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# *I've Got the Light of Freedom*

## *The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*

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# *Thirteen*

## MRS. HAMER IS NO LONGER RELEVANT

### *The Loss of the Organizing Tradition*

*Even the hatred of squalor*
*Makes the brow grow stern.*
*Even anger against injustice*
*Makes the voice grow harsh. Alas, we*
*Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness*
*Could not ourselves be kind.*

BERTOLT BRECHT

*So my rationalization for it is that the kids tried the established methods and they tried at the expense of their lives, which is much different from the accommodating role of trying that had previously been used. . . . So they began to look for other answers.*

ELLA BAKER[1]

On many college campuses today, Black student organizations do not use traditional titles for their officers. Instead of presidents and treasurers they have "facilitators" or "coordinators." On some campuses, there is not a single member of the organization with any idea why Black students forming organizations in the late 1960s didn't use the more common terms. The language chosen by the students of the sixties reflects the fact that they were still in touch, in greatly varying degrees, with an entire philosophy about social change that cautioned

against hierarchy and centralized leadership. Contemporary students are almost entirely unaware of that heritage.

To take another example, columnist Clarence Page opens a recent Public Broadcasting documentary on Black conservatives by claiming that for most of this century civil rights leaders have focused on outside help rather than the Black community's own resources; now, he says, in the 1990s some conservative Black leaders are focusing on Black self-help. I suspect few viewers, including few Black viewers, will question his premise: that the civil rights movement was something that had little to do with the Black community's own sacrifices and resources. The ideological right has successfully appropriated the movement's history and reinscribed it to support the conservative line, and even contemporary Black activists are often sufficiently alienated from their own history as to not recognize its theft.[2]

In the late sixties and early seventies, the themes of the community-organizing tradition—the developmental perspective, an emphasis on building relationships, respect for collective leadership, for bottom-up change, the expansive sense of how democracy ought to operate in everyday life, the emphasis on building for the long haul, the anti-bureaucratic ethos, the preference for addressing local issues—were reflected, in varying combinations, in some anti-poverty campaigns, in various forms of nationalist organizing, in struggles on college campuses. In some cases, Deep South organizers carried the organizing philosophy with them as they moved on to other struggles. One can certainly find contemporary examples of activists self-consciously working within the organizing tradition (and far more of activists using that tradition's rhetoric). It is still fair to say that the organizing tradition as a political and intellectual legacy of Black activists has been effectively lost, pushed away from the table by more top-down models.

In the sixties, organizing represented just one culture of activism among the several that made up the movement. It never had much visibility to those outside the movement. Outsiders saw the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, Freedom Summer, Atlantic City, but not deeper traditions that lay underneath them. Nonetheless, at a critical juncture in our history, some of the country's most innovative and influential activists were working within and redefining an organizing tradition, and through them, the concerns of that tradition were part of the larger dialogue in the Black community about direction and means. That is seldom the case now.

In part certainly, organizing lost ground because to people hungry for change it often looked like such a tortuously slow road that people began experimenting with other activist styles. The radical-nationalist thrusts that came to dominate much Black activism after the mid-sixties represent not one but several distinguishable activist cultures, some of them diametrically opposed to the assumptions of the organizing tradition. Some—I stress the *some* here—of those operating under the new political banners had no problem with hierarchy so long as they could be at the top of it, no problem with cults of personality so long as they got to pick the personalities, little conception of individual growth as a political issue, more interest in the dramatic gesture than in building at the base, and little concern with building interpersonal relationships that reflected their larger values. The basic metaphor of solidarity became "nation," not "family." The last may be especially important. The larger movement—not just SNCC and not just the civil rights movement—underwent a loss of community similar to what happened at the local level in Greenwood. While their analysis was in fact growing sharper in many ways, movement activists increasingly lost the ability to relate to one another in human terms. Even had there been no other changes, that alone would probably have been enough to prevent much organizing. In the movement's sense of "organize," in the transformative sense, it is probably safe to say that you cannot organize people you do not respect. You can lead them, you can inspire them, you can make speeches at them, but you cannot organize them. Some of the more self-consciously radical thrusts, notwithstanding rhetoric to the contrary, were simply contemptuous of the individual.[3]

Near the end of 1964, Bob Moses wrote that SNCC was like a boat in the water that had to be repaired to stay afloat but had to stay afloat in order to be repaired. Too many issues needed to be addressed simultaneously. Between the fall of 1964 and the spring of 1966, SNCC

was trying to resolve a staggering number of questions, many of them products of the organization's disillusionment with American society. What did "integration" mean, and was the country worth integrating into? How would it be possible to accommodate both the need of individual members for freedom of conscience and action and the need of the organization for discipline? What was the proper role of whites in the context of increasing race consciousness among Blacks? How is it possible to provide leadership without being manipulative? Is it possible to be both moral and politically effective? How could the organization speak to economic inequalities, rural and urban? If neither the federal government nor liberals could be trusted, where were the movement's allies? Could allies or models be found in the Third World? How should the organization respond to the anger in the urban ghettoes and the periodic violent uprisings it generated? What are the limits on what local leadership can accomplish? Should existing social structures be reformed or new ones created? What was to be the role of women in the movement? What should be the movement's position on Vietnam?

Even had there been fewer questions, discussion about them was increasingly taking place in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and recriminations, a deteriorating social climate that would ultimately lead to SNCC members threatening one another with weapons, to members calling the police to settle disputes among themselves, to the members of one faction "firing" all the members of another faction and being "fired" by them in turn. We are still far from fully understanding the causes of these changes, but an important part of the explanation may be that the transition from the Beloved Community to Black Power was accompanied by a jettisoning of some of the moral and social anchors that had helped regulate relationships among activists when SNCC was in its community-organizing phase.

