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Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s. By Marc Dollinger. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2018. ISBN 9781512602562

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Historian Marc Dollinger has a knack for challenging the reigning academic paradigms and conventional wisdom about Jewish politics. (As Dollinger teaches at San Francisco State University, one might be tempted, in the jargon of nearby Silicon Valley, to call him a "disrupter.") In his first book, *Quest for Inclusion* (2000), Dollinger took on the widely-held view that the liberalism of American Jews was grounded in Judaism, arguing instead that supporting liberalism allowed Jews to become more American—what Dollinger called the "politics of acculturation."[1] In his recent book, *Black Power*, *Jewish Politics*, Dollinger seeks to reframe decades of scholarship about Jews and the civil rights movement, Black-Jewish relations, and American Jewish politics.

The conventional story of Blacks and Jews that Dollinger attempts to reframe is familiar and broadly goes something like this. In the postwar decades, American Jews formed an alliance with African Americans, fighting for civil rights based on "individual-based legal equality" (p. 47). American Jews—including rabbis, lawyers, students, activists, and civic and community leaders—mobilized, protested, and donated funds far out of proportion to their small numbers in American society. "The iconic image," Dollinger writes, "of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma symbolized the highest ideals of an interracial, interfaith movement that testified to the essential similarities between blacks and Jews" (p. 89). Jews and African Americans not only marched together but died together—as activists Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner did with James Chaney in the summer of 1964. And they succeeded together: the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting, was largely written at the Religious Action Center, the political body of Reform Judaism located in Washington, D.C. In the late 1960s, however, the alliance unraveled, as "black militants forced whites and Jews out of leadership positions in the civil rights organizations" (p. 63). Black Power advocates made, or failed to repudiate, comments that many Jews saw as antisemitic, anti-Israel, or both. Gradualism and individual-based liberalism—previously the glue that held together Jewish and African American civic leaders and civil rights supporters—was pushed aside by younger, more aggressive Black activists who espoused group-based identity politics. Many Jews felt their bona fides questioned and even their place in the American meritocratic state threatened. In this atmosphere, stung by former allies, Jews retreated from their decades-long engagement with

African Americans. The two communities have struggled ever since to repair the rift.

This narrative, told and retold over the years, has hardened (among Jews, at least) into a scholarly and popular consensus about Jews, Blacks, the civil rights movement, and American liberalism.

Black Power, Jewish Politics tries to "reframe" (p. *xiv*) this narrative. Fundamentally, Dollinger argues that the rise of Black Power did not mark a break in Black-Jewish relations and an end to liberalism but rather a new period. While the postwar decades saw a political "consensus" (a word Dollinger relishes) based on interracial solidarity, the emergence of Black Power in the mid-1960s led to a "new consensus" in which American Jews "turned inward" under "their own identity politics banner" (p. 11). American liberalism no longer meant individual rights-based liberalism but rather a political system in which various ethnic groups took their cue from Black Power and "found their individual voices and coalesced around the idea of self-advocacy" (p. 17). As Dollinger quips, "Black Power proved quite good for the Jews" (p. 26).

In six substantive chapters, Dollinger makes two main arguments to support his reframed narrative. One argument, already alluded to, is that the traditional story about Black Power—in which the rise of militancy in the late 1960s doomed the historic Black-Jewish alliance—actually needs to be flipped, and that, in fact, the rise of Black Power allowed Jews to embrace their own form of "Jewish identity politics" (p. 164). Whereas earlier Jewish ethnic activism remained quiet, behind-the-scenes, and private, in the wake of Black Power, Jews could be more vocal, aggressive, and muscular in support of Jewish causes and issues. "Thanks to Black Power, American Jews engaged in forms of public identity and political protest that their 1950s suburban parents never could have imagined" (p. 135).

In support of his argument that Jews took the lessons and model of Black Power to turn inward and focus on themselves, Dollinger focuses on three major case studies. The strongest case study is that of the Soviet Jewry Movement. Dollinger demonstrates how Jews, having been largely kicked out of the Black civil rights movement, turned their political attention to their brethren in "Moscow, Leningrad, and beyond" (p. 10). After all, he notes, why had Jews not supported their coreligionists in the Soviet Union earlier during the Cold War? Dollinger convincingly argues that it was only after "black nationalists pushed Jews out of domestic social justice causes" (p. 133) that they had the impetus to advocate—as Jews—for a visibly Jewish cause.

