

A WHITE ON WHITES

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CO-OP REPORT (~~First of two~~)

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Introduction

From fall, 1962, to fall, 1964, I worked as an organizer in rural Southwest Georgia, rural Mississippi, and Washington, D.C.. I worked for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Georgia and Mississippi, and for Southeast Neighborhood House in Washington. In every locale, I worked in Negro communities.

Most Negroes reacted to me ^{at first} as they have been taught to react to all white men--with a subservient "yassuh, boss." I would talk to them about all kinds of things--the weather, crops, local gossip, religion--anything to gain confidence. But it was extremely hard for me to overcome traits of mine that caused stereotyped reactions. I discovered that I had many traits that were peculiarly white, and that I had to have a full understanding of them. For example, paternalism, or over-reacting, and trying to "prove" that I was not like the other white men.

Also, I had to overcome self-consciousness. I had to learn those traits which were basically human and universal, and give up some I had previously considered part of my "individuality," but which only served to alienate me from the people with whom I worked.

This was a very painful process. At times it overwhelmed me, and I felt completely lost and depressed. After a while, though, I began to gain enough self-understanding to be able to function.

Now, in 1966, after going through all that anguish, I am being told I am no longer wanted in the Civil Rights Movement. SNCC no longer wants whites to organize. They have adopted a policy of "black power."

I must admit that at first, although intellectually I understood SNCC's reasons, I felt quite bitter and personally defeated. I could do nothing about changing the new policy, however, so I struggled to be able to deal with it within myself. This called for a complete re-evaluation of the role of white people in the Civil Rights Movement.

This paper is part of my attempt to put my thoughts and feelings into some coherent order. It is highly subjective.

The Role of Whites-1962

Goals

Let me start at the beginning--the rural areas around Albany, Georgia, fall, 1962.

When I first thought of working in the South, I had the typical white liberal attitude prevalent at that time. The main problem, I felt, was the "prejudice" of Southern whites towards Negroes. If only Southern whites would accept Negroes as "equal", the Civil Rights problem would be solved. My job, therefore, indeed the only job to be done, was to convince the whites. I felt, of course, that I had no prejudice. (My idea was to work with the Jewish Community of Albany, which was influential in civic affairs. I felt I could "communicate" with them better than other segments of the white community.)

However, soon after I started working, it became clear that I would have very little direct contact with the white community itself. I learned immediately that the Negroes with whom I would be working did not trust whites anymore than the whites trusted them. The difference was that the whites mistrust stemmed from the fear of the slave-holder of having his slaves rise up. The Negroes' fear was the fear of a man who had been mistreated and oppressed all his life by whites and, naturally, assumed that all whites, no matter how friendly they tried to appear, would, sooner or later, turn against him and somehow "put him down".

As Charles Sherrod, my project director, said to a reporter:

We want to strike at the very root of segregation. The root is the idea that white is superior. That idea has eaten into the minds of the people, black and white. We have to break this image. We can only do this if they see white and black working together, side by side, the white man no more and no less than his black brother, but human beings together. *

My role, then, was seen as walking side by side with Negroes, as an equal. Which was, literally, what I did--down many muddy country roads, knocking on shacks, trying to convince people to register and vote.

*Anne Beaden, "Students Challenge Rural Georgia, The Southern Patriot, Dec., 1962, p.1;3

Problems

Our project was the only one in the Deep South that used white workers. Project directors elsewhere felt that it was too dangerous to use whites. Negroes could slip in and out of areas without being noticed by the racist authorities, but integrated teams inevitably attracted attention, and violence.

The hostile whites hated us more than the Negro workers. First, because they felt that we must be the ones who were "agitating" the Negroes, as we were white and superior. Second, because we were traitors to our race. Over and over again, the worst insult that white racists could think of to heap upon us was to ask derisively, "You, really white, bawls?"

