor Jekyll. As a consequence, the Black Power movement is usually relegated to a secondary or even nonexistent role in the development of black politics. Worse, it is even sometimes considered to have hindered the process.

Contrary to Rustin’s assertion, the road pursued by Black Power activists did not lead to an impasse. Without occulting the differences between politics as protest and politics as institutionalized norm, this study will demonstrate that the year 1968 cannot be viewed merely as the high point of Black Power and the point of the Civil Rights movement demise. By focusing on the National Black Political Conventions of the late 60s and more precisely on the largely ignored 1968 Philadelphia Black Power Conference, this analysis will show that the Black Power movement had a profound influence on black electoral politics. It should thus be recognized as a force that led the actors of the larger movement for black liberation to rethink goals and strategies. While not necessarily embracing a long movement approach, this study posits that both movements, without forming an indistinguishable whole, can be qualified as phases within a larger one. Those phases truly interact, and as such their analysis provides a new perspective on American politics. The continuing tension between radicals and moderates within the evolving larger movement helped shape a workable black agenda, to be used as a potentially influential bargaining tool in institutionalized politics. It gave a voice to those within the black leadership who dreamt and asked for more than what institutionalized politics
could traditionally offer. It is therefore high time to take a closer look at the neglected yet crucial interaction between the moderate and radical components of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and their influence on the evolution of black electoral politics.

**Rustin and the Declension Narrative: The Civil Rights Movement Died in 1968**

5 Giving the Civil Rights movement the appearance of political and ideological unity was the only way to achieve success. That is why African Americans were asked to abandon their political and ideological divergences so as to unite around the goal of political integration and make the latter happen as quickly and coherently as possible (Pinderhughes, 485-487). However, when studying the Civil Rights movement, emphasizing its unity conceals the reality of its different phases and puts it in sharp contrast with the Black Power movement. The latter appears radical and disorganized. Both movements are not viewed as phases within a larger one which interact and help define each other, but as antagonistic and distinctive movements, sharply divided along ideological and strategic lines. Consequently, the declension narrative overpowers the complex realities of their evolution. Proponents of the declension narrative will claim that the Civil Rights movement died with Martin Luther King in 1968. To counter this narrative, a long movement thesis has developed. However, it would be simplistic to assume that the two narratives are diametrically opposed. In their critique of the long movement thesis, Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Land (2007) judiciously contradict the common perception that the theses of the long movement and the traditional understanding of the black protest-turned-social movements are necessarily antonymic:

> Recognizing the Civil Rights and Black Power movements as waves in a broader more complex river of resistance and affirmation, the Black Liberation Movement, is not tantamount to acceptance of a declension narrative, emphasizing a "golden age" of nonviolent protest followed by a period of black militancy and racial chauvinism. (Cha-Jua and Lang, 270)

6 Bayard Rustin had prophesized as early as 1966 that there was no alternative to the institutionalization of the Civil Rights movement; he became the champion of the declension narrative. Indeed, in developing his vision of the movement’s future, Rustin called for a coalition movement which would gather together labor unionists and liberals of various ethnic backgrounds. Accordingly, he was “an outspoken opponent of any sort of separatism, nationalism, or Black Power.” (Levine, 210) Rustin was doubtlessly a harsh critic of Black Power advocates whose sole purpose, to him, was to call for a severance of ties with the white community. He feared that the assassination of Martin Luther King would bring about a deepening sense of isolation on the part of black activists (Rustin 1968, 190). Rustin worried that consequently they would understand the Black Power admonition of Carmichael and Hamilton that African Americans as a group had first to “close ranks” as a permanent strategy instead of a temporary measure to increase their political influence.5

7 While Rustin was right about the fact that Black Power advocates reacted strongly to King’s assassination, it does not mean that their expression of rage was necessarily damaging. True, a minority of radical black activists, such as Max Stanford, H. Rap Brown or Huey Newton, advocated the use of violence and did not limit themselves to violent rhetoric, yet this reflected the reality of the black experience for ghetto black youth. Still,
Rustin’s understanding of the movement is far too reductive, because his purpose is to show that Black Power activists and black elected officials had nothing to bring to each other. They formed distinctive political entities, one bound to fail, the other representing the promise of black politics. The contemporary National Black Political Conventions are furthermore a neglected area in the field of black studies. The few authors who attempted to give it meaning (sometimes participants in the conventions themselves), such as Ronald Walters or William Clay, both a CBC member and a Gary attendee, tend to consider them as failures. They focus instead on the National Black Political Conventions (NBPC), and the Gary one in particular, as a series of events that either marked the end of the movement or led to a political dead-end in the conservative era of American politics (Cruse 1974, Jones, Walters, Smith, Walters, Clay, Gafio Watts and to some extent, Marable). However, as the study of the NBPC shows, black radicals and moderates, nationalists and integrationists interacted with each other. Of course, this sometimes led to a cacophony of somewhat unrealistic strategies and goals. But these interactions were the necessary ground on which a sustainable strategy for achieving black political empowerment could grow. Furthermore, even if radical in style, the discourse was more often than not reformist in substance. In Philadelphia, black radical nationalists were well represented and were probably the most vocal in their demands, but this should not occult the fact that there were also many proponents of moderate forms of Black Power, including, at the other end of the spectrum, those who felt close to presidential candidate Richard Nixon.

The 1968 Philadelphia Black Power Conference: Revolution or Reform?

Before Stokely Carmichael, Adam Clayton Powell (D-New York), a black legislator elected to Congress in 1945, had given meaning to Black Power in his “Black Position Paper” first delivered on May 28, 1965 in Chicago. Powell remarkably blended integrationist and nationalist rhetoric. He encouraged Blacks to continue using nonviolent direct action and more importantly to make the best use of their newly acquired voting power, but also insisted on defining Black Power as black pride and called for African Americans to fight in order to achieve economic and political independence. What mattered to him was for Blacks to create black interest groups and black-owned businesses and to elect black legislators and other qualified political leaders (Powell, 12438-12439).