Even allowing for some nostalgic exaggeration on the part of early SNCC members, there is not much doubt that most members at that time really did find the movement an oasis of personal trust, an extended family more sustaining than some real families. Joyce Ladner remembers Medgar Evers introducing her to a CORE worker who had come into the state to lay groundwork for the Freedom Rides. "We



didn't ask questions. You didn't ask questions back then. We just accepted him as he was." Bob Moses compared SNCC's ability to release from its members levels of personal energy that they themselves never knew they had to nuclear fusion. The sense of trust and community was an important part of that, and its erosion was an important part of the organization's growing ineffectiveness. Instead of making individuals feel larger and stronger, it made them weaker. "They began to sort of eat on each other," Ella Baker put it.[4]

Jim Forman and Bob Moses always represented somewhat opposite tendencies in SNCC. Forman, while aware of the need for field workers to have considerable autonomy, thought the organization needed to be run like a real organization if it was going to be effective. Moses, while aware of the need for some minimal level of organizational discipline, was much more afraid of the possibility of too much organization suffocating the spirit. These differences did not prevent them from working together. In the wake of the 1964 Summer Project, they jointly developed a plan to expand SNCC's range of operation and to take advantage of the momentum created by the Summer Project. Called the Black Belt Project, the intention was to establish new projects in counties with large Black populations, from Virginia to Texas, this time using Black volunteers to minimize racial conflict as well as the chances of undermining the confidence of local participants. Preliminary inquiries suggested that both Black college students and local Black communities were going to be receptive to the idea. The plan was introduced for approval at a staff meeting that fall but never fully discussed. As soon as it was introduced, some members began questioning the motives of its authors and arguing that there should have been more staff input in its development, reacting as if it were a final decision rather than a proposal. Discussion got side-tracked into a consideration of the basic issue of decision-making. Some members objected to the plan, apparently without revealing their real motives for doing so. Some took the plan to be a power-play on the part of those who had done the preliminary planning. Apparently, in that climate, neither Forman nor Moses felt comfortable pushing the plan. The plan was tabled. Forman later wrote that the kind of confusion that characterized discussion of the Black Belt plan would have been

"unimaginable" one or two years earlier. SNCC had then been a smaller, more tightly knit group, "moving on the assumption of great unity of purpose and good intentions as well as a willingness to compromise."[5]

The inability to implement the Black Belt Project was a sign of things to come. Time and again, the substance of ideas could not be discussed because of a climate of suspicion and emotional strain, so that the organization was unable to implement any new projects or even effectively maintain old ones. The climate would become progressively more debilitating. Mary King noted:

> Until late 1965 it was possible to disagree in SNCC and yet not feel reviled, because the underlying bonds were strong. Personal hostility was now [in 1965] being expressed. This did not feel like SNCC to me. It was foreign—dissonant.

Mrs. Hamer commented on the changes at least once. In late 1966 at a dinner at which SNCC workers were honoring her, Mrs. Hamer "turned upon her old friends, as much in sadness as in anger, for growing 'cold' and unloving."[6]

One of the factors contributing to the new and unhealthy climate was the expansion of the staff. At the end of the Summer Project, about eighty volunteers elected to stay on, a decision approved with some misgiving by the staff. The Mississippi staff almost doubled in size. At the same time, the increased national visibility of SNCC following the Summer Project attracted new members to SNCC projects across the South and outside of it. In late 1963, the organization only had about one hundred fifty full-time staff. By the summer of 1965, it had swollen to more than two hundred staff and two hundred fifty full-time volunteers. According to SNCC's Cleveland Sellers:

> This growth, coupled with the changing nature of struggle, was responsible for the emergence of several opposing factions. Although SNCC had always contained individuals who strongly disagreed with each other on various minor issues, it had never really had to contend with large factions divided by basic political differences. I spent much of the spring and summer of 1965 attending long, involved staff meetings where the various factions haggled and argued over everything from the "true nature of freedom" to the cost of insurance.[7]



It is misleading to suggest that early SNCC members disagreed only over "minor" matters, but disagreements in the early years seldom led to the rigid, politicized factions, each quick to suspect the worst of the other factions, that developed after 1964. If the expansion had not occurred so rapidly, or if it had come when the organization had a stable direction programmatically, or if SNCC had been a more hierarchical organization, or if the people coming in had come from social backgrounds more like those of the veterans, the effects might not have been so damaging. At the same time it was trying to reassess its entire program, respond to the morale problems caused by disillusionment with liberal America and by the lingering resentments from the debate over whether there should have even been a Summer Project, SNCC was adding a group of largely upper-middle-class white northerners to what had been predominantly a southern Black movement.

SNCC's membership had always come from diverse backgrounds. Mary King notes that the early members included rural Blacks, northern middle-class blacks, upper-class southern Blacks, New England Quakers, Jews, white ethnics, members of the Left, and southern whites. "Our heterogeneity—a strength while we were small . . . —was strained to the breaking point when we expanded quickly. It resulted in irreconcilable schisms."[8]

Organizational size was always an important consideration to Ella Baker. She generally preferred smaller organizations. She was much impressed by cell structures like that of the Communist party: "I don't think we had any more effective demonstration of organizing people for whatever purpose."[9] She envisioned small groups of people working together but also retaining contact in some form with other such groups, so that coordinated action would be possible whenever large numbers really were necessary. I know of no place where she fully explains her thinking, but, given her values, it is almost certain that she would have been put off by the undemocratic tendencies of larger

organizations as well as by their usual failure to provide the kind of environment that encouraged individual growth. I suspect that she also favored smaller organizations precisely because they were less likely to factionalize or develop climates of distrust.