Having whites on the staff added to tensions, and the possibility of violence, in another way also. No matter what the actual personal behavior of the whites, we were accused by both white and black Southerners of having a perverse sexual interests in Negroes. We became the target of many lewd and vulgar accusations and insinuations. We had to work in an atmosphere in which we were considered "fallen".

The whites had always believed that Negroes were more sexually aggressive and potent than themselves, and both white men and women probably had conscious or unconscious desires to have sex-relations with Negroes. Indeed, the Kinsey Report stated that something like 90% of all Southern white men had their first sex-relations with a Negro woman. Thus, the only bi-racial relations that many whites were familiar with were sexual and they naturally assumed that we were engaging in sex with Negroes.

The Negroes, on the other hand, knew of many white men and women who had exploited them sexually, and therefore needed assurance that we did not want to do so. A psychiatrist working with civil rights workers wrote:

A seventeen-year-old Negro girl who was somewhat upset that her boyfriend had just broken up with her to pay his attentions to a white girl bitterly remarked, "I think all these white girls down here sat up North dreaming about being raped by some big black Negro and came down here to see what it was like."*

*MS. Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D., The Stresses of the White Female Worker In the Civil Rights Movement in the South, pg. 6

Inter-Staff Conflicts

I left Georgia in the winter of 1964, returned to school for six months, and then went to Washington, D.C., to work as a community organizer for Southeast Neighborhood House. I stayed there for six months, then went back to work for SNCC, this time in Mississippi. I will discuss Washington shortly, but for the present I must skip over it and write about Mississippi. I say must because from the perspective of today I cannot see the Washington experience as a distinct experience. It seems part of Mississippi. When I was in Washington I had many anxieties and vague notions about what I was going through, but I never could crystalize or identify these feelings. In Mississippi, I had the same feelings, but I was with others who had them also, and through discussions I was able to put them into words.

I went to Mississippi in the Spring of 1964, and was stationed at Rust College, a small, poorly-endowed school for Negroes, in Holly Springs. I was the only white at the college, and the only SNCC worker. My job was to make preparations for the arrival of twenty other workers that were coming that summer. I rented a house for them to live in, made initial contacts in the community, etc..

That spring, many Negro SNCC staff members in Mississippi had been against having more white workers sent down. They had said the whites would increase the possibility of danger, would cause disruption among the regular staff, and would tend to alienate SNCC from the masses of Mississippi Negroes.

Those supporting using whites said that the white students generally would come from middle-class backgrounds, and would therefore bring money into their projects--from their parents, and from friends of their parents, who would be anxious to support them. Also, several of the workers would have very influential parents who would, undoubtedly, be willing to help. (For example, one would be the son of a California Congressman).

It is very significant that not one of the Negro SNCC workers justified bringing whites on ideological grounds, or on the grounds used by Sherrod two years previous, that only through having whites work would the goals of the Movement be achieved.*

Finally, one thousand young white workers were brought from the North. They found themselves at the center of an emotionally shattering cross-fire of racial tensions, fears, and hatreds. Whatever their prior good intentions, few white workers were able to cope with their new situation. Immediately, they had to face the bitterness and hostility of the Negro workers who had opposed their participation.

The white women, especially, found themselves in an extremely trauma-producing situation. She stands at the very center of the Southern way-of-life. For Negroes she is the tabooed and revered object. "It has been in her name and for her glory that the white South has oppressed, brutalized, lynched, and mutilated the black man for centuries. Violation of the socio-sexual taboos surrounding the white woman has frequently meant instant death for the Negro."** Thus, many Negro staff members felt more resentful of the white women than of the white men.

Feelings that whites "are trying to take over our Movement" were more often directed at the white female than at the male.*** White girls were periodically made the scape-goats for most of the difficulties any particular project was having. It was she who was blamed when the program was not running properly or the staff got bogged down in "black-white relations." When resentful feelings were highest among the Negro workers, one often heard: "Those white bitches should all go home". This sentiment was sometimes expressed directly to the white girls and attempts were made to isolate them socially and psychologically.