For Powell as for other advocates of Black Power who sought to ensure political leverage so as to guarantee political autonomy, political dependence was to be avoided at all costs. They believed that in order to represent a new force in electoral politics, Blacks had to remain independent. However, they had not yet articulated what political independence actually meant, and surely it would not mean the same thing for Powell as for many black nationalists, especially the most radical. For the latter, compromise with black elected officials associated with the Democratic Party, who had by definition already integrated American electoral politics, was not an option.

To guarantee political independence and leverage, Black Power activists, inspired by Malcolm X and under the impetus of Powell, decided to organize a series of conventions in order to discuss political strategies and goals. The joint project materialized in the National Black Political Conventions, the first major one being held in Newark, New
Jersey in 1967. Contrary to Gafio Watts’s assertion, the NBPC were rooted in African American history (Gafio Watts, 406). Indeed, the series of NBPC, which lasted from 1966 to 1980, was modeled on the National Negro Conventions of the 1830-1860s and the 1926 National Negro Congress, in the impossible hope that the ideal of ideological unity and strategic consensus would translate into a distinctive reality. These conventions would in theory, by the appropriate use of participatory democracy, develop a consensual black agenda aimed at offering black political candidates guidance and a means to exercise collective political influence.

The very first planning conference for the NBPC, held in Washington and organized by Adam Clayton Powell himself, on September 3, 1966 and the first actual NBPC, held in Newark the following year, attracted each between 1,000 and 2,000 participants. The latter was organized only three days after the Newark uprisings and for that reason came close to being cancelled. Some 169 delegates participated in the workshop; they represented 42 cities and more than 200 black organizations (Martin, 21). The Newark Black Power Conference, held from July 20 to July 23, 1967, was organized under the chairmanship of Nathan Wright, a Philadelphia episcopal clergyman. Wright would remain faithful to the Republican Party in the late 60s and 70s; he somewhat shared the pluralist vision of Hamilton and Carmichael but gave it a much more conservative twist. Maulana Ron Karenga (also known as Ron Everett), the cultural nationalist leader of the organization Us, helped Wright coordinate the effort. Karenga put the emphasis on the principle of “operational unity” which built on the idea that Blacks should try to put aside, at least temporarily, their differences in terms of strategy, in order to form a solid coalition in the defense of their specific interests. The principle was vague enough to be welcomed by Blacks of all political variations and would serve as a guide in future conventions.

In Newark, a planning committee with five permanent members was created, with Wright and Karenga as members, as well as Isaiah Robinson, a Harlem CORE member and advisor to the board of education of the I.S. 201 project; Omar Ahmed, also a Harlem CORE member and former prominent member of Malcolm X’s Organization for Afro-American Unity; and Chuck Stone, a journalist and Representative Powell’s special aide (1965-1967). The Continuations Committee was to organize a National Black Power Conference every year.

During the Newark Conference, the delegates issued a Black Power Manifesto, blending liberal integrationist, nationalist, and panafricanist philosophies. The Newark resolutions included the need to greatly increase black representation at the congressional level and in local institutions:

Elect 12 more black Congressmen in 1968 to triple our black representation. Target districts are Atlanta, Baltimore, Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant, Cleveland, Gary, Newark, Richmond, St Louis, Chicago’s West Side, two from Mississippi and one from South Carolina (Stone 1968, 234).

Several points that also mattered for the delegates were the organization of black political conventions in the shadow of the two parties’ national conventions as a way to make black political empowerment gain official recognition; economic empowerment via the promotion of “buy black” campaigns; community control of schools, as well the separation of the United States into a white and a black territory (Stone 1968, 225-228). This combination of panafricanist, nationalist, and liberal integrationist ideas can be interpreted as a rough draft for the 1968 Philadelphia conference. The latter was held
between August 28 and September 1, at approximately the same time as the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and its scope was national. The question was whether the majority of the Philadelphia conveners had built their convention around Hamilton and Carmichael’s admonition about “closing ranks”. Had they chosen reform over revolution? This pluralist approach developed by both authors would be repudiated by Carmichael early on, as he became associated with the Black Panthers and later moved to Guinea; Hamilton thus became its sole defender. A few days after King’s assassination, Hamilton, reflecting upon Operation Breadbasket as “Black Power in operation,” kept defending the idea that “Black Power must insist that the institutions in the black community be led by, and wherever possible, staffed by blacks.” (Hamilton 23) On this basic premise, the delegates could all agree.

Because of the disruptions during the first NBPC which had led, according to the participants, to an extremely biased rendering of the event by the press (Washington, 74-75), the organizers had decided to exclude all Whites, even journalists. Chuck Stone was chosen as the intermediary between the delegates and the press, but journalists could not get a firsthand account of the event. For these reasons, there was little, if anything, in the national mainstream press about it. Nonetheless, it was logical that the conference as a whole attracted extremely little media coverage, even afterwards, as the eyes of the world were turned on to the events unfolding during the Chicago DNC. People were watching the confrontation between the police and demonstrators outside, and were trying to make sense of the protest of some of the convention delegates inside. Meanwhile the convention majority nominated Hubert Humphrey as the Democratic candidate for the upcoming presidential election. Channing Phillips, the first Black to receive votes for the presidential nomination, ranked fourth, with 68 votes.