The changing social base of its membership, as well as the rapid expansion in the number of members, contributed to the increasingly negative social climate. That climate, then, contributed to its inability to execute its program, which in turn aggravated internal relations even further. After 1964 there are more reports of staff members acting irresponsibly or just not working at all. In Greenwood, Mary Boothe remembers the post-1964 period as a time when there were staff meetings all the time but very little follow-up. There were similar problems across the state. Referring to the fall of 1964, Clayborne Carson writes:

> Some of those involved in the Summer Project abandoned their responsibilities, citing fatigue and a desire to allow local black residents to assume greater control over civil rights activities in their communities. Freedom schools and community centers in Mississippi were closed, owing to the absence of dependable personnel. "People were wandering in and out of the organization," Marion Barry recalled. "Some worked, some didn't work." There was a noticeable increase in marijuana usage, which contributed to the discipline problems.

In the years between 1964 and 1966, Jack Newfield notes, "drinking, auto accidents, petty thievery, pot smoking, personality clashes, inefficiency and anti-white outbursts all increased." According to Forman, even some of those "who had come to SNCC as disciplined, dedicated workers became dysfunctional and disgusted within a year or two." After the winter of 1965, Cleveland Sellers remembers, "Although most of us were under twenty-five, we seemed to have aged. Our faces were haggard, our nerves overwrought. Arguments over trifles dominated all our meetings." He recalls relationships deteriorating to a point where two factions had a stand-off involving "pool cues, baseball bats, knives and a couple of pistols." The issue at stake was whether people at a conference could be admitted to breakfast without a meal ticket.

When Cleveland Sellers was elected program secretary in 1965 he was determined to set the house back in order, and he quickly sent letters to all staffers asking them to explain what they were doing. The move generated substantial resentment among some old members, who thought SNCC should still operate like an extended family, and some newer members, who thought it smacked of authoritarianism. The various initiatives by Sellers and others were insufficient to halt the decline. By 1966, SNCC projects in Mississippi had weakened to the point where both the NAACP and SCLC were considering expanding their activities to take advantage of the vacuum.[10]

Factions contributed to programmatic ineffectiveness. Sellers describes two of the important factions as the Floaters and the Hardliners, putting himself in the latter group. His admittedly biased description portrays Floaters as equally divided between Blacks and whites, generally well-educated and committed to integrationist ideals. They were resistant to organizational discipline, upholding the right of the individual to follow the dictates of individual conscience, an important principle in early SNCC. "Go where the spirit say go," they used to say, "Do what the spirit say do." In the early years, the small size of the organization and the fact that the membership was so highly self-selected probably ensured that personal freedom wouldn't too often become personal license. In later years, according to Miss Baker, "the right of people to participate in the decisions that affect their lives . . . began to be translated into the idea that each person working had a right to decide what ought to be done. So you began to do your own thing."[11]

Hardliners tended to be Blacks, with less formal education than Floaters, were more likely to be field organizers, and were less concerned with personal freedom than with organizational effectiveness, which they saw as requiring a greater degree of centralization and accountability In retrospect, Mary King thought that while the problems were difficult ones, they could have been resolved had the discussion not taken place in an atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia.[12]

Program ineffectiveness was probably also a function of the reluctance of some new members to work with local leaders in the old way. On the one hand, Ivanhoe Donaldson, who had driven truckloads of food to Leflore during the winter of 1962–63, had moved to Columbus and, cooperating with local leaders, had set up what appeared to be a very promising community development corporation. On the other hand, Carson attributes the modest success of the attempt to organize in Vine City ghetto in Atlanta to the failure of the leadership "to acquire the support of strong, indigenous adult leaders who had traditionally provided entree for SNCC field secretaries." Many of those in the leadership of the project were relatively recent members of SNCC. Where the veterans were almost always respectful of local leadership, sometimes to the point of romanticizing it, some of the new members had no respect for local leaders at all, seeing them as clear examples of political backwardness. At a 1966 meeting where the expulsion of whites had been proposed, Mrs. Hamer fought the idea. A few separatists discounted her position since she was "no longer relevant" and not at their level of development.[13]

Attitudes like that may have been part of the reason organizers began leaving rural areas. At the same time, ghetto uprisings and the passage of the civil rights bill caused more concern with taking the movement to the cities. Traditionally, the great majority of staff members had been stationed in the rural South. By October of 1966, only a third of the staff remained in such areas, the rest being placed in urban centers in the South or outside of it. According to Carson, most of those who joined in 1966 were urban Blacks drawn to the militant image of SNCC rather than to the kind of organizing it had done in rural areas, and "few wanted to engage in the difficult work of gaining the trust and support of southern black people who were older than themselves and less aware of the new currents of black nationalist thought." More harshly, Forman claims that too many of the newcomers were simply middle-class Black elitists, unwilling to work with poor people.[14]

Drifting away from the close ties they had once shared with local people meant that the movement was drifting away from one of its moral anchors. In earlier years, Bob Moses had noted that being rooted in the lives of local people kept the movement from going off on tangents. Similarly, Martha Prescod Norman pointed out that the decision to work with people like Mrs. Hamer and Amzie Moore implied a decision to conduct oneself in a manner acceptable within their moral code. Some of the contentious and dogmatic behavior that came to characterize the movement in the middle sixties would never have been tolerated by local people. For many of the local people with whom SNCC had worked, nothing excused a lack of personal courtesy, and abstract ideas about political direction were less important than relationships with concrete individuals.