Dollinger's second case study is Zionism. Dollinger argues that the emergence of Black Power allowed Jews to advocate for their own "nationalist agendas without compromising their status as loyal Americans" (p. 9). Black Power, in other words, provided an answer for the infamous (false) charge that Jews had "dual" loyalty. Jews could support Israel vigorously as part of America's "emerging identity-centered political culture"

(p. 9). (Ironically, Dollinger notes, Black Power provided Zionists this very model even as the movement largely supported the Palestinian cause, not the Zionist one.) Dollinger's argument—that "nationalist aspirations" (p. 150) drew a parallel between Black Power advocates and American Zionists—attempts to reframe the standard narrative about tensions over Israel. Ultimately, however, Dollinger's chapter cannot escape the strong anti-Zionism of Black Power. If Black Power offered some American Zionists a model for escaping the dual-loyalty canard, incidents like Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver's statement that "Zionists, wherever they may be, are our enemies" (p. 160) were far more influential in the deterioration of Black-Jewish relations.

Dollinger's argument is less convincing in his third case study, what he calls the "Jewish youth movements" that became increasingly popular on colleges campuses and in schools and synagogues. Dollinger argues that Jews turned inward, "emulating Black Power tactics in a new campaign for heightened Jewish identity" (p. 103). While the rise of Jewish groups and Jewish Studies courses on campus increased in the late 1960s—as did other ethnic studies groups and courses—Dollinger side-steps the more familiar questions about the demands of Black Power on and off campus, particularly its calls for affirmative action for minority admission. The subset of students calling for Jewish Studies courses paled in comparison to the effort of Jews (of all ages) who resisted what they saw as the new militants' assault on meritocratic liberalism. It is harder to swallow fully Dollinger's argument that so many of the religious changes of the period were tied to Black Power. Dollinger credits the Black Power movement with widespread impact, citing many examples, including Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's neo-Hasidism and creation of the House of Love and Prayer; the rise of the *havurah* movement; the Reform movement's adoption of the *Gates of Prayer* prayer book; and the publication of *The Jewish Catalog*. (Dollinger does not consider the contemporaneous religious revival in Israel, including the Haredi "Repentance Phenomenon,"[2] although he does bring up Ezrat Nashim, an activist group that grew out of the Conservative movement, as a response to American feminism, acknowledging that Black Power cannot be the answer for everything.) In short, Dollinger's effort to ascribe Judaism's religious revival to the model of Black Power is far less successful than his argument that Black Power offered Jews a *political* model. Dollinger is on firmer ground when he links the growth of day schools in the United States during the period to non-Orthodox Jews who "softened their stance toward Jewish day school education with the rise of Black Power-inspired identity politics" (p. 121). In Australia, for comparison, Jewish day schools also expanded around the same time, which historian Suzanne Rutland partly attributed to the 1967 and 1973 wars in Israel, as well as changes in Australian politics and funding schemes in which "separate ethnic and religious schools became more acceptable."[3] (Unlike in Australia, however, American Jews were not

successful in securing federal funding for private schools, a topic Dollinger teases here, but could easily form another research project.)

Dollinger's other argument (which appears first in the book) is that American Jews in the 1960s, and even 1950s, saw the rise of Black Power coming, approved of it, and recognized their own "white privilege." In the book's opening chapter, Dollinger reframes the periodization of postwar Black-Jewish relations. Counter to the standard narrative—in which Black Power emerged in the late 1960s to sever a previously strong alliance—he argues that Black Power was not a surprising rupture and that, in fact, some Jews anticipated, if not predicted, its emergence and the alliance's eventual breakdown. Even during the 1950s, he maintains, Black nationalism attracted the attention of some American Jewish leaders, who even supported the movement's rise and downplayed potential drawbacks, including antisemitism.