The Philadelphia Black Power conference drew approximately 4,000 people to North Philadelphia’s Church of the Advocate, far exceeding the building’s capacity. On the last day, the conference was moved to the larger building of the Benjamin Franklin High School (Black Power Conference Reports, 17). Its theme was “Black self-determination and black unity through direct action.” It gathered an eclectic cast of black leaders, such as Max Stanford, Queen Audley Mother Moore, Richard Henry, Malana Karenga, Amiri Baraka, Jesse Jackson, Whitney Young, Nathan Hare, John Conyers, and Rosa Parks.

Electoral politics was not the only issue debated in Philadelphia. There were overall ten workshops organized around the themes of politics, education, culture, history, economics, reparations, black student as well as black women community organizing, religion, and communication (Black Power Conference Reports, 1). For the participants, the right to develop black-owned businesses in or outside of the ghetto, to redefine school and university curricula so as to include Blacks in the larger realm of American history, and to (re)write African American history as a whole, were issues as fundamental as the right to vote and choosing black candidates for office.

The conference reflected the diversity of ideologies of Black Power advocates, but also their ambivalence. While Nathan Wright declared that it was “the most inclusive conference ever” (NBC Evening News), the Philadelphia Black Power Conference Reports, published in 1970 in New York, which transcribe selected resolutions, provide a narrative that seemed to indicate the prevalence of radical nationalists, especially regarding the development of electoral politics. The sampling of organizations mentioned as active participants in the conference are the National Association of Black Social Workers, the Republic of New Africa and the Black Panther Party. However, members of all major civil
rights organizations, such as SCLC, NAACP, CORE and NUL were also present. Max Stanford (also known as Muhammad Ahmad), the founder of the OAAU shadow organization the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), which held close ties with the Black Panther Party, advocated self-defense and revolution. RAM’s official aim was to organize the rage of black ghetto youth so as to foster chaos and bring down American institutions. Stanford was also heavily guarded by his own men, dressed in paramilitary attire, and this infuriated the more moderate participants (Giovanni, 30). The rhetoric used by Stanford, blending Marxist theory with the use of “urban guerrilla warfare” tactics was violent and counterproductive. It led a great many white Americans, and some African Americans as well, to believe that indeed Black Power advocates were entirely responsible for the urban uprisings, which concealed the fact that Black Power radicalism had not initially caused the poorest Blacks to come to such desperate means. The violent rhetoric did lead, understandably, many delegates to distance themselves from the leader, whose organization was becoming increasingly fragmented.

18 Queen Audley Mother Moore, the leader of the Reparations Movement who chaired the eponymous workshop, was much more moderate in her stance, but no less radical in spirit. She was the cofounder, with Richard and Milton Henry, of the Republic of New Africa. They all were provocative in their demand for a separate territory on US ground, in the tradition of Garveyist ideology. Instead of professing a return to Africa, the recently formed organization’s proposal was to have the Deep South States of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina withdrawn from the Union so as to create a nation reserved to Blacks only, with its own, separate institutions (Black Power Conference Reports, 34-35). Richard Henry claimed that they already had a provisional government, and that once they had the land to build a nation, they would get the help of international resources and the “moral and physical help” from African nations (NBC Evening News). Moreover, Moore pressed for the recognition of the debt the US government owed to Blacks as compensation for the decades the previous generations had spent in bondage. Undoubtedly utopian, Moore and Henry’s proposal nevertheless paved the way for the development of the modern Reparations movement and this led to the issuance of James Forman’s Black Manifesto the following year, which gave the movement its framework—and demanded $500 million in reparation. These demands were considered by most integrationists as being an impossible wish to fulfill. Worse, for Bayard Rustin, they represented an “impractical and politically reactionary” program entirely built on white guilt (Rustin 1969, 100).

19 The most radical nationalists were disappointed by the reception of their discourse, explaining that they felt that the tone of the convention was too confrontational (NBC Evening News). It was indeed frustrating for them to see other speakers, who had a different understanding of the meaning of Black power, try to impose themselves as national leaders in order to fill the void left by King’s death. Max Stanford shared their dissatisfaction when he indicated that, as opposed to Wright, he felt that the convention was not addressing the needs of “the average Black,” and was thus illegitimate in its claim to represent the collective interest of Blacks (NBC Evening News). Tensions were high among the most radical delegates, who differed in terms of ideological and strategic thinking and who found it extremely difficult to follow the principle of “operational unity.” These tensions reflected the failed attempts at coalition building between such organizations as RAM, the Black Panther Party, the Republic of New Africa, SNCC and Us (Woodard, 118).
Even though it was also becoming extremely difficult to imagine the most radical resolutions transform into anything concrete, the year 1968 witnessed the most intense political expression of black demands for self-determination and independence ever. In the economics workshop, chaired by Brooklyn CORE Robert Carson, a staunch anticapitalist, black politics were given a much broader, pragmatic meaning. Dealing with the issue of black employment and the development of black-owned businesses, the delegates, in the presence of Jesse Jackson, reframed the goals of SCLC’s Poor People’s Campaign.24 With their focal point on decent housing conditions for black people, the workshop reflected the hopes triggered by the passage of the Civil Rights Act of April 11. The delegates additionally discussed the need to develop labor unions—and whether they should exclude interracial coalitions—and to create a National Bank for Blacks, even though its chairman recognized that not much had been achieved since the last convention (Black Power Conference Reports, 26). Despite this setback, Maulana Ron Karenga still expressed his confidence that the convention would witness the birth of a set of unified strategies and goals (NBC Evening News).

The most vivid calls for political independence were made in the politics workshop chaired by Richard Traylor, who held close ties with cultural nationalist Amiri Baraka. The workshop participants encouraged the creation of local black parties detached from the mainstream so as to exercise leverage in cities where the majority of the population was black, and even more:

We urge the endorsement of the United Brothers and Sisters of Newark’s Political Program growing out of a Black Political Convention held in Newark on June 21 - 23, 1968, which set forth the following principles:

1. The election of dedicated Black men and women for every available office.
2. Black self-determination: political, social, and economic.
3. Black control of the political structure of the city of Newark (Black Power Conference Reports, 7-8).

