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Marc Dollinger’s *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* is a thought-provoking book that boldly revises existing historiography on the Black-Jewish civil rights alliance and its demise to tell us that virtually everything we thought we knew about that story was seriously flawed.

Conventional studies of Black-Jewish relations tend to follow a downward slope of declension, from the halcyon days of cooperation in the heroic phase of the civil rights movement from 1954 to 1963, to the expulsion of white Jews from civil rights organizations and the rise of the militant African American organizations and nationalist politics of the Black Power movement, as uprisings and insurance fraud arsons tore through America’s inner cities and sparked the reactionary politics of the modern Republican Party. But Dollinger spins this narrative on its head and argues that not only did white Jews understand and sympathize with Black Power, but that Ashkenazi Jewish rabbis and thought leaders had predicted its advent as early as the 1950s.

Writing against the narrative that the rise of Black Power ended the Black-Jewish alliance, Dollinger argues that instead it “forged a new, powerful, and transformative partnership between the two communities” (p. 7) and that Black Power “opened the door for Jews, as well as other ethnic, racial, and gender groups, to embrace identity politics for their own communal benefit” (p. 8).

Almost as remarkable as Dollinger’s revisionist thesis is the fact that it has taken so long for a historian to access readily available archives at such mainstays as Hebrew Union College and YIVO to see what Jews actually thought about the Black Power movement. Dollinger’s study is also notable for incorporating West Coast sources, reflecting his own Northern Californian origins and location. Reading in those archives, Dollinger argues that representatives of major Jewish organizations “predicted the rise of black nationalism and
approved of its key tenets” (p. 15). Black Power proved to be “good for the Jews” (p. 16), as it provided a template for Jews to redirect their energies inward and to build stronger Jewish schools, institutions, and identities. But ironically, in so doing they became better Americans, and “in fact the American Jewish revival borrowed more from Black Power than it did from any imagined Jewish past” (p. 107).

Representatives of major Jewish organizations did not view the Nation of Islam as a threat and viewed Black nationalism sympathetically in the 1950s. The Great Society “distinguished Jews once again as white America’s most liberal and progressive ethnic group just as it defined, in the clearest possible terms, their newfound appreciation for viewing American social life through a group-based lens” (p. 79). As Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg put it in 1966, Jews “are the people who are best able to understand the rhetoric of Black Power, even though they are most directly on the firing line of its attack” (p. 81). In 1968 Conservative movement rabbi Jacob Chinitz called on their members to emulate Black Power with Jewish Power (as did Rabbi Meir Kahane, who deserves a more prominent place in this discussion).

The epilogue’s cursory review of intersectionality, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and Jews of color feels tacked on. If it is true that “Jews of color” is “a lens” that upends everything we think we know about Jewish racial identity, then why save that musing for the final page? Dollinger’s planned preface to the second edition reportedly attempted to address exactly this oversight, but his reported admission that Jews of color “have been erased from almost all of the historical literature in American Jewish history, this book included” hits at the crux of the matter. If it is true, as I would argue, that Jews of color help to delineate Ashkenazi Jewish whiteness in structural if not racial terms, then scholars will have to jettison the contention that Jews “became white” only after World War II, which has become a central plank of much of Jewish studies no matter how much historians like Hasia Diner argue against it. The ongoing publishing dispute between the author and Brandeis University Press means that we will have to wait awhile to see if the planned new edition leads to anything other than a “Jews of color” wrapper on an otherwise Ashkenazi book.

At times, Dollinger perhaps overstates his argument, or does not consider contradictory interpretations. He states that “Black Power gifted American Jews a new appreciation and enthusiasm for Jewish nationalism, redefining the very meaning of what it meant to be an ethnic American and helping inspire an unprecedented growth in American Zionism” (p. 151). While he does discuss 1967’s Six Day War, it seems hard to justify the argument that the Black Power movement did more than Israeli military victories to inspire American Zionism, or that the revival in Yiddishkeit, religious observance, and Jewish mysticism drew more from imitation of Black cultural politics than from autochthonous Jewish sources. By the 1960s some Jews felt entirely deracinated, torn from any meaningful Jewish identity or knowledge, but not all Jews did. And the ones who created the Jewish revival were not simply performing Black Power in whiteface.

