

'BLACK POWER'-WHAT IS IT, WHAT CAN IT DO?

Communique asked Mike Miller, field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, for his views on "Black Power", recently the subject of much notoriety by press and TV. His notes (from an address to the August 3 UC Faculty luncheon meeting) define the movement and the direction it is taking.

I would like simply to present some definitions which might clarify current discussion of the civil rights movement that is being presented in the media.

"Black power", as I understand the term, simply means that Negroes wish to control the politics and economics of those areas--neighborhoods or counties--which they inhabit. In areas where they constitute a majority of the population, they will seek to govern the area; in areas where they are not a majority, they will seek to organize themselves into a coherent bloc of votes which they can use to bargain with other elements of the community. They will not be, as they have been in the past, the vote that the Democratic Party could count before the election results were in. Economically, "black power" means that Negroes will seek to develop their own businesses, whether privately or cooperatively owned, in the ghetto. In unions, they will form, as they have for some time, caucuses which can protect their particular interests as a racial minority along with their general interests as workers.

Interest-Group Politics

Black power clearly implies an interest group theory of politics. It is not a strategy of go-it-alone; it simply says, as does everyone else in politics, that when we go into coalitions it will be on the basis of mutual interest, not just on the basis of the interests of the Democratic Party or the white liberal or the trade union. Black power rejects the view that the source of racial problems in America is to be found in a lack of understanding or in a failure of communication in the white community, but is found in conflicts over political power and economic interest. It also rejects the view that the solution to the problems of the Negro community is to be found in the conscience of white America. It does not reject white allies; it does demand, however, that Negroes do the organizing work of the ghetto, and that whites begin to find ways of moving in the white community--among the liberal middle-class, among the white trade-unionists, among the white poor.

Since much of the basis of the Negro's problem is to be found in the racism of this country, his alternatives are to organize around the source of his oppression--that is, to organize black power--or to remain powerless and to continue to be the victim of racism.

Develop Own Culture, History

"Black consciousness" is another of the major new terms injected into the discussion of civil rights by the recent staff meeting of the Student Nonviolent

Coordinating Committee. It is a phrase which sums up the concern among a growing number of Negroes that they and their communities begin to develop and celebrate their own culture and history rather than seeking to become white. The problem they are seeking to deal with is, perhaps, most glaringly illustrated in an old experiment performed by Negro psychologist Kenneth Clark. He presented some very young Negro children with a group of black, white and brown dolls and asked them to choose their preference; the colors of the dolls chosen turned out to be random. He presented a similar choice to some older girls--who had already, as they say, been acculturated. These girls systematically chose the white dolls over the brown and black dolls. Most of you have heard the ghetto phrase, "If you're black stay back, if you're brown stick around, if you're white you're all right." Many of you probably don't know that in the voter registration drives in the South, frequently white voter registration workers were able to get Negroes to go to the Registrar's office when Negro workers had been unable to get that result. The white man had said "regis-



Mike Miller of SNCC.

ter", so the Negro went to the Court-house. Those remnants of a slave mentality must be eliminated. Part of their elimination is in the development of black power; another part of the attempt to eliminate these remnants is in the conscious introduction of African and American Negro history and culture in black communities.

"Black consciousness", as the term is used by people in SNCC, means that

Negroes in this country ought to have pride in their history and culture. It is, as Stokely Carmichael puts it, "not anti-white but pro-black." It means that black women should not be judged for their beauty on white or western standards. It means that black men and women should not be so mentally enslaved as to believe that something black is necessarily inferior.

Black consciousness is, in my opinion, a pre-condition to full racial equality in this country. To call it "black supremacy" is, I believe, to reveal the conscious or unconscious racism of those Americans who celebrate their own cultural, ethnic or historic identity but who would deny this right to black Americans. Black consciousness is not black supremacy--it is part of the war against the sense of inferiority that is one of the results of slavery in America.

No 'Light Brown' Common Culture

This concept of black consciousness seems to be a special threat to many so-called integrationists. These integrationists really advocate the assimilation of the American Negro into white, middle-class, protestant culture. They do not believe in the value of differences; they cannot appreciate the beauty of variety. They are one-dimensional people who are threatened by ambiguity and by pluralism. In their model of the good world, everybody would be of a light brown shade of skin and cultural uniquenesses would be merged into one international culture, with one language spoken universally. I don't think people in SNCC would surrender their belief in internationalism. But they refuse to believe in a common humanity which would obliterate all those human differences that make life interesting.

Between assimilation and separation, there is a view of cultural pluralism that is implicit in SNCC's view of "black consciousness." This pluralist view should not be confused with the business as-usual political science claim that America is a pluralist society, with many cultural and interest groups participating as equals in the economic and political market place of democracy. I think most people in SNCC hold to this view as their model of what they'd like the world to be. But their view of the world as it is would argue that power is highly concentrated in the society; that there is little democracy in America; that cultural values are defined by a tiny strata of America and that the major problem in America is that so much power is so irresponsibly lodged in the hands of so few men.