To this was added that campaigns should be readily organized “for Black presidential candidates and Black candidates for offices.” (Black Power Conference Reports, 5)

So far, the idea was neither new nor revolutionary, and could have won the approval of the great majority of delegates, although it was obviously a rejection of interracial alternatives such as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (1964), or anything that Rustin would have defended. What did it mean to create an actual “black party”? According to the workshop chairman, it meant that a separate national black government would be created in the process and that meanwhile, the Republic of New Africa was deemed a potential provisional government (Black Power Conference Reports, 6). Evidently the two-party system was rejected from the start. However, according to Chuck Stone, who played a key role in the organizing of the conference, a national black political formation would act more as a force influencing the mainstream parties than as a real party. It would put pressure on the Democratic or the Republican candidates or elected officials and threaten to withdraw support in case they did not defend the interests of Blacks (Stone 1969, 11). Stone thus developed a more moderate and pragmatic form of electoral politics, which was nationalist in tone, but did not reject integration nor political institutionalization.25

The idea that the election of black candidates and the creation of a third black party or force were the best strategic tools for Blacks would permeate the conference and those that were to follow. The ambivalence regarding whether these candidates and this so-
called “party” would actually work within or outside of institutionalized politics helped ease the transition from protest to electoral politics and blurred the line between the two forms of political actions.

In parallel, Karenga’s somewhat cryptic message was meant to convey the idea that the black delegates would be able to unite behind a single strategy because they had the same goals. He stated that “everybody ha[d] the same interest: self-determination, self-respect, self-security, and self-defense.” (Clark, 2) This broad generalization was welcomed by Karenga’s greatest admirer, Amiri Baraka, who was the culture/creativity workshop chairman. As the leader of the Black Arts movement, Baraka had three years earlier founded the Newark Spirit House, a black community theater. Arrested and beaten up by the police during the 1967 Newark uprisings, he had been deeply affected by this violent injustice and had thus become more politically active. As was to be expected, he expressed the same understanding as Karenga, who had developed Black Power as black cultural nationalism, of the need for black art and culture as a means to “reassert Blackness that’s been taken off and forgotten” (Black Power Conference Reports, 39).

Karenga and Baraka would pursue this goal of emphasizing black pride during the 1970s, although Baraka changed his view from black nationalism to Marxism-Leninism in 1974.26 The same year, Karenga would be arrested on charges of assault. His organization Us, which was misogynist and increasingly sectarian, had been in violent confrontation with the Black Panthers for years, and was quickly dismantled (Joseph 2009, 36). If attention is paid only to the trajectories of the two charismatic delegates, the 1968 Philadelphia Black Power Conference can be considered an utter failure. There is no doubt that both Karenga and Baraka were too overtly optimistic when they imagined that the debates at the conference would quickly transform into concrete action. The conference proceedings were also too often obscured by ideological tensions within the most radical factions, and the myriad of organizations that accompanied them. However the 1968 Philadelphia Black Power Conference, with its emphasis on the need to increase political leverage, also helped pave the way for future national political conventions, even though the continuations committee was unable to fulfill its promise to hold conventions every year.

Indeed if, in 1968, in a combination of realism and idealism, Amiri Baraka’s black party was thus thought as a hybrid political structure with conventional, institutionalized, and legitimizated characteristics, but also with disruptive, militant, and protest-oriented ones, it would later transform into a convention.28 Baraka understood that, even if increasingly influential leaders such as Charles Diggs, Julian Bond, and Jesse Jackson were warming up to the idea of a specifically black political agenda, the creation of an independent black political party remained a highly disputed issue. Moreover, if Baraka seemed to share Richard Traylor’s vision that black electoral politics should be detached from mainstream parties, in practice, he was the one who helped build an interracial coalition of Blacks and Puerto-Ricans in Newark, which greatly contributed to the election the city’s first black mayor, Kenneth Gibson, in 1970. These tensions reflected the Black Power Movement’s strong sense of racial solidarity, the need for numerical representation, and above all an inherent ambivalence toward institutionalized politics.29

The 1968 Philadelphia Black Power conference was an incredibly formative experience for many of its participants. Most radical nationalists and the vast array of organizations that supported them had reached the peak of their power and seemed to be singing their swan song, although many would remain vocal in the conventions of 1970 and 1972. In fact, the study of the Philadelphia conference proceedings also shows that Black Power discourse was not necessarily destructive and sometimes only temporarily or even virtually separatist. The development of a specifically black culture did not necessarily mean that Blacks should live separately from Whites. Ideas developed by delegates such as the creation of the separate nation, virtual or real, the need for reparations, an independent party, the support for black candidates, the development of black-owned businesses, and a specific black culture, strongly articulated in 1968, would be carried onward, and would help reinforce the sense of shared fate among Blacks. Panafriicanism would also greatly develop, forming a tentative continuum between the fate of Blacks in the USA and people of African descent worldwide. Black Power was by no means uniform or static, which Rustin contended, even though he considered its lack of cohesiveness a weakness:

The call for Black Power is now over three years old, yet to this day no one knows what Black Power is supposed to mean and therefore how its proponents are to unite and rally behind it. If one is a member of CORE, Black Power posits the need for a separate black economy based upon traditional forms of capitalist relations. For SNCC the term refers to a politically united black community. Us would emphasize the unity of black culture, while the Black Panthers wish to impose upon black nationalism the philosophies of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Chairman Mao. Nor do they exhaust all the possible shades and gradations of meaning. If there is one common theme uniting the various demands for Black Power, it is simply that blacks must be guided in their actions by a consciousness of themselves as a separate race (Rustin quoted in Van Deburg, 220).

