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## Inflating the Threat of Black Anti-Semitism

by Joseph Featherstone

The specter of black anti-Semitism is haunting New York City. Two incidents show how charged the atmosphere has become. The first occurred when the Metropolitan Museum of Art printed a black girl's essay as part of the catalogue for a rather witless and patronizing exhibit called "Harlem on My Mind." A heavily edited version of the original essay contained remarks that many took to be anti-Semitic, and there was a terrific outcry. The second happened when Leslie Campbell, a militant black teacher from the Ocean Hill district read a student's anti-Semitic doggerel over radio station WBAI. The station defended the broadcast as a way of focusing attention on black attitudes, denying any intention of slurring Jews, but Jewish groups in the city violently objected and are asking the FCC to revoke WBAI's license. Fears and feelings are running high: the Jews, one hears, are in the same position as those in Germany in the thirties; the Gentile establishment, one is told, is actually inciting the blacks to turn on Jews. Ferocious abuse is heaped on Mayor Lindsay, who was forced to fire the black director of the city's Commission on Human Rights for allegedly being soft on black anti-Semitism.

In the center of this grim picture is the struggle be-

tween the United Federation of Teachers and the governing board of the Ocean Hill demonstration district. Many on both sides decided early that they were witnessing a showdown between a black community and a Jewish union; that was bad enough. Matters became worse when the UFT began reproducing and circulating anti-Semitic handbills published by black extremists during the school crisis. By now some half a million of these hate sheets have been distributed, reaching a public beyond the wildest dreams of their wretched authors. The union view was that black anti-Semitism was a growing menace to which city officials were scandalously indifferent; reprinting the handbills was thus necessary to alert the public. Critics of the union point out that the handbills appeared at a time when public support for the union was shrinking; the suspicion is that the UFT cried anti-Semitism simply to win its case against Ocean Hill.

It was a serious distortion of the facts to link the handbills to the Ocean Hill governing board. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the dispute — and there are legitimate grievances on both sides — anti-Semitism is not the issue at Ocean Hill. Well over 60 percent of the teachers hired by the local governing board are white, and well over half of these are Jewish. Like other teachers, Jewish teachers working in Ocean Hill have grievances. Some disagree completely with the course of action the board has taken, but they do not complain of anti-Semitism. Listening to the alarm bells set off by their elders, some of the younger Jewish teachers talk sadly of the generation gap.

No one can deny that this has been a violent year: at IS 55 in September, crowds of blacks jeered returning white teachers and threatened them with death, while all over the city teachers who crossed picket lines were subjected to fantastic abuse and extreme threats by striking teachers. But charges of Nazism and fantasies of pogroms have been no help.

There is mounting bitterness among blacks that the UFT has won by what they see as trickery. For its part, the UFT keeps the fire going: every anti-Jewish remark by every black sidewalk Savonarola is cited as further evidence of the consequences of the Ocean Hill experiment. The furor keeps spreading. The Mayor's special committee on racial and religious prejudices issued an imprecise report on the "appalling" level of bigotry in the city, and the Anti-Defamation League issued an equally vague and provocative document.

There is some reasonably exact information on black anti-Semitism. A Harvard sociologist, Gary Marx, did a study of the 1964 riots for the Anti-Defamation League, and found that blacks as a group tend to be less anti-Semitic than whites. He showed that anti-Jewish statements by blacks often reflect anti-white feelings, not anti-Semitism. Blacks did not single out Jews as scapegoats — in fact the majority of blacks failed to distinguish Jews from other white ethnic

groups. Those who did distinguish Jews as a separate group looked on them more favorably than other white ethnic groups. Mr. Marx concluded that there was no case for the prevalent notion that anti-Semitism is more widespread among blacks than whites. His findings, moreover, agreed with six out of seven studies done over the preceding 20 years. And in March, 1968, a smaller study of New York City was done for the American Jewish Committee by Caroline Atkinson of Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research. Her findings tallied with those of Mr. Marx: "In general, then, there is no evidence from our study to suggest that either black nationalism or black power has appreciably influenced Negroes' attitudes toward Jews. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that attitudes have changed substantially since the 1964 study."

All this could change, but the most reliable evidence indicates that there's less anti-Semitism among blacks than among whites. (Someone has said that if all black Americans were anti-Semitic, they would still be outnumbered by anti-Semitic whites.) The anti-Semitism of some black intellectuals, and the anti-Zionism of black Marxist, Third World and Moslem groups does not find much of a response among black people generally. It would be ironic if the confrontation in New York led Harlem to adopt the anti-Semitism of the Union League or the old *Brooklyn Tablet*.

What is true is that blacks are becoming more aware of the ethnic lines of battle in all city conflicts. As Murray Friedman very sensibly pointed out in *Commentary*, American blacks are not tied to European traditions of anti-Semitism: they are another ethnic group trying to move on up and out from the bottom of the American heap. In New York, the Jews displaced the Irish in the school and welfare bureaucracies of the thirties; now there is pressure from the blacks and Puerto Ricans for the Jews to move over. The situation is the same in many cities: the black push is anti-Irish in Boston, where the Irish have dug in, anti-Italian in Newark, where the Italians rule, anti-Jewish in New York. Like their Irish and Italian counterparts in other cities, lower- and lower-middle class Jews feel that they are being asked to take the rap for the failures of the whole urban social order. Their resentment is understandable. So is the permanent wariness of people whose relatives were among the six million dead. So is the bewilderment of Jews who helped create and nurture the civil rights movement only to see its gains scorned by black power militants.

New York's Jewish teachers, welfare workers, and small shopowners are on the firing line in one more episode in urban America's history of grinding ethnic factionalism. The situation is bitter and dangerous enough without bringing in Hitler.