Dollinger likewise repeatedly extols progressive gains from identity politics but ignores the white backlash to same or the conservative domination of national politics on the back of white resentment toward African Americans and the symbols of identity politics and Black Power. He frames the rise of Jewish day schools as a species of “Jewish Power” when his own sources suggest, along with legal activist Leo Pfeffer, that the Jewish day school movement was part of white flight from African Americans in public schools (pp. 121-123). It is odd that Dollinger would not make the same observation of the thirty thousand American Jews who made aliyah to Israeli between 1967 and 1973.
Dollinger's sources are often more dyspeptic than he is, as when Leonard Fein stated that “the dirty little secret of our community, after all, is that its leaders have always spoken more forcefully and more radically than its followers have felt” (p. 93). Would that the author's analysis had admitted the same subtlety, rather than presenting a handful of progressive (and usually Reform or Conservative) spokesmen of “major Jewish organizations” to speak for Jews as a whole. Dollinger presents no notion of regional, class, or religious variation in the Jewish community, or the bitter class, racial, and religious resentment that lower-middle-class Jews felt in places like outer-borough New York and the New Jersey suburbs. There is likewise no mention of the pitched battles that such Jews fought against Blacks and Puerto Ricans in neighborhoods and schools in the Black Power years. For that, one has to turn to books like Jonathan Reider’s still-revelatory 1985 book, Carnarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism, Jerald E. Podair’s The Strike that Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis from 2008, or Shaul Magid’s forthcoming book on Meir Kahane.

Dollinger’s argument in favor of Black Power’s influence seems unconvincing in the case of the American movement to free Soviet Jewry. Sure, one can find plenty of examples of American Jews leveraging the metaphor of the civil rights movement to argue for greater rights for Jews in the Soviet Union. The civil rights movement after all became one of the most celebrated and internationally famous in American history, and was widely seen to have succeeded by 1965 and before the backlash that followed. But it is not demonstrated that the civil rights movement in general or especially Black Power in particular inspired the American movement to free Soviet Jews, or that American Jews would not have found another freedom struggle to point to as a metaphor had the Black freedom struggle not been available for such purposes.

In a sense, I have waited twenty-five years for this book, since that was how long ago I started writing about Jews and Black Power in the long process that led to the publication of my 2013 book on African American Jews and Israelites.[1] Back then there was a striking paucity of literature on either Black Power or Jewish history of the era, let alone on Jews of color. There were all of three books on Black Power, for instance, including the 1967 volume of that name by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton. Dollinger’s book is bracing in its revisionism, even at times revelatory. Had it landed in my hands in 1996 I have no doubt that it would have become my Bible.

But now that the book I always wished existed is in my hands, I find myself wondering if its argument is actually correct, or if it does not harbor a central flaw, a core confusion between cause and effect. Dollinger argues time and again that the Black Power movement, and also to a degree the earlier civil rights movement, inspired a change in the Jewish community: the ethnic revival’s embrace of Jewish identity; young Jews’ embrace of countercultural Jewishness; and the American Jewish embrace of Zionism between the wars of 1967 and 1973.

But for Dollinger, Black Power emerges fully formed from Stokely Carmichael’s speech at the Meredith March Against Fear in 1966 like Athena from the head of Zeus. In contrast, recent histories of Black Power stress its deep roots in Black internationalism and nationalism going back at least as far as the nineteenth century, the always tenuous acceptance of nonviolence during the “heroic phase” of the Black freedom struggle, and the importance of women in Black Power organizing work.

There are now dozens of books and articles on the Black Power movement, most produced in this century, but Dollinger cites only two examples of this substantial literature. This seems a critical oversight. Missing from his account is an appreciation of Black Power itself as a product of genera-
tional forces that are not just similar but in fact opposite sides of the same coin that led so many white Jews to reject assimilation and embrace Jewishness, Judaism, and Zionism in the same years.

Dollinger makes a real contribution by demonstrating that white Jews again and again pointed to the Black freedom struggle in general and the Black Power movement and its slogan of “Black is Beautiful” as examples and metaphors for parallel movements to renew and revive Jewish identity. However, the central actors in both Black Power and Jewish Revivalism were middle-class, college-educated activists who were reacting as baby boomers to the anticommunist conformity, cultural vacuity, and structural racism of 1950s Cold War America, symbolized and in part created by its segregated suburbs and fascistic freeways that did so much to decimate Black middle-class neighborhoods even as they created new nearly all-white suburban prosperity zones.