To stress the need for interracial coalition-building, Rustin rejected the potential ambiguity of Black Power and tried to impose his own rigid interpretation of it so as to define it as antagonistic to his own views. And therefore it makes sense that the mastermind behind the scenes of the Civil Rights movement would be disappointed in the lack of rhetorical, strategic and organizational cohesiveness of the Black Power movement during late 1960s–early 1970s. True, according to radical black nationalists, integration was a myth; it was not something to be hoped for nor sought because it was more often than not associated with complete assimilation. But if Black Power advocates disagreed on the subject of the creation of an independent black political party, they agreed that the development of black political leverage was necessary. For that reason, they supported a black agenda which, in theory and practice, would give the evolving social movement a new impetus. The 1968 Philadelphia Black Power Conference had failed to develop such an agenda, but its proceedings served as the blueprint for the agenda of the early 1970s, born out of the Congressional Black Caucus and the 1972 Gary National Black Political Convention (Veroni-Paccher, 16). Contrary to Rustin’s beliefs, it appears that moderate black nationalists did not reject the institutional system entirely. At a time when the demands of black activists had shifted from basic civil rights to full equality, black elected officials worked to reform political institutions from within, but they could not do it on their own. They would be able to do so only by letting moderate
What should be noted though is that 1968 Black Power would also take on a whole new meaning with black leaders such as Nathan Wright. The development of black-owned businesses was one of the many facets of Black Power, and although there was no explicit mention of “black capitalism” in the conference reports, the conference chairman was a strong supporter of it. A year earlier Wright had published “Black Power and Urban Unrest,” in which he explained that Blacks should try to get a piece of the pie: “Black Power in terms of self-development means we want to fish as all Americans should do together in the main stream of American life.” (Wright 1967, 62) A staunch Republican, Wright had thus already developed the concept and gave it a much more conservative angle, which would greatly inspire presidential candidate Nixon. The latter was considered by Wright, as he explained in Let’s Work Together, published in 1968, to be:

among the most capable leaders that our nation might except to find in the days ahead. His needs, the satisfaction of which he would welcome, are but symptomatic of the needs of our society as a whole (Wright 1968, 54).

As the co-organizer of both the Newark and Philadelphia Black Power Conferences, Wright had welcomed the subsidies of 50 American corporations such as Clairol. In a letter addressed to the Philadelphia delegates, the Clairol President stated that Black Power meant “ownership of apartments, ownership of homes, ownership of businesses, as well as equitable treatment for all people” (Allen, 164). In his account of the proceedings, black Marxist scholar Robert Allen denounces what he considered as Uncle Tomism on the part of Nathan Wright, dismissing the conference as yet another form of “corporate imperialism”. Building on Black Power’s elusiveness, Allen’s conclusion is indeed truly surprising, as it brutally dispossesses the conference of its radicalism and even its moderate nationalist stance. What is remarkable, nevertheless, is to see that indeed, at some point, Black Power came to adopt such a variety of meanings that it became completely distorted. As an answer to the summer urban uprisings, Richard Nixon had crafted an odd message, broadcasted in his CBS nationwide radio address, “Bridges to Human Dignity”, meant to reassure Republicans, black and white, as well as to attract liberals:

What most of the militants are asking is not separation, but to be included in--not as supplicants, but as owners, as entrepreneurs--to have a share of the wealth and a piece of the action. And this is precisely what the federal central target of the new approach ought to be. It ought to be oriented toward more black ownership, from this can flow the rest--black pride, black jobs, black opportunity and, yes, black power, in the best constructive sense of that often misapplied term (Nixon).

Nixon’s aim was to downplay the role of racism in black unemployment and socioeconomic difficulties; he was indeed critical of the Kerner Commission Report on Civil Disorders for what he considered as an “undue emphasis on the role of white racists and its failure to indict the perpetrators of the riots themselves.” (Semble 1968, 1) To show that he was deeply concerned with civil rights, Nixon had promoted the creation of minority set-asides when he formed OMBE, the Office of Minority Business Enterprise (Kotlowski, 410). After his election, he started making promises to black leaders that he would do “more for the Negro than any president has ever done.” (Semble 1969, 1) By claiming to do so, Nixon “paid lip service to a form of economic black separatism.” (Kotlowski, 413) The President would quickly develop his Southern Strategy, with its set
of coded words attracting conservatives formerly associated with the Democratic Party, in complete contradiction with his former promise of supporting black empowerment. While both Nathan Wright and Richard Nixon’s use of the Black Power concept certainly dispossessed it of its rebelliousness, at least temporarily, it should not mean, however, that it obliterated the concept as a whole. The Black Power movement did not die in the hands of Nixon, just as the Civil Rights movement did not die because of Black Power advocacy.

Unfortunately, other forces would also be at play to counter black political empowerment, and black activists would not be able to measure the extent of state repression that would become blatant once the FBI COINTELPRO files were released to the public under the principle of the Freedom of Information Act, as William Sales Jr. acknowledges:

Actually the rhetoric of self-defense and retaliation had been a constant feature of urban black resistance for a period far longer than that of the Civil Rights and the Black Power insurgencies. What was novel to the situation was the government’s decision to disrupt, discredit and destroy the movement (Sales, 197).

While one may argue that state repression was the price to pay for the use of advocacy of violence against governmental institutions, the study of Edgar J. Hoover and FBI’s COINTELPRO program shows that Hoover increasingly and indiscriminately targeted black activists and their organizations in order to force black activists into silence and black organizations to dismantlement. State repression was particularly intense in 1968.

As Douglas McAdam explains:

No fewer than twenty-four known black insurgent groups were subject to tax surveillance as part of a larger effort to use the IRS to harass “extremist groups” of varying (though primarily leftist) political philosophies (McAdam, 218).