The loss of faith in nonviolence meant the loss of another moral anchor. Nonviolence is frequently talked about in tactical terms, in terms of its impact on the outside world, but the internal effects of the nonviolent, Christian tradition may have been equally important. Although not a proponent of nonviolence herself, Ella Baker noted with approval that in SNCC's early days the kids "were so keen about the concept of nonviolence that they were trying to exercise a degree of consciousness and care about not being violent in their judgment of others."[15] So long as significant numbers of members were making an effort to live their daily lives according to the dictates of stringent moral codes, there was something to balance whatever forces might have generated interpersonal bitterness. As organizers generally lost faith in American values, rejected the nonviolent, Christian tradition, and drifted away from their close contacts with the rural poor, they failed to create or find any functionally equivalent system for regulating their day-to-day behavior with one another. Without some such system, activists could become as much a danger to one another as to the social order.

The increasingly dogmatic style represents an especially important break with SNCC's heritage. It is quite different from the attitude with which the first organizers entered Mississippi. SNCC members had often prided themselves on their non-ideological character, on the way in which they developed ideas out of action. By the mid-sixties, ideas were taking on a primacy of their own, which meant a tendency to be unable to learn further from experience.

As a counter-example, consider Charlie Cobb's experience with the

Julian Bond campaign. During the spring of 1965 Bond, at the urging of Ivanhoe Donaldson, ran for a seat in the Georgia House. By this time, probably a majority of SNCC members had deep doubts about participating in the political system. Some of those who did not participate in Bond's campaign called those who did sell-outs, symbolized by the exchange of overalls for coats and ties among campaign workers. Charles Cobb decided to participate despite his own misgivings: "I will confess that I was also worried about the corrupting influence of politics in general. I felt, and I still feel, the threat . . . American 'politics' has on people who 'play the game'—you know, like touch . . . and be tainted." At the time, according to Cobb, most of the staff thought that city people were hardest to organize; they were "too apathetic." "We don't know yet what can tap and sustain the energies of the people locked up in the city ghettoes." Bond ran a campaign very much in the SNCC tradition. His workers went door to door, asking people what their problems were and what they wanted from a state representative (which often required explaining what a state representative was, since these people had never really had one before). On the basis of their responses, Bond fashioned a platform that stressed economic issues. He won the primary and the election by comfortable margins. Cobb learned a good deal from the effort. In the final analysis, he wrote, urban organizing is the same as rural: "What people need—all over!—is something they can grab hold of, or build, that is their own." He found that his own fears "about controlling people or manipulating them blurred in the give and take dialogue (which implies give and take of decision-making and ideas) with the community." After the campaign he was fascinated by the idea of communities "moving in and out of traditional American political forms. It implies a creation of instability of these political forms, created by people whose needs are not being and probably will not be met by the forms anyway. I think it is to our advantage to have oppressive government unstable."

Cobb's stance was open-ended. He took part in the campaign despite misgivings; he was willing to experiment with a tactic he thought dubious. The experiment then changed his thinking to something more complex than an either-or choice about whether to participate in the system. Much of what was dynamic in SNCC is reflected in Cobb's attitude, and that dynamism would be lost in a more dogmatic climate.[16]

The more doctrinaire climate also meant a tendency to see one another in increasingly stereotypical, one-dimensional terms. Ella Baker and Septima Clark understood clearly that the matron in the fur coat or the self-important preacher were hardly models of progressive thought, but they still assumed that such people could be worked with and could make a contribution. This ability to see people in their full complexity was increasingly lost in the more dogmatic phase of the movement, and as had been the case with southern racists, labels came increasingly to substitute for an awareness of the contradictions and complexities of individuals. Once, in the context of an argument within SNCC over who had the right to participate in the movement, Miss Baker, with uncharacteristic rhetorical flourish, said, "We need to penetrate the mystery of life and perfect the mastery of life and the latter requires understanding that human beings are human beings."[17] Making allowances for the ordinary human imperfections and contradictions of one's comrade became increasingly unlikely as the movement became increasingly dogmatic.

SNCC's increasing radicalism meant increasingly problematic relations with former allies. In the wake of the Atlantic City convention, they found relations with northern liberals and funding sources strained. In November 1964, the NAACP, still very angry over Atlantic City, left the COFO coalition, citing SNCC dominance. COFO disbanded altogether a year later. After Atlantic City, SNCC also found itself red-baited more frequently, a problem exacerbated even more in early 1966, when SNCC spoke out officially against the Vietnam War, the first major civil rights group to do so (although King as an individual had earlier made known his opposition). Most SNCC members seem to have opposed the war from the very beginning but the organization refrained from taking a stand until Sammy Younge, an Alabama SNCC worker and a navy veteran, was killed for trying to use a white restroom. Their statement on Vietnam argued that "the murder of Samuel Younge in Tuskegee, Alabama, is no different from the murder of people in Vietnam." In 1966, the liberal establishment was still largely

behind the war. Even a year later, when Martin Luther King, against the advice of his staff, spoke out very aggressively against the war, he was sharply criticized by much of the liberal community. For SNCC, liberal reaction to its position on the war was more evidence of liberal hypocrisy. All apart from the war issue, SNCC's increasing emphasis on economic issues meant that it was going to have more trouble with liberals. "We are raising fundamental questions," Bob Moses said, "about how the poor sharecropper can achieve the Good Life, questions liberalism is incapable of answering." By 1967, most members thought of themselves as anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist members of the Third World.[18]

Reconciling the more global concerns with the daily problems of the sharecropper and the ghetto dweller did not prove easy. The deepening radicalism led to Stokely Carmichael's election as chairman. In 1965, when few SNCC projects were going well, he had led an effort in Lowndes County, Alabama, that resulted in the creation of what was becoming a very powerful Black political party. His work there was very much in the community-organizing tradition, basic door-to-door organizing to create vehicles to empower the powerless. His success increased his prestige within the organization. His election in May 1966 reflected that, and it was also a repudiation of the tradition of Christian nonviolence symbolized by John Lewis, who had been chair since 1963. The shift from the religious Alabaman to the brasher, more eloquent New Yorker also symbolized a shift in the organization's self-presentation. Carmichael was seen as more militant on racial issues than Lewis, although his nationalism never precluded effective working relations with whites, a distinction largely lost on the press.