The Black Power/Black Arts turn toward symbols like African clothing was every bit a part of the baby boomers’ rejection of their parent’s overly processed conformity as was the rejection of Jewish hippies who left soulless synagogues, dropped acid, and studied kabbalah. Historian Donna Murch has demonstrated that not only did the founders of the Black Panther Party meet in college, but they also drew on middle-class, college-educated African Americans who were disillusioned by the persistence of racism and the limitations of socioeconomic opportunity in postwar America.[2]

When residents of Watts and dozens of other cities rebelled and rioted in the 1960s, they were protesting the structural racism that underdeveloped and segregated cities. Quite often, Jews played outsized roles as shopkeepers, landlords, and even city planners who helped to control those ghettos of the 1960s and 1970s, as James Baldwin and studies of Robert Moses and William Levitt remind us. When Jews raised in white sub-urbs rebelled, joined civil rights protests, and later explored their Jewish identities, they were rebelling from the opposite side of the racist housing system that has aptly been called American apartheid, reaching backward to the Yiddishkeit of their grandparents’ neighborhoods in the very ghettos and “gilded ghettos” that highway construction, urban renewal, and suburban development had rendered a distant memory.

To make Black Power the Aristotelian prime mover in all other group’s investigations of self paradoxically denies historicity to Black Power and the people who made it. The Black Power movement—which was a diverse and at times antagonistic assemblage of political and cultural organizations and movements—had particular panache, and like James Brown, said it loud, and was Black and proud. But young boomers of all races had begun to rebel long before Black Power came to fruition.

One might argue that it was not Black Power but Black-inspired rock-and-roll music that first cracked the shell of conformity and set the nation’s youth of all colors on quests away from their parent’s identities and toward their generation’s own new identity, but Dollinger makes no reference to music. Those lads from Liverpool who played Black music with subversively long hair and later, psychedelic ornamentation undoubtedly had a bigger impact on Jewish Revival exploration than did Stokely Carmichael. Even white Jews like Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who joined Black and Chicano social clubs and then wrote hits like “Ain’t Nothing But A Hound Dog,” “Jailhouse Rock,” and “Stand By Me” did their part to pry away the boomers of all races from their parents’ worldviews and start them on the road to generational self-invention.[3]

Dollinger documents that Jews flowed into Jewish Revivalism and mysticism from a countercultural interest in Eastern religions, and so it seems out of balance to mostly credit Black Power for that development. Jewish Beats like Allen Gins-
burg were no doubt inspired by models of Black rebellions against white social and cultural oppression, but they were among those leading America’s youth out of the suburban fold and into marijuana, psychedelics, and Eastern spirituality long before the phrase “Black Power” tripped off anyone’s tongue.

Black Power was undeniably influential principally as a style template and spawned a host of other powers: Red Power, Brown Power, Lavender Power, and Jewish Power. But young Native Americans were principally inspired to revolt by poor conditions on reservations and in cities. Young Mexican Americans were likewise rebelling against racial discrimination and differentiating themselves from their parents by embracing the once-stigmatized term “Chicano.” Same-sex loving people were on their own generational trajectory following the galvanizing experience of mobilization during World War II and the persecution of the relatively novel category of “homosexuals” that followed. Kahane for his part was reacting to his upbringing in Revisionist Zionism and racial conflict in Robert Moses’s postindustrial, postwar New York City.

Without denying the galvanizing and inspirational force of Black Power, it seems to miss the wider and deeper generational, political, and ideological historical contexts of the ethnic revival to argue that all manifestations were following in the footsteps of Black actors who were themselves sui generis. For all of these groups, including African Americans, one can make a convincing case that the rejection of Cold War conformity and structural white supremacy was far more inspirational than the Black Power movement, which was more an effect than a cause of the same deeper forces.

In sum, Dollinger has done us a tremendous service in questioning the declension narrative that postulates Black Power as the ogre that raided and burned the happy village of the civil rights movement. The actual history was far more complex, he wants us to know. But perhaps the story was even more complicated and less salutatory than he admits, and by pushing his argument too far, by relying too heavily on a few progressive leadership voices, by ignoring Jewish diversity of political, class, and religious perspective, and by not utilizing the scholarship or primary sources of Black Power itself, by treating Black Power as the prime mover rather than a product of generational and structural forces in its own right, Dollinger has created a counter-mythology that is a necessary dragon slayer but not the whole story.

Notes


[3]. George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 140.