Hoover evidently had an extremely large understanding of leftist extremism, as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Stokely Carmichael, described as a potential “messiah” in a March 1968 memo, were under FBI strict scrutiny (Warden, 25). As far as organizations were concerned, it seems more logical though that the Revolutionary Action Movement became one of the primary targets of the Program. However, to keep Max Stanford and other RAM members away from the streets, they were “arrested on every possible charge until they could no longer make bail.” Moreover, SNCC, SCLC, RAM, CORE and NOI were all considered, in an incredible pell-mell, as “Nationalist-Hate groups” as an FBI internal memo of August 25, 1967 clearly indicates (Hoover, 3-5).

The FBI program weakened the Black Power movement, but the most radical groups that emerged in the late 60s were also unable to find a consensus with the activists within the movement who did not reject American institutions entirely. The latter were in fact much closer to the average black American, as the 1969 Newsweek “Special Report from Black America” poll conducted by Peter Goldman suggested: 63% of interviewed Blacks nationwide still believed that rights could be won without violence (21% believed the contrary); moreover, 69% of Blacks did not want to witness the creation of a separate black nation, against 21% in favor (Goldman, 20, 23). While Northern black ghetto youth of the late 60s, the “Stokely generation”, seemed to have lost faith in nonviolence and remained intensely frustrated by the lack of progress, they still had a dream (Stout, 19-21). This ambivalence on the part of black ghetto youth was reflected in the resolutions of the 1968 Philadelphia Black Power conference.
Despite Karenga and Baraka’s dream of strategic unity, it was thus predictable that the most radical delegates in Philadelphia would find it difficult to share their vision with more moderate black activists, members of mainstream civil rights organizations, and new black elected officials. In essence, their common goal was to increase the influence of the black electorate thanks to a unified political strategy, but deep ideological differences could not be transcended and there was large disagreement as to the means to achieve such a goal. The delegates remained united by their belief that the link to Africa created a feeling of unity and solidarity among African Americans. However, they could not agree on whether working within the framework of mainstream political institutions would actually guarantee political independence and racial unity. The vision of some of the most radical nationalists was so short-sighted, that it did not appear to them that while they sought to revolutionize the American institutional system, they were actually already using its most basic codes. Indeed, the development of local electoral politics would fortunately not lead to the complete withdrawal of Blacks from the system. However, a radical understanding of local politics carried the illusion that Blacks could build an actual separate nation on US soil, with separate institutions in the long term. The development of local electoral politics was a valuable strategy only when it was used to test the limits of a black political strategy that would be well-grounded in the American institutional system. Even though it remained a virtual battlefield, the real test indeed would be to see how black elected officials fared in the larger world of American politics.

In 1972, during the Gary National Black Political Convention, the other strain of black nationalism would become predominant. It was more pragmatic, less insurgent, and was the translation of Carmichael and Hamilton’s call for Blacks to “close ranks” before they could become politically integrated. The 1972 convention delegates in that sense were much more optimistic than those of the 1968 convention because political integration was deemed achievable in the near future. Despite this, Black Power kept being dismissed by Bayard Rustin as yet another form of self-destructive political withdrawal. Moreover, it was for too long denied existence in the African American narrative because of the prevalent simplistic dichotomy of integrationism versus nationalism. How Black Power advocates articulated their political goals and strategies gave a much more complex and richer meaning to the concept than Rustin cared to recognize.

It would indeed be hard for members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other black elected officials to publicly admit their indebtedness to the Black Power movement, even though the latter greatly contributed to their rise to power. Black elected officials first learnt to close ranks in order to enhance their political clout, but this is no longer an absolute necessity. Instead, they tend to rely more on their affiliation with the Democratic Party. If black elected officials have been truly empowered by the 1972 Gary convention’s capacity to build an agenda in an attempt to give meaning to black electoral politics, they have also tested and expanded the boundaries of American politics. Seeking legitimacy both inside and outside of the black community, black elected officials have developed a cohesive strategy which placed them in action and interaction with the black community. The fact that the series of NBPC did not translate into the building of a third party should not be considered as mere failure to transform political theory into real action. Together, the creation of the CBC and the organization of the Gary convention embodied the promise of black politics, a promise which cannot be forgotten: new BEOs should be able to work both inside and outside of institutionalized politics, and never lose touch with the protest tradition of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.
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NOTES

1. See Joseph: “Now, Black Power is most often remembered as the civil rights era’s ruthless twin. In most historical accounts of the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement represents the collective black consciousness of the postwar era. In these accounts, Black Power is then relegated as its evil doppelganger, having engaged in thoughtless acts of violence and rampaging sexism, and provoking a white backlash before it was finally brought to an end by its own self-destructive rage.” (Joseph 2010, 12)

2. The conference is mentioned in Sales (1994) and in Gafio Watts (2001). In general, in accounts of the Black Power era, most scholars hardly devote a paragraph or a page to the conference. Robert Allen offers a highly distorted vision of the conference. Komozi Woodard (1999), Matthew Countryman (2007) and Cedric Johnson (2007) are the rare authors who provide the most faithful—and yet partial—account of the conference proceedings.