Traditionally, SNCC chairmen had not become media figures, but that changed under Carmichael, primarily because of the Black Power controversy. In early June, less than a month after the election, James Meredith began his March Against Fear, intending to walk from Memphis to Jackson to prove that it could be done. He was shot from ambush on the second day. A coalition of civil rights groups quickly formed to continue the march. Almost as quickly, the NAACP and Urban League, deliberately baited by Carmichael, pulled out. He refused to give them a reassuring statement about continued commitment to nonviolence. CORE, increasingly nationalistic itself, SNCC, and SCLC continued the march into the Delta, stopping in towns along the way to stimulate voter registration, getting a good response from local residents. In Greenwood, where Carmichael was well known from the time he had spent there in 1963 and 1964, he was arrested in a dispute over whether the marchers could use school grounds to pitch their tents. Bailed out (by Father Machesky), he showed up at that evening's rally boiling mad. When he spoke, he announced that this was his twenty-seventh arrest, and he intended for it to be his last. It was time for some changes. For years, Black people had been shouting "Freedom Now!" and had little to show for it. Cops were still doing anything they pleased. It was time to start shouting "Black Power!"[19]

SNCC members had been discussing the idea of Black Power, and one, Willie Ricks, had used it in speeches. Carmichael himself seems to have been surprised by how positively the slogan was received by the crowd. The phrase catapulted him into the national spotlight. For some months, few reporters could see anything in it but anti-white sentiment. Nationalism, separatism, racism, and Black Power were frequently discussed as if they meant the same thing. The press was not helped by the fact that Carmichael was consistently, and probably deliberately, ambiguous in his subsequent explanations of the idea. More conservative civil rights organizations immediately criticized the slogan. Martin Luther King, who had been on the march, refused to join the condemnations, private misgivings notwithstanding. He was himself going through a period of frustration with SCLC's programs and a period of philosophical transition. He also had long-standing relationships with some SNCC members. He stressed the more pragmatic elements of the slogan and noted that there was nothing wrong with racial pride. He also noted that some policymakers were trying to exploit the controversy over the phrase to justify resistance to change.

SNCC had long been disdainful of SCLC for acting as if building a movement and making speeches were the same things. With Carmichael's increased national visibility, SNCC increasingly found itself acting the same way. Although he had planned to spend the year rebuild-

ing southern projects and trying to replicate his success in Lowndes County, he found himself flying all over the nation making speeches and stirring controversies, while organizing projects continued to drift. His speech-making gave SNCC a central role in the national reexamination of racial and economic issues and generated badly needed funds, but it generated internal resentment as well. Other members suddenly found themselves being regarded by the public as Stokely's followers, which came as news to them. While no one denied that Carmichael had paid his dues in the field, so had dozens of other organizers, and they were not getting the kind of public adulation Carmichael was getting.[20] Some members began calling him Stokely Starmichael. It did not help that some of his statements were intemperate and unauthorized, as if policy were now being made at the podium. Carmichael acknowledged the validity of many of the criticisms and for a while followed the restrictions placed on his public speaking by other staff members. When he left the chairmanship in the spring of 1967, he again announced his desire to return to the field as an organizer, but in fact he continued to play the role of militant nationalist spokesman. Having stepped on the stage, he seemed unable to step back off. The pattern of substituting rhetoric at the top for program at the bottom continued after he stepped down. "Rather than encouraging local leaders to develop their own ideas," Clayborne Carson contends, "SNCC was becoming merely one of many organizations seeking to speak on behalf of black communities."[21]

Other organizations were having similar problems. As early as 1963, Septima Clark, then with SCLC complained:

> Many states are losing their citizenship schools because there is no one to do follow-up work. I have done as much as I could. In fact, I'm the only paid staff worker doing field visitation. I think that the staff of the SCLC working with me in the Citizenship Education Program feels that the work is not dramatic enough to warrant their time. Direct action is so glamorous and packed with emotion that most young people prefer demonstration over genuine education. It seems to me as if Citizenship Education is all mine except when it comes time to pick up the checks.[22]



Similarly, grassroots organizing, slowly developing local leadership, must have seemed undramatic in the atmosphere of 1966–67, even to such a successful and experienced organizer as Carmichael.

For Ella Baker, the increased reliance on the press and the need of leaders for public recognition was a common element in the degeneration of social movements, a part of the pattern by which initially progressive American movements have traditionally been rendered ineffective.[23] She contended that the labor movement had succumbed to what she called the American weakness of receiving some recognition from the powers-that-be and then taking on some of the characteristics and values of their former enemies. Similarly, in the NAACP of the forties and fifties, she thought that the thirst for recognition was one of the factors leading to accommodationist politics at a time when many of the members were ready for a more militant program. Too many leaders thought that as long as *they* were getting some attention from the press, as long as *they* could call important whites on the phone, the Race was making progress. In the 1960s, she thought that some Black Power spokespersons became so enamored of the coverage they were receiving from the press as to begin performing for the press.

> I think they got caught up in their own rhetoric. Even this business of the press, I think, has its explanation. To me, it is a part of our system which says that success is registered in terms of, if not money, then how much prestige and how much recognition you have. . . . So these youngsters with their own need for recognition began to respond to the press.[24]

The substance of the Black Power idea didn't trouble her; the lack of organizing did. She noted that she had seen Carmichael explain Black Power in ways that should have made sense to any person willing to look at the facts.

> But this began to be taken up, you see, by youngsters who had not gone through any experiences or any steps of thinking and it did become a slogan, much more of a slogan, and the rhetoric was far in

advance of the organization for achieving that which you say you're out to achieve.

