

After two months spent talking to "poor whites" in NE Miss., I have come to some very tentative and roughly stated conclusions about us and them.

1. Them:

Their pressing needs are economic needs. They have bitter memories of decades of experience with politicians, parties, and promises. They are very cynical about politics as a means of solving their economic problems. They want direct solutions: cooperatives, new industries, loans, etc. They are open to the idea of unions, but to many even unions look like a lot of talk without much in the way of tangible results. Many do not want unions because they know that the runaway factories would just run somewhere else to get cheap labor.

Us:

Do we have the resources and the personnel to even begin to cope with the tremendous problems of rural decay, automation, unemployment? We might ask ourselves where we would be in the Negro community today if we had had to confront the economic issues head on and produce some tangible results. Instead, the issues of segregation, police brutality, injustice in the courts, and the vote have provided us with more immediately soluble problems around which we could organize.

None of these issues are pressing enough to the poor white people to provide a basis for political organization. When we learn how to organize in cities like Jackson and Atlanta, we will perhaps pick up some pointers which will indicate the approach poor whites might respond to. For even though most of the poorest whites in Mississippi still live in the rural areas, theirs is a dying culture. The young who are lucky are getting jobs in the new factories in the towns. Those who can't find work here go North - in large numbers. Thus they are rapidly becoming an urban working class, even though so many of the older people continue to live on the land and to grow a little cotton.

2. Them:

The following is a rough summary of the typical racial attitudes of poor whites in the area where we worked: (Itawamba county is 95% white.). They think Negroes ought to have the vote, at least in their area. They say they oppose the violence this summer brought to other areas of the state. Most oppose school integration, but many know it is coming one day soon. Some are not afraid of integration because their children have gone to integrated schools up North. They all fear race mixing and economic competition from the Negro in the future.

But the most striking thing is that to most poor rural whites in Itawamba County, the racial questions seem irrelevant. They live in a white world. There are very few Negroes left on the land. The few who live in the county are clustered in little pockets outside the towns. Many do domestic work for middle class whites and end up with nicer homes than a great many of the rural whites. Furthermore, there is no KKK or Citizens' Council in the area. So, many of the whites can't see that Negroes have any particular problems and do not understand this summer's ferment. Rather than sympathizing with the Negro movement, they feel threatened by it.

Us:

We are COFO, SNCC, what have you. To them that means Freedom Riders, nigger lovers, unholy race mixers, the NAACP, which is of course synonymous with communists. They have fairly violent prejudices against us, to say the least. And just as in their attitudes toward Negroes, the prejudice is accompanied by noticeable Fear.

I found that many did not know what COFO was. If I said it was an organization that worked on getting people to vote, teaching people how to read, etc. and that it worked among people of both races, they just said "Oh". They thought we were social workers.

But it never took long for word to spread that COFO was the NAACP, the Freedom Riders, etc. And then people did not open their screen doors when we came back, or they went for their guns or the telephone. They were afraid. And they felt they had been taken in by us, remembering how we sat in their homes or shared food with us, remembering all the things they had talked to us about.

Why tell them we are COFO? After the summer's experience with white folk in Bihoxi, some people suggested that those who worked with whites should "disassociate themselves" from COFO. But this is not so easily done. Once COFO, always Cofo, like membership in the Communist Party 30 years ago. We are being fought every inch of the way by an efficient police state who tap lines and keep files on us. It is not difficult to expose us as having worked with COFO. This is almost 100% effective as a smear tactic, right now.

If it were possible for a worker to remain "underground" for a year or so, he might so win people's confidence that such exposure tactics would be ineffective. But I am not sure such secrecy is possible in Mississippi, or even desirable. Eastern Tennessee or North Georgia might possibly be different.

Perhaps the most we can do at this point is encourage other groups to go into the poor white community with their personnel, skills, and resources - groups not associated with the movement. The question is who? The outlook is bleak on both unions and existing farm organizations: they shy away from the Deep South.

Since we are at present indelibly branded as race mixers, perhaps the only way we can relate (however negatively) to poor white people is on the subject of race. Which, we must remember, is not one of their major concerns.

3. Them: Poverty, or The Alliance

Poor whites do not wish to relate to us on the subject of their poverty. To understand this whole business of attitudes toward poverty, we have to remember that for many Negroes, their state of poverty can be viewed as a continuation of the state of slavery to which the whole race was subjected. This can relieve in a small way the burden of individual guilt that all parents feel when they cannot provide a decent future for their children.

For poor whites poverty is something to be ashamed of in a more personal way. He has trouble identifying with a group who were visibly put down. If the family lives in a shack, it is because the father never "made good". Or at least he sees it that way. And so do his neighbors, who often blame him for the poverty he and his family live in.

Most poor whites have relatives, even close relatives, who have "made good" and who are now full fledged middle class Southerners. He identified with the whites who are making it, and expects or hopes that his children will catch up to their children some day. He may even come to share their attitudes to others in his own situation: "they are white trash." In short, as has been said so often, the lower class Southern whites do not have much class consciousness yet. The populists, the communists, and labor people have all stubbed their toes against this fact. It is also a problem for us.

Us:

Thus it is very difficult to approach a poor white Mississippian with the idea that there are three groups in Mississippi: rich white, poor white, and Negro, and the last two should ally against the first.

No matter how subtly this idea is concealed in conversation, it cannot be hidden for long, for it is inherent in the very fact that we seek out poor whites to talk to. When the man senses this, he is humiliated. To him there are only two groups, white and black. He does not consider himself a "poor white". He has a lot more to learn about Negroes and about whites in the power structure before he will see himself as belonging to a separate group.

And he will not see himself as part of a separate group until the ladders of upward economic mobility - both here and in the North - are as blocked off to him and his relatives as they are to Negroes.

- To make the difficulties involved in "an alliance" even clearer, let us suppose that in spite of all the above obstacles, poor whites were ready to turn to the FDP as a vehicle for change in Mississippi. Suppose they were ready in larger than token numbers? Is the FDP ready for them? Would this be a good thing for the FDP at this early stage of its development? Would it be a good thing for Mississippi Negroes? I have great doubts.

To advocate the drawing in of numbers of poor whites into the FDP, when the party is still so young and fragile, may be to overlook the psychological traits which centuries of oppression have produced in most Southern Negroes. Though we do not talk about it much in staff meetings, we are all aware of the degree to which most Southern Negroes cannot yet relate to whites, especially local Southern whites from their own area, without falling into many of the old attitudes of submission and retreat.

Any organization (e.g. NAACP) can throw up sophisticated leaders who can hold their own in the white political arena. But if we are to develop a party in which decisions are made by the rank and file, we have to take into account the state of mind of the average person, not of the exceptional ones. We have to know whether Negroes on the Lowndes or Lafayette County FDP executive Committees could function as they do now if 50% of the committee were white. At the Tougaloo meeting, Jean Wheeler maintained that in West Point, people were not ready to have whites come to their precinct meeting - if this had been a possibility.

Many people objected at first to what Jean was saying. But I think she was right. I think we have years of work in developing predominantly Negro parties like the FDP (with handfuls of token whites), and in developing local leadership and mass participation before we reach the point where an integrated political movement becomes a real possibility. Talk about an alliance between poor whites and Negroes is very premature - maybe ten years premature. Maybe much more..1

[Faint, mostly illegible text at the bottom of the page, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side.]