Dollinger identifies the Great Society, President Lyndon Johnson's social reform programs of the 1960s to stamp out inequality, as an opportunity for Jews to test out their reactions to an early version of "group-based" politics. In the Great Society, Dollinger argues, President Johnson abandoned the color-blind, individual-based approach to public policy in favor of a racially conscious, group-based one. Jews' reactions to Johnson's new approach were mixed. To federal government officials, Jews were "classified Jews as 'white' and therefore ineligible for many Great Society programs" (p. 63). Jews were excluded from being deemed a vulnerable minority, a reality that particularly hurt poor Jews. Dollinger writes, "Under the Great Society's binary racial classification system, Jews became part of the white privileged class and, by extension some believed, responsible for participating in the subjugation of African Americans" (p. 63).

While Dollinger may convincingly portray Jews as members of the "white privileged class," his corollary argument—that Jews at the time *saw themselves* in this way—is less persuasive. Dollinger ascribes to 1960s Jews an awareness of "white privilege" (a phrase he uses at least six times) and an appreciation for "institutional racism" (about twenty times) that feels more appropriate for 2020 than 1965. For example, he writes, "By the mid-1960s, American Jews acknowledged their privilege as white middle-class Americans as they appreciated, even more, the continued outsider status of their black fellow citizens" (p. 82). Or, "As representatives of organized Jewish life, they recognized institutional racism as a grave threat to American democracy and, by and large, defended group-based programs such as affirmative action as a necessary step in the larger struggle for racial equality" (p. 52). Such statements seem to read back (however charitably) onto 1960s Jews a progressive worldview that was not widely shared. Dollinger bases his argument largely on a handful of personalities, including Rabbi Arnold J. Wolf, an "outspoken leftist rabbi from Chicago" who "challenged his coreligionists to consider the irony of their own support for racial equality"

(p. 101), and the leftist writer and founder of *Moment* magazine Leonard Fein. Their progressive worldview was hardly representative of the American Jewish community of the 1960s—and in many quarters, would not be so today. Dollinger himself shows how even these select leaders were *reacting against* what they saw as their constituents' mass failure to realize how Jews fit within the racial structure of the United States: more often than not, they were frustrated with their congregations or constituents for not realizing their "white privilege." The rank and file were not there yet.

While Dollinger's book covers much ground, a comparison to Australia is helpful in illuminating two areas that Dollinger neglects. First, immigration. During the 1960s and 1970s, Australia experienced a parallel rise in ethnic particularism, one driven directly by immigration from non-Anglo countries. The era saw the end of the "White Australia policy" and the adoption of Australian multiculturalism.[4] In America, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act abolished the national origins (quota) system and sparked a wave of immigration from new lands. It would have been interesting for Dollinger to consider whether immigration reform in the midst of the Great Society—especially the 1965 act, introduced by Philip Hart and Emmanuel Celler, a 50-year Jewish congressman—offered an opportunity for Jews to test out their "group-centered" politics. Theoretically, the issues raised by the 1965 immigration reform law—quotas, skills, and family unification—would have created a chance for Jewish organizations to confront questions about individual merit and group preference. We know, from historians like Libby Garland, that major Jewish organizations (the same ones featured by Dollinger) funded, published, and disseminated written materials that called for an end to the immigration quota system.[5] Yet for many Jews, one suspects, their individual achievements as "model" immigrants carried significant meaning, rhetorically and emotionally. In the field of immigration, a significant political issue that affected many minority groups, Jews might have thought twice about a group-based approach to politics during the Great Society.

The second element of the story that Dollinger does not take up is the response of the government to the new group-based "identity politics." Following the lead of Black Power, ethnic groups in the United States began creating their own versions of group-centered politics, as did non-Anglo groups in Australia. Yet Australia seems to have been more successful in marshalling this identity politics trend into a productive political constellation, today celebrated as Australian multiculturalism. Historian Suzanne Rutland has noted the benefits for Jews and others of the "adoption of multiculturalism as official government policy."[6] In America, however, multiculturalism never quite reached the same level of acceptance and celebration, and the period saw much more competition among ethnic interest groups. One possibility to consider for this divergence was political leadership. In Australia, for example, the Labor government of Gough