[What was needed was] a greater degree of real concentration on organizing people. I keep bringing this up. I'm sorry, but it's part of me. I just don't see anything to be substituted for having people understand their position and understand their potential power and how to use it. This can only be done, as I see it, through the long route, almost, of actually organizing people in small groups and parlaying those into larger groups.[25]

The national and international reaction to the Black Power controversy probably obscured the need for real organizing. Perhaps nothing in SNCC's history, not even the Summer Project, had given the organization so much visibility. Quite apart from the way in which some leaders may have been affected by the need for recognition, the fact that the organization itself was getting so much attention, however hostile, probably contributed to a sense that they were getting things done, they were shaking the world.

The high-flying rhetoric of Carmichael and others was a far cry from SNCC's early style in Mississippi. Bob Moses, for example, although he hadn't thought the problem out fully at the time, responded to the enormity of the problems in Mississippi by understating everything:

> I remember that all during that time period my talk, my speech and everything was very, sort of sparse. I didn't know any other way to talk there. You were always afraid of getting people thinking that something was going to happen that wasn't going to happen. You needed people who were going to accept what was going to happen and were somehow going to steel themselves to be part of what you knew was going to happen as opposed to promising people something that you knew wasn't going to happen. . . . Your tools are really the people, those are your tools. So the question is how do you attract the tools that you need from among those people? Well, it isn't by getting people who are going to respond to the big speech.



The issue of white participation in SNCC came to a head during Carmichael's tenure as chair. SNCC's small size in its early years was probably particularly important in maintaining the sense of interracial fraternity. Most of the whites were from the North, but it may also have been significant that some of the most active and visible whites were southerners—Bob Zellner from Alabama (who grew up in the same church as George Wallace), Casey Hayden from Texas, Jane Stembridge from Virginia, Connie Curry from North Carolina, Sam Shirah from Alabama. They frequently seemed more at ease interacting with Blacks than did their northern white counterparts, at least partly because southern whites and southern Blacks shared so much culturally. MacArthur Cotton, a Black SNCC member, appreciated the fact that white southerners came to the movement by a particularly hard road: "I found a closeness with southern whites. That probably had a lot to do with commitment. You step out of one of these towns in Alabama or Mississippi, talking about you going to be a freedom fighter, you committed."

Racial tensions were also minimized by the fact that there just weren't that many whites in the organization before 1964, and leadership was generally in Black hands. In 1961, Zellner was the only white member on a staff of sixteen, and it would be a year before another white, Bill Hansen, joined him. Of the forty-one field staff in Mississippi in late 1963, there were six whites. In the Leflore County area during the same period, I know of only two whites who were there for any length of time. After 1964, the proportion of whites in the overall organization went up to about twenty percent, although it didn't maintain that level very long.[26]

Historically, the involvement of outsiders in movements of the oppressed has been unstable. In one article on the subject, Gary Marx and Michael Useem look at three cases of outsider involvement in minority movements—whites in the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement, upper-caste Hindus in the movement for untouchable rights in India, and whites in the modern American civil rights movement. Outsider involvement became problematic in all three cases, and for similar reasons in each case.

First, despite broad agreement on the need for change, outsiders and minorities were likely to disagree ideologically, frequently because minority-group members favored more radical strategies. Second, the privileged backgrounds of outsiders in the broader world were often replicated or thought to be replicated inside the movement. They often, for example, had skills that tended to make them gravitate toward administrative roles. Third, outsiders often brought some of the prejudices of the outside world with them, even if in diluted forms. Many white abolitionists were quite sure they knew what was best for Blacks. Ex-slaves like Frederick Douglass had to fight for the right to speak for themselves. Finally, while outsiders often played important roles in the early phases of movements, the passage of time often made their roles more problematic, no matter whether the movement was successful or not. As participation made minorities more self-confident, they wanted to depend less on others. Sources of conflict that are present from the beginning become more and more nettlesome with increased interaction between the two groups. The failure to reach goals may lead to a desire for internal restructuring of the movement or to scapegoating. In the end, even Gandhi's participation in India's Untouchable movement became problematic.[27]

What happened in the civil rights movement is not historically unusual. By 1964, some SNCC members worried that the presence of whites in large numbers could interfere with the development of the self-confidence of the local people; that no matter how individually liberal whites might be, in appearing to rely upon them the movement added to the stereotype that Blacks were dependent on whites for everything; that some white members were trying to act out personal philosophies that were not always consistent with the movement's needs or were just acting out personal problems; that some white members had trouble accepting leadership from Blacks, partly because they thought of themselves as messiahs. Perhaps every veteran had a version of the story in which a Black organizer pleaded and pleaded with some old farmer to go register without success. Then some white organizer comes along, and the farmer goes right away because anything a white person says must be right. On the other hand, some young local Black people working with SNCC could not stop using white SNCC members as punching bags against whom they could release pent-up racial frustrations.