The Negro female workers in particular were unhappy with the presence of the white female. ^{The} Negro women tend to have a generalized deep-seated resentment toward white women because of society's superior valuation of "white standards of beauty."

*The question was debated back and forth for many months, until SNCC leaders felt there was a consensus. Most of the arguments presented here are specifically from a staff conference held in Greenville, Miss., May, 1966.

**^{From the same source} op.cit, pg.1

***Ibid, pg.8

Negro women must live with the frustration that, no matter how much they straighten their hair or bleach their skins, they can never be quite "white". In addition, they saw white female civil rights workers as competitors for their Negro men; and since the Negro man has been brainwashed for centuries with "sacred white womanhood," many of the Negro girls saw these white girls as "unfair competition."

Many of the white workers, male and female, contributed to their own difficulties. They brought with them certain attitudes (often unconscious and in different degrees) which can be called the "White-African-God Complex." At the center of this "complex" was commonly found the fantasy of the intelligent, brave, white leading the poor, downtrodden, and oppressed black man to freedom. The Negro is seen as someone who had to be "led". Usually, because of their superior office and administrative skills, the whites work themselves into positions of control and leadership. In their social contacts they wanted to associate intimately only with the Negro project leaders.

The Whites As Organizers

So far, I have been describing white-black relations in more or less psychological terms, and dealing with inter-staff problems. I would now like to make some observations about the white role in terms of the job to be done--gaining freedom for Negroes.

Over and over again in Mississippi and Georgia, hostile white people would challenge me:

"Do we cum Nawth an tell ya'll how to run yawh state? Why don't ya go home!"

There was usually no way to respond. The communication gap was too wide.. Behind their statement lay every assumption the Civil Rights Movement was fighting. The whites were assuming they ran their state and its counties, an assumption based, of course, on reality; even though in most of the counties in which I worked, the majority of people were Negroes. Also, behind their statement lay the assumption that, because I was white, I participated in running my home state in the same way they ran theirs. Their assumption

was not true; not in the way they meant it. (Many of the Negroes with whom I worked also believed that I had power because I was white, and I'll deal with this problem in a moment.)

The whites were further assuming that the basic conflict was between white civil rights workers and themselves. The debate was about how to "treat" the Negro.

In their thinking, they could not consider the possibility that Negroes, of their own free volition, had organized and were in control of the Civil Rights Movement.

They could not conceive of the possibility that Negroes were people with feelings and intelligence who were simply tired of oppression and were organizing to fight it.

Most of the Negro local residents also assumed that we whites had power. Every morning in Holly Springs, ten, maybe twenty Negroes would come into the office. They refused to talk with the Negro workers, and insisted on talking to us. They all had individual problems--they were being treated unfairly by the Welfare Department, or were being cheated out of their pay for growing cotton, or hundreds of other complaints. They wanted us to "go talk to the man" for them. This was just a perpetuation of the old tradition of getting a "good white man" on your side to fight for you against a "bad" one. Before, many Negroes would gain the sympathy of a local law officer, or a banker or lawyer, and constantly ask him for help. The Negroes had completely accepted the white supremacy system and had adjusted to it.

The Negroes' image of the white worker was reinforced when the white responded to calls for help and did indeed intervene between the Negro and the white authorities. The fact was that white civil rights workers, the people most vilified in the Southern press and most despised by local authorities, had a certain kind of power over the authorities.

For example, during the fall of 1964, SNCC was organizing to have Negroes run for the county committees that decide how much cotton each farmer can plant. People who wanted to be put on the ballot in my area, Marshall County, were having a very difficult time. The local Agriculture Department Agent was ignoring those who approached him and the present local committee was beginning to Gerrymander district lines so that the Negro vote would be split. [I spoke to the agent.

He took definite actions which made the committee elections equitable. All Gerry-mandering schemes were halted, and several Negroes were put on the ballot.