4. In Commentary (September 1966 issue), Rustin explained that “The Civil Rights movement is evolving from a protest movement into a full-fledged social movement—an evolution calling its very name into question. It is now concerned not merely with removing the barriers to full opportunity but achieving the fact of equality. From sit-ins to Freedom Rides we have gone into
rent strikes, boycotts, community organization, and political action”. For more see Commentary, September 1966, 35-41.
6. The 1972 Gary convention is also neglected because when it is integrated in the larger NBPC movement, its purpose becomes distorted. The Convention’s sole purpose was not the creation of a black third-party per se, but the articulation of a much more complex vision of a black political force which would influence electoral politics either from the inside, the outside or both. The significance of Gary thus also lays in its complex, and sometimes contradictory, articulation of what an independent black political force actually meant.
The conventions that followed Gary indeed did not have its scope, because they were taken over by radical nationalist formations, because they did not gather as many participants, and because BEOs were then following their own path. But by blending Gary more or less uniformly into the larger NBPC, these authors obscure the Gary convention’s significance for black politics.
7. There was another black congressman then, named William Dawson (D-Illinois).
8. The following year, his paper entered the Congressional Record and was the basis upon which Powell elaborated his Howard University Commencement Speech.
9. Black scholar Komozi Woodard is one of the first to have emphasized the link between Malcolm X and the organizational structure of the OAAU (Organization for Afro-America Unity) and the creation of the National Black Political Conventions, which he considers a movement in its own right. According to him, the NBPC were meant to test electoral power and were inspired by Malcolm X’s declaration in “The Ballot or the Bullet” (April 3, 1964).
10. “Black national conventions on the model of the 1830-60 and 1936 conventions were organized with the idea of promoting ideological and strategic unity. The 1830 National Negro Convention was organized for the purpose of setting a specific agenda of national importance. As for the 1936 National Negro Congress, it was formed by black intellectuals such as Ralph Bunche with the explicit purpose of creating a civil rights agenda while trying to find ways to better the socioeconomic status of Blacks. Its purpose was also to develop alliances with white liberal organizations and unions.” (Persons, 194-195).
11. This one-day national planning conference was organized by Adam Clayton Powell and held in the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C. It would lay the ground for the Newark Convention organized in July 1967.
12. Even though by the time Black Power was published, at the end of the year 1967, Carmichael would have probably repudiated it as he had turned to Panaficanism.
13. Karenga’s Us had been created in Los Angeles in 1965 in order to help develop an alternative black culture, with a specific set of values, rituals, and aesthetics all summarized in the philosophy of Kawaida-Swahili for “tradition and reason”. Us members adopted African names, dress, and learned Swahili.
14. The Newark NBPC also led to the organization of local black political conventions the following summer, whose aim was to carry selected black candidates to city office; one was organized in Newark by Baraka and Karenga from June 21 to 23 around the theme of “Peace and Power,” to create an association between the Black Power and the Anti-War movements, but none of the chosen candidates was elected (see Woodard 101-102). Similar attempts took place in Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Boston, Denver, Los Angeles, and other cities.
15. Operation Breadbasket was initiated by SCLC and was directed by Jesse Jackson after 1967. It aimed at fighting against job discrimination and black unemployment.
16. With the notable exception of the local newspaper The Philadelphia Inquirer (August 29, 30 and 31 as well as September 2 issues), of the black newspaper the Indianapolis Recorder (September 7 issue), as well as an NBC report on September 2 (which lasted 4 minutes). See NBC Evening News for Monday, Sep 2, 1968.
17. Black Panther Elridge Cleaver, the author of the controversial Soul on Ice, ran as a candidate for the Peace and Freedom Party, but was not even eligible in many states because of his youth.

18. Although Father Washington states that there were roughly 8,000 people present, most accounts of the event evaluate the number of participants at about half that figure.

19. The list of black leaders who attended the convention fluctuates from one scholar to another. Woodard claims that Carmichael attended but this contradicts the account of the conference by Father Washington and the Black Power Conference Reports themselves. Another example of this absence of reliable information is that no one mentions the presence of Rosa Parks but Jeanne Theoharis, who has done extensive research on Parks’ life and is to publish a book on her in the following months. It makes perfect sense that she attended, as the Civil Rights movement pioneer Rosa Parks had been, with John Conyers, at the forefront of the opposition to American involvement in the Vietnam War. Moreover Theoharis received the information from Nathan Hare. To learn more about Rosa Parks’ involvement in the Black Power movement, see transcript of Theoharis’ interview available online at: <http://www.democracynow.org/2013/2/4/on_rosa_parks_100th_birthday_recalling>.

20. See Nikki Giovanni’s account in Negro Digest, June 1969: “Black Poems, Poseurs and Poems” (30-34) although she informs her readers that Karenga was also provided with a security service and that his guards and Stanford’s created a heavily tensed atmosphere.

21. His discourse was inspirational for H. Rap Brown and Huey Newton, who was about to be convicted of voluntary manslaughter. RAM members were mostly black ghetto youth and with the support of black intellectuals, the organization was led by Robert Williams, one of the most vocal proponents of armed self-defense, then in exile in China.

22. The Henry Brothers had just changed their names to Imari and Gaidi Obadele and in some of the historical accounts of the Black Power Movement, their African names are used instead to refer to them.

23. The latter also criticized the fact that the existence of a conference fee to cover expenses excluded many potential participants.

24. Jesse Jackson had been fighting against employment discrimination for a long time, and was very active in SCLC’s Poor People’s Campaign, initiated by Martin Luther King. Jesse Jackson had helped negotiate agreements with Chicago white businesses that led to the employment of 2,000 Blacks and the opening of the market to black-owned businesses (Llorens, 78).


26. Black pride was also a central tenet of the education workshop, chaired by Nathan Hare, who stood for a more moderate, pragmatic meaning to the Black Power concept. Hare had been appointed San Francisco State Black Studies Department chairman and had been involved in the Black Student Union strike. Thanks to Hare, the participants in the education workshop stood witness to the institutionalization of Black Studies. It is in the workshop on “Education – Control of Schools within the Black Community” that the process of institutionalization was the most palpable. Nathan Hare developed the first Black Studies department and the discipline later expanded to other universities nationwide, although it was criticized for its militancy and suspected lack of scholarly neutrality.