There was broad agreement within the organization, including among many white members, that some of these were valid problems, but different people took different lessons from that. Many, probably a majority, thought that it was time that white organizers started working in white communities. Others thought that whites had to go altogether. Among those taking the hardest line were the members of the Atlanta Project, an attempt to demonstrate that urban areas could be successfully organized. Half of the members were from the North, many were veterans, but only a few had been with SNCC in its earliest years. Most had not been as exposed to the nonviolent, Christian period of the movement and were not as likely to have long-standing personal relations with individual whites. Black members who had gone through that earlier period even as they adopted nationalist ideology were more likely to envision a continuing role for at least those individual whites with whom they had shared jail cells, cigarette butts, and beatings.[28]

Members of the Atlanta Project were among those within the organization engaging in a new form of race-baiting. While members of the press kept the organization on the defensive by constantly raising the specter of Black racism, members of the Atlanta Project kept other Black SNCC members on the defensive by constantly questioning their loyalty to the race. The Atlanta separatists also acquired a general reputation for being difficult to work with. "They ignored memos, refused to return phone calls and rarely attended general staff meetings," according to Cleveland Sellers. Some of the lack of cooperation may be attributable to the fact that some members were jealous of Carmichael or to the fact that from their perspective, the persons running the organization, even though largely nationalist, had not achieved the level of consciousness they had reached.[29]

Members of the Atlanta Project forced a "final" resolution of the racial question at a staff meeting in upstate New York in December 1966. To the chagrin of many present, they refused to allow any other business to be discussed until that issue was disposed of. Debate went on for several frustrating and emotional days. Carmichael argued for

the whites-organizing-whites idea rather than exclusion. In the end, the vote was for exclusion of whites, with nineteen voting for the motion, eighteen against, and twenty-four official abstentions. (Perhaps another twenty-odd members were not present for the vote, held at two in the morning.)[30]

The December vote did not lay the race question to rest. In May of 1967, Bob and Dottie Zellner presented the central committee with a proposal under which they would organize a poor white community in New Orleans. They had already acquired their own funding, but they wanted to operate the project as SNCC members without any special restrictions because of their race. Zellner had been in SNCC almost since its inception and held a special status. Sellers, one of the leaders of the nationalist thrust, said Zellner "commanded the unqualified respect of everyone in the organization. He was a damned good man. No one questioned his courage or his commitment." During the uneasy debate over the proposal, Forman, also an architect of SNCC's nationalist position, called Zellner his best friend. The decision not to accept the Zellners' proposal was painfully made by the committee, most of whose members, with the exception of Forman, had not been in the organization as long as Zellner. Someone wanted to deliver the decision by mail rather than look the Zellners in the face. Forman condemned that proposal for cowardice. What comes through from all accounts of the meeting is the ambivalence of SNCC's officers, committed though they were to the nationalist path. In the name of ideological principle, they were doing something that just did not sit right in the gut. Like nearly all of the whites expelled from the organization, the Zellners refused to talk with an eager national press.[31]

The Zellners stayed in the organization longer than did many members of the Atlanta Project. A few months after the December meeting at which they had pushed the expulsion of whites, Atlanta Project staff were themselves fired from SNCC after they had responded to a disagreement over use of a staff car by sending Jim Forman a threatening letter. There was talk among the Project members of settling their expulsion with force, but that was averted. They had, though, made a contribution to the growing pattern of dogmatism within SNCC that would outlast their actual presence. "In their uncompromising effort to impose their ideas on other SNCC workers, they further undermined the trust, mutual respect, and interdependence without which SNCC could not survive," according to Carson.[32] Still, it is not clear that they were any more dogmatic than any of the other factions.

The expulsion of whites from SNCC and from some other movement organizations is taken to be a watershed in our social history, but emphasizing racial antagonisms in this way can be misleading. American intellectuals have often stressed the interracial to the exclusion of the intraracial.[33] For the same reason that the deaths of Black activists never had the public impact of the deaths of white activists, social commentary on the movement in the middle of the decade sometimes focused on how Blacks and whites were interacting almost to the exclusion of looking at how Blacks were interacting with one another. Thus, we don't fully appreciate one of the central ironies of the period, that while elaborating an ideology that gave a new primacy to racial unity, Black activists increasingly lost the capacity to work effectively with one another. Once that happened, the status of whites in the movement was more or less beside the point. The expulsion of whites has to be understood as one expression of a more pervasive deterioration in social relationships. Charlie Cobb refers to it as a period of tribalism, a time when activists began making invidious distinctions among themselves based on educational background, region of origin, philosophy of organization, placement on the field or office staff, length of movement service.[34]

One important dividing line was that between northern and southern Blacks. Tensions had been present from the beginning. At SNCC's founding conference in 1960, Miss Baker had been at some pains to keep southern students and northern ones apart, precisely because the northern students were better schooled and exposed to a broader range of social philosophies. Miss Baker thought it important that the basically southern character of the early struggle not be suddenly overwhelmed by all these ideas the southern students weren't yet prepared to discuss.

Even among Black students, each group came to Raleigh conference with its own reputation. The North Carolina kids had been the most activist and had the prestige that went with that. The Atlanta kids

were seen as swell-heads, and they did have a pretty high opinion of themselves. They quickly learned that in this context, they lost points because they hadn't engaged in much direct action, and no one at the conference was especially impressed with the ringing proclamations they had issued. The Nashville group was the most steeped in the study of nonviolence and civil disobedience, probably the only group to have a regular pattern of workshops, and like the North Carolina kids, they already had a great deal of practical experience. The Howard group was thought to be more articulate than any of the others in a formal sense and better prepared to argue their positions. Miss Baker noted that kids from the southern tradition were strong on the flowery oratory but less good at reasoned dialogue. The Howard group was also seen as more aggressive than the other students, often inappropriately aggressive, a reputation that would follow them and other northern students so long as the movement in the South lasted.[35]

Joyce Ladner, who appreciated the students, white and Black, who came from the North and once thought they might be the South's salvation, still felt a deeper sense of communion with students who shared her southern background.

> I strongly agreed with the southerners, Black southerners in the movement much more than I did with northerners because they understood more. I used to feel that there were occasions when northerners didn't fully understand and they could go back to their own homes. So I had a special affinity with people like MacArthur Cotton, Sam Block, Willie Peacock, James Peacock, Hollis and Curtis. They were people like me. I always felt we had much more of a stake in what happened in the South, in Mississippi.