Why did I, the "communist outside agitator" have an effect? The agent hated and despised me, all right. He even refused to shake hands. But he was awed by the fact that I obviously had more education than he and he fully believed the same myth that most Southern whites believed--that I had the "power of the Federal Government" behind me. (The Southerners are told everyday that the Government is going "Communitistic," and they grow to believe it.) Also, the agent knew that I had contacts with the press and other public media sources, so there would be adverse publicity.

The point is that the agent was reacting to me, not to the people he was supposed to be serving, the residents of Marshall County, the majority of whom were Negro.

The Negroes did not interpret the agent's giving in as a victory for themselves. They viewed the whole matter as a debate between two white men. The "good" white had won in this case, that was all. Indeed, the fact that there was a victory reinforced the system which had taught the Negroes they needed whites to "take care" of them.

Washington, D.C.

At last, I can talk about Washington. As I said, while I was working there, I had feelings of uneasiness about my role, but was never able to make them explicit.

In Washington, I was forced by the nature of my job to play the role of the "good white." I was a social worker in a Negro neighborhood. Individuals would come to me with complaints about the Welfare Department or about the Public Housing Authority. I would go with them to see their caseworker, or to whoever else had authority in the problem area, and try to "straighten the problem out." Usually I was quite successful.

But my "clients" treated me with the same obsequiousness, and the same mistrust as they did their social workers. After working in Georgia, where I had been trained that people needed "self-respect", and where I had tried to break down the idea of white supremacy,

my Washington job went against my grain. I felt uneasy, frankly, when sixty year old Negro women would call me, a boy of 22, "sir".

My director, Ralph Fertig, although coming from a traditional social-work oriented background, was sensitive to my concerns, and agreed that the only way to deal with the problems of poverty was to have the poor, Negroes, directly confront the power structure themselves. In this case, the power lay in the various Congressional and Senatorial Committees that run the District.

We organized a group of people on welfare to testify before the Committees during hearings on appropriations for the District Welfare Budget. All went well in front of the House Committee, but the Senate Committee refused to let the people on welfare testify. Senator Robert Byrd, the Committee Chairman, insisted that Mr. Fertig speak for them. Fertig quite rightly insisted he could not speak for them, but did give a testimony.

This whole incident is just a variation of the pattern I described above: The whites believe that the white sympathizers are "agitators" leading the blacks. The Negroes do not believe they can face the power structure alone, and that they need the whites to intervene for them.

In remarks not reported in the above article, Senator Byrd made it clear he thought Mr. Fertig was the only person he had to deal with. Also, the fact that Byrd did allow Fertig to testify added to the Negroes' feeling of helplessness.

Conclusions

I have described some of my own experiences which showed the tremendous conflicts and tensions between white and black civil rights workers. All these conflicts led, of course, to much less actually being achieved by the projects.

Also, I have shown some cases where white organizers were able to be highly effective in gaining victories for the movement. But, they were able to do so because they were white. This fact reinforced the white supremacist position that Negroes can do nothing for

*See Appendix

themselves, and reinforced the Negroes' feelings of inadequacy. Whites gaining victories for Negroes helped perpetuate the system of whites being superior to Negroes, and Negroes depending on whites.

I feel, however, that the goal of the Civil Rights Movement should be to change that system. It must build within the Negro people a feeling that they have the right to make demands on the power structure by themselves and for themselves, without using a "good" white. SNCC was trying to convince the Negroes that through organizing, through sticking together, they could gain a say in determining the direction of their own lives. Many call this "self-dignity".

From my time as an organizer, I feel it is impossible for any white person to help Negroes gain "self-dignity." The white supremacy mentality is too ingrained in both white and black. Whenever we intervened between the blacks and the power structure, there was no way to convince Negroes they had succeeded by their own efforts. Even if we had never personally approached the authorities, Negroes would be convinced that the only reason they got results was that we were "behind" him.