27. The continuations committee attempted to organize another conference in the Bermuda Islands in 1969, but it did not have the scope of earlier conferences, partly because many black leaders, considered a threat for national security, were barred from entry into the territory.

28. Baraka and Diggs were two of the co-convenors of the 1972 Gary Convention.

29. Amiri Baraka would, soon after the election of Kenneth Gibson, take his distance from the new mayor.

30. The conference witnessed the development of Panafrocanism. Resolutions were made in favour of a so-called African unity, accompanied with its sometimes completely idealized,
romanticized version of Africa. The conference would also lead, two years later, to the holding of the Congress of African People (CAP) in Atlanta, which emphasized the sense of linked fate within the African diaspora.

31. Clairol Market Development Manager, Benjamin Wright, was Nathan’s brother (Allen, 163).

32. Uncle Tomism is a reference to the loyal black slave in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1851-52). By extension it means any Black who seeks, sometimes desperately, the approval of Whites.

33. Semble’s italics.

34. The Southern Strategy was an appeal first made by Barry Goldwater, then by Richard Nixon, to Southern Democrats who had felt alienated by their party as the consequence of the passing of civil rights legislation. Usually, one associates Democrats at the national level with social progressivism, in the Rooseveltian tradition. However, it is another story at the local and regional level. Of course, it does not mean that all Democratic voters think alike. Up to the 1970s indeed, Democrats had been holding the Southern vote because the Republican Party was associated with Abraham Lincoln and the end of segregation, as well as corrective legislation aimed at providing Blacks with an equal status. White Southerners were mostly social conservatives who were reluctant to change the hierarchy that had been established during the segregation era and even prior to that. The conservatives Goldwater and Nixon were very much aware of this, and used coded language so as to appeal to this electoral segment. Thanks to this Southern Strategy, the Republicans would take back the conservative vote from the Democrats.

35. Max Stanford and other RAM members were arrested on the charge of the attempted murders of Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young.

36. The convention gathered 8,000 delegates, among them black elected officials from 44 states, from local leaders to black congressmen.

ABSTRACTS

Bayard Rustin feared that Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination would bring about a deepening sense of isolation on the part of black activists. Since Stokely Carmichael had transformed the rallying cry of militants from “Freedom Now” into “Black Power” two years earlier, the Civil Rights movement had been slowly dying. The year 1968 thus supposedly marked a new era, when the Black Power movement emerged. Unfortunately, the latter seemed too overtly radical and disorganized and, to Rustin’s despair, its proponents recommended that Blacks first “close ranks” in order to gain political leverage. Both movements are consequently viewed as antagonistic and distinctive ones and, in Peniel Joseph’s words, the Black Power movement appears as the Civil Rights movement’s “evil, ruthless twin”. By focusing on the largely ignored 1968 Philadelphia Black Power Conference, this study demonstrates that the Black Power movement has had a profound influence on black electoral politics. It should thus be recognized as a force that led the actors of the larger movement for black liberation to rethink both their goals and strategies.

Bayard Rustin craignait que l’assassinat de Martin Luther King ne renforce le sentiment d’isolement des militants afro-américains. Depuis que Stokely Carmichael avait transformé leur cri de ralliement, « Freedom Now », en « Black Power », deux ans auparavant, le mouvement des Droits Civiques s’ét埃及 doucement. L’année 1968 devait donc marquer une nouvelle ère, lors

Bayard Rustin temia que el asesinato de Martin Luther King reforzara el sentimiento de aislamiento de los militantes afroamericanos. Desde que Stokely Carmichael había transformado su grito de guerra « Freedom Now » en « Black Power », dos años antes, el movimiento de los Derechos Civicos se estaba apagando lentamente. El año 1968 debía marcar pues una nueva era, durante la cual dicho movimiento dejaría lugar al del Black Power. Desgraciadamente, éste parecía demasiado abiertamente radical y desorganizado. Además, para desesperación de Ruskin, sus defensores recomendaban a los afroamericanos que « cerraran filas » con el fin de ejercer una verdadera influencia política. Ambos movimientos fueron entonces considerados como distintos y antagónicos y así, tal como bien lo relata Peniel Joseph, el movimiento del Black Power se transformó en « mellizo maléfico y sin piedad » del movimiento de los Derechos Civicos. Al concentrarse en la conferencia del Black Power organizada en Filadelfia en 1968, este estudio demuestra que el movimiento que le viene asociado ha tenido una profunda influencia en la futura política electoral negra. Debería pues ser reconocido como una fuerza que obligó a los actores del largo movimiento de liberación negro a que repensaran sus objetivos y sus estrategias.

Bayard Rustin temia que o assassinato de Martin Luther King reforçasse o sentimento de isolamento dos militantes afro-americanos. Depois que Stokely Carmichael transformou seu grito de guerra, “Freedom Now”, em “Black Power”, dois anos antes, o movimento pelos direitos civis começou lentamente a definhar. O ano de 1968 iria portanto marcar uma nova era, em que o movimento daria lugar ao Black Power. Infelizmente, este último parecia por demais abertamente radical e desorganizado. Além disso, para grande desespero de Rustin, seus defensores recomendavam aos Afro-americanos que “cerrassem fileiras” a fim de exercer uma verdadeira influência política. Os dois movimentos passaram assim a ser considerados como distintos e antagonistas e, desse modo, conforme narra tão bem Peniel Joseph, o movimento do Black Power tornou-se o “gêmeo maléfico e impiedoso” do movimento pelos direitos civis. Concentrando-se na conferência do Black Power organizada na Filadélfia em 1968, este estudo mostra que o movimento que lhe foi associado exerceu profunda influência sobre a futura política eleitoral negra. Deveria portanto ser reconhecido como uma força que obrigou os atores do longo movimento de libertação negro a repensar seus objetivos e suas estratégias.
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