Hollis Watkins expressed the differences more sharply. He referred to northern students as "the children of those who ran" from the South. He found northern Black students less dependable, more given to rash behavior. They were great philosophers, he said; they could rap for days, but they might or might not be around when something serious had to be done. Those who had not been politically active in the North were actually less trouble than those who came down with some prior experience. If they already had any kind of civil rights experience, you couldn't tell them anything. They already had all the answers. Willie Peacock noted that "we [Southerners] had spiritual values; most of them did not. . . . They tried to rationalize everything. Because of our different realities, we clashed on many issues." Other southern-born organizers expressed similar feelings. Northerners had too little respect for the local people and their customs. Above all, perhaps, they were simply seen as arrogant and pushy, too prone to seeing themselves as saviors.[36]

Similarly, James Forman has been sharply critical of certain attitudes that he attributed to middle-class northerners, whatever their color. He attributes much of the disorder of the post-1964 period to their increasing influence within the organization, and the egotism and elitism they brought with them. He also sees them as the source of a kind of bourgeois liberalism that made them so concerned with retaining a kind of moral purity they were unwilling to exercise the power they might have exercised.

As with race, these antagonisms were at least partly a struggle over ownership of the movement. According to Mary King, the involvement of the white and powerful tended to make local field staff, those who had risked the most to build the movement, feel excluded. That is no doubt true, but it does not apply only to the involvement of whites. When the Summer Project was still under debate, local staff objected to the idea of large numbers of white students coming down, but many were also uncomfortable with the idea of large numbers of Black students coming down, and the Greenwood staff objected to SNCC's national office coming to Greenwood. Although they differed in intensity, there were objections to outsiders, period, and the objections were almost certainly related to the fact that the outsiders, white or Black, were perceived as taking the movement away from the people who had built it at the local level. As had been expected, national attention focused on the outsiders. There are any number of stories from the Summer Project in which a reporter is in a room with several veterans of the Mississippi movement and Susie Sophomore from Swarthmore, who has been in Mississippi all week. The reporter, of course, wants to talk with Susie. Similarly, as some SNCC members

became nationally known spokespersons, they tended not to be the southern-born members of the field staff, but northern Blacks. The southern-born staff was pushed aside inside their own movement, and their resentment showed at times in quite visible disdain for johnny-come-latelys, some of whom had never organized anything and never put their bodies on the line. Fighting back, newcomers sometimes treated whatever SNCC had done prior to their coming as irrelevant and old-fashioned anyway. It was the kind of escalating spiral that could go on endlessly with the real issues never being discussed.

At their most destructive, the various manifestations of tribalism encouraged subgroups of activists to try to establish some higher legitimacy by playing games of moral superiority—Blacker Than Thou, More Dedicated Than Thou, More Revolutionary Than Anybody. In the absence of successful program, it allowed one to maintain a self-identity as being on the side of the angels. Of course, it also helped make organizational life, or even rational discussion, virtually impossible.

The social and political atmosphere of the late sixties was inimical in so many ways to the organizing tradition that it is impossible to be precise about just which of many factors were most important. The social climate that developed in much of the movement community after 1965 was certainly a very important problem. The social climate of the Mississippi movement in the early sixties was developmental in several different respects. In the latter period, it was much more judgmental, more divisive, more negative, sometimes characterized by a dogmatism that militated against thinking freely and experimenting widely. In the name of radicalism, people started destroying their friends. Political work became increasingly media-mediated, increasingly focused on charismatic personalities. The patient path of actual organizing seemed much less attractive. At their worst, the new militant spokespersons were just the modern version of the old southern preacher, Reverend Chickenwing transformed into Brother Abdullah. Rushing off into brave new forms of struggle, activists frequently left behind some of the forms of thinking and doing, some of the relationships that had sustained and anchored activists in Mississippi and elsewhere.



Black Power was and is an unsettling idea. While there is much truth in characterizing it a radical slogan that, at least within SNCC, seldom developed a comparably radical program, the idea of Black Power was a central element in a national debate that changed, probably permanently, the way Americans think about race. For substantial numbers of Black activists and intellectuals, it legitimated their right to think without constant reference to what pleased whites. It added legitimacy to the idea that Blacks have as much right to defend themselves as anyone else, that the legal rights of Blacks cannot be dependent on how loving and nonviolent they are, that Blacks need not beg and plead for what white Americans take for granted. It helped make it possible for an important minority of Black Americans to identify with non-white people the world over and with their own African backgrounds and to begin looking for reasons to take pride in a history that had too often been treated as stigma and degradation. It was a part of several social currents that encouraged Black and white intellectuals to think about social problems in terms that were more institutional and less personal. If it developed in ways that represented a turning away from the styles of many older, rural Blacks, it also captured and gave expression to a growing mood of frustration and urgency among younger Blacks.

The benefits were not without costs. Although few in number, SNCC and CORE organizers had great impact on the shape of political discourse among Blacks nationally. In the best of worlds, as those who had been a part of the organizing tradition began moving to other political styles, some thought would have been given to preserving and passing on whatever had been learned from years of struggle in Deep South communities. In fact, real-world urgencies and the emotional climate of the time left little time for calm reflection. The idealism and high hopes of the early years had been thrown back in their faces. Joyce Ladner said:

> I think a lot of the acting out that people have gone through, the turning on each other, came about in part because of the big, idealistic bubble having been burst in so many places. . . . If this that I

believed and in which I've invested so much psychic energy all these years doesn't work, then what am I to believe?

In turning on one another, they were turning away from the local people of the South and the sense of community that local people had done so much to create within the movement. If the movement's formally radical phase achieved less than it might have, the erosion of community is at least partly responsible for that.

However unwittingly, however compelling the reasons, the activist tradition in the Black community lost touch with the kinds of questions raised by the organizing experience in Mississippi, a loss that has certainly contributed to the impoverishment of political discussion in that community for the last two decades.