Whitlam and Immigration Minister Al Grassby channeled the rising "ethnic nationalism" into an ethnically-grounded Australian nationalism; among their ideas was the establishment of ethnic broadcasting stations.[7] On the other side of politics, in 1977 Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser told an audience at the opening of a Sephardi synagogue in Melbourne that multiculturalism was explicitly government policy, adding, "It is my hope that Australian society can continue to develop in a way in which each of us will be proud of our being Australians and at the same time cherish traditions passed on to us by our forefathers."[8] In America, by contrast, "ethnic nationalism" privileged the "ethnic" group interests, pitting group against group. This competition was encouraged by President Nixon and his advisers, who famously identified PIGS (Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Slavs) as a winnable new voting demographic for Republicans.[9] Nixon's tendencies to conceive of entire ethnic groups in this manner might have been more about pure politics than policy, but the American political system's reaction to this new "group-based" thinking is worth further investigation.

Ultimately, Dollinger's two main arguments—that Black Power inspired a "Jewish ethnic revival" (p. 112) and that Jews recognized structural racism and their own privilege—vary in their persuasiveness. Yet, because the book's larger goal of reframing the dominant paradigm of Black-Jewish relations is such a serious challenge to the established narrative, it ends up being more than the sum of its parts. Dollinger upends the traditional narrative—that the rise of Black Power caused the demise of the Black-Jewish alliance—and writes a new one. In Dollinger's narrative, Jews and Blacks exhibited a parallel "consensus," first as individual-based liberalism, then group-based identity politics. In doing so, Dollinger has thrown a grenade at the giant boulder of previous scholarly work. True, this massive structure still stands, but the earth has shaken a bit. By recovering the voices of a small number of Jewish leaders who acknowledged their position in society as different (and better-off) than Blacks, Dollinger offers a counter-narrative to the traditional tale of "what happened to the Black-Jewish alliance." And although he might not phrase it this way, Dollinger's alternative view of Black-Jewish relations chooses agency and hope rather than cynicism.

This is a book of and for our time. American Jewish politics exists and evolves within the rhetorical universe of American society. For those of a progressive mindset, who seek to call out issues of white privilege and systematic racism, Dollinger's story also shows the mainstreaming of what was sixty years ago a marginal point of view. In his epilogue, Dollinger tells of a group of rabbinical students he taught in 1991, and their hostile reaction to his suggestion that the Jewish turn inward for Jewish schools was connected to Jews' "white flight" to the suburbs. Although 30 years apart in each direction, many Jews in the 1990s were, in a sense, closer to the Jews of the 1960s than today's Jews are to the Jews of the 1990s. This year, for

example, we have seen significant Jewish communal response (albeit much of it virtual) in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

In his preface, Dollinger tells us about his love for basketball. Because of his affection for the game (and because his home team in San Francisco is the Golden State Warriors, led by the exceptional long-distance shooter Stephen Curry), let me close with a basketball comparison. For years, conventional wisdom of the game centered around the higher-value three-point shots—attempts from just behind the line about 23 feet away from the hoop. For offense and defense, the three-point line was sacrosanct. Then along came Curry, who showed us a different way. This book is the academic equivalent of one of Curry's 30- or 40-foot shots. Even if it misses, we can appreciate the skill (and chutzpah) it takes to launch it. By merely taking his shot, and showing others it can be done, he has altered how, for decades, the game has been played.

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[1] Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2000).
[2] Kimmy Caplan, "Israeli Haredi Society and the Repentance (*Hazarah Biteshuvah*) Phenomenon," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8 (2001): 369-398.
[3] Suzanne D. Rutland, *The Jews in Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 100.
[4] Jatinder Mann, *The Search for a New National Identity: The Rise of Multiculturalism in Canada and Australia, 1890s-1970s* (Peter Lang, 2016).
[5] Libby Garland, *After They Closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921-1965* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), 209.
[6] Rutland, *Jews in Australia,* 100.
[7] Ibid., 102.
[8] Mann, *Search for a New National Identity,* 186.
[9] Thomas J. Sugrue and John D. Skrentny, "The White Ethnic Strategy," in Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Harvard University Press, 2008): 171.