Even if we whites would say explicitly to Negroes: "you must do it yourself--you are capable of it, " or "We have no more power down here than you do, " we would not break down their image of us. Indeed, in situations where we said this, the response often was: "Yassuh, boss, you sho' is right, boss." And the person would indeed do whatever needed to be done on his own, but only because a white had told him to do it.

Looking back on the period when a great number of white workers were in Mississippi, I feel very little was gained. The Negro communities in which we worked became dependent upon us. Even if we achieved a lot in terms of gaining equal rights for Negroes, once we left a community the Movement there usually died. The people fell once again into a state of feeling helpless.

This put a tremendous amount of pressure on the white workers. The first thing local residents would ask us when we moved into a new community was: How long are you going to stay? If we could not honestly answer "forever", Negroes made it clear to us they felt we were letting them down. But we all had to leave, sometime.

The only solution I can see is that the Movement should constantly strive for direct confrontations between the Negro masses of people and the white authorities. That way, the authorities will learn that in a democracy they must respond to the people they serve simply because the people are their constituencies, and not because "educated" whites are present. Though direct confrontation Negroes will learn their own power and gain a new sense of dignity.

The outside white has no role in this confrontation. No matter how dedicated or sympathetic he might be, his very presence, through no fault of his own, always tends to defeat the purposes of the Civil Rights Movement.

SNCC and other groups are now saying that whites who want to help the Civil Rights Movement should work in their own communities, with whites. They should reason with their friends and neighbors to try to break down potential barrier to Negro advancement. For the present, I see this role as the only worthwhile one we can play.

APPENDIX

Byrd won't hear city's poor at hearings on D.C. budget

Senator Robert C. Byrd (D-W. Va.) refused to hear the stories of seven low-income families - four of them welfare recipients - at a hearing before his District Appropriations subcommittee on the 1965 city budget, Friday evening.

Byrd, who took sharp exception to a reference made to the exclusion of the witnesses by Ralph D. Fertig, executive director of Southeast Neighborhood House, said:

"There are 10,000 persons on welfare rolls. We're not going to open these hearings to recipients. There would be no end of it."

BYRD STATED the low income families and others in the same predicament, were "ably and competently" represented by heads of organizations who testified on the budget most of them pleading for more liberal welfare programs.

He said he would accept the written statements of the witnesses who had waited most of the day to be heard.

THE EXCHANGE occurred when Fertig departed from a prepared statement asking aid for families of unemployed employable fathers.

Fertig said such families are neglected for months while waiting on lists to be seen or heard.

Asserting he could not serve as spokesman for these families, Fertig told Byrd the families could speak for themselves "but you won't let them."

wrong but when aid is denied although the husband and father is mentally and psychologically unable to get or hold a job and the church funds are exhausted, what can one do," Jackson said.

GENERALLY, FRIDAY's speakers on welfare urged correction of what have been termed six critical needs by the Citizens Committee on Public Welfare of the Health and Welfare Council of the District.

They are aid to children of

unemployed parents, an increase in public assistance grants, expansion of daycare services, reduced worker case loads, drastic reduction in special investigative personnel and increased foster home board rates.

Among Friday's speakers were Clarence E. Shaw, D., Chamber of Commerce; Mrs. C. John L. Hunter, president, League of Women Voters of the District; and Robert G. McGuire, Jr., president of the Washington Urban League.

THE FAMILIES INVOLVED include:

A mother of three children receiving \$100 per month from public welfare who wished to work but was unable to pay minimum child care charges.

She asked for enough money per month to pay the minimum charge and still earning for a month when she otherwise self-supporting.

A public assistance recipient who suggested that the caseload per social worker be reduced in order to decrease the five to six months waiting period before applicants receive their first check.

A mother of three also caring for a fourth child who said the \$162 received monthly from public assistance is inadequate.

A mother of one who is unable to work and has been denied welfare assistance because she is supposed to receive \$25 per week from her estranged husband but most often, does not.

A mother of twins whose husband has been unable to find steady employment as a construction laborer.

AFRO-AMERICAN, Washington, D.C.

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