

SNCC: The Qualities of Protest

Tom Hayden

Tom Hayden, a new member of the editorial board of *Studies on the Left*, is a community organizer on the staff of the Newark Community Union Project and the Economic Research and Action Project of SDS. He worked for SDS in Atlanta in 1961-62 and is the author of several articles and pamphlets on Mississippi.

Howard Zinn, **SNCC: The New Abolitionists**. Boston. Beacon Press. 1964. \$4.95. Pp. 246.

SO UNWRITTEN is the SNCC story that any contribution as rich and knowledgeable as Howard Zinn's is desperately needed. His book is a rare example of concentrating on the center of gravity in the civil rights movement. However, the book underemphasizes much of the feeling and many problems of the movement. These gaps have been widened greatly by events during the eight months since the writing was finished, particularly by developments in Mississippi.

What does Zinn give his readers, and to whom is he writing? First, he documents much of the detailed history of the period since the 1960 sit-ins, far more responsibly than any previous writer. What we have received from Louis Lomax and numerous other "inside dopesters" have been histories portraying "the Negro revolt" as a quest for integration into American society as it

presently exists. Gradually, it is becoming understood that the credit for this revolt is most deserved by, and least given to, SNCC — and that this partly stems from SNCC's position as an effective force largely un-integrated into American society. The other civil rights organizations often use SNCC's deeds as a means to raise money and justify their own programs. SNCC is the least guilty of the major groups in this competition for image, and consequently, it is the most infrequently mentioned of the major organizations in the mass media. Because of this, it is gratifying to find a writer who knows the pivotal role SNCC plays and who documents numerous cases of their incredible achievements in organizing in the back country most Americans know quaintly as the Old South.

Secondly, Zinn stands out as one

of the few searching critics of the Federal role in Black Belt voter registration. He uses close-up studies of negligence by Justice Department personnel, as in Selma, Alabama, as well as pointing out the unused legislation which the Department could employ to end voter discrimination today. Zinn's position, challenging both the Administration and the established civil rights coalition, is that the 1964 Civil Rights Bill is not a "first step" but a narrowing of the prevailing constitutional mandate to protect the rights of all citizens. No one can read the book without facing the possibility that, behind all the rhetoric about the government's limited powers, stands an Administration prepared to indulge only in a tokenism which lulls civil rights supporters while callously denying the needs of the underdog Negroes in the South.

Third, Zinn is perhaps the most sensitive of the published writers to problems which the movement itself defines as critical to its own future. He devotes a chapter to black-white relationships within SNCC, arguing that underneath the tensions there is growing the kind of thorough interracial contact that is needed to produce an integrated society. SNCC, in this view, is an island where people at least struggle to overcome racial alienation although never escaping the vicious atmosphere of a racist society. In another chapter, entitled "the revolution beyond race", he broaches a number of issues that SNCC is beginning to confront and raise: 1) the possibilities in direct action as a supplement to orthodox parliamentary change; 2) the need to end the categories of "communist

and anti-communist" which have paralyzed American liberals and radicals for several generations; 3) the need to extend democratic decision-making to the sacred sphere of private enterprise; 4) the need for new focus and forms of teaching and learning, begun with the development of "freedom schools" as alternatives to segregated inferior education. What may be most profoundly the contribution of SNCC, he suggests, is the quality of

renunciation, without the pretense of martyrdom, of the fraud and glitter of a distorted prosperity. It is also a recapturing from some time and place long forgotten of an emotional approach to life, aiming, beyond politics and economics, simply to remove the barriers that prevent human beings from making contact with one another. (p. 237)

The book seems to be written for a broad audience, but in particular a liberal and educated one: students, professionals, browsers interested in the civil rights movement. It serves as a defense of SNCC against its critics, without going into name-calling or major criticisms of individuals or organizations. It does this by stirring emotions and challenging myths: most impressively, the myth that the Federal government is on the "right road." It also begins to define the content and style of a new radicalism in America, something which few have been able to do with such control and persuasiveness. However, there is a sense in which the book is too self-limiting: it avoids getting deeply into problems, glosses over them or draws back. This inadequacy can be explained, in part, by the fact that the book was written before the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project.

It also goes back to the apparent employs. He initiates a dialogue mostly within the terms of the majority society: he tells where the SNCC organizers came from, he asks whether the Federal government is doing what it claims, he shows the relation of civil rights to other issues, he tries intelligently to answer the questions which most interested people might be expected to raise. But this approach means, first, that certain upsetting questions are not raised, such as the full national responsibility for the Mississippi system, and especially the nature of the basic challenge SNCC poses to liberal and established political forces in America. While describing the attitudes that SNCC staff members often hold toward issues in American life, Zinn neglects, generally, the sources of protest and the relations between SNCC staff and the local dispossessed. These relations make the fabric of revolt. More than that, they establish a kind of underground forum, which strengthens those in the underground, but which remains mysterious and unexplained to anyone in the dominant American society.

IT IS IMPERATIVE to examine some of the issues which are reduced in importance by the framework employed by Zinn.

To take one example, he could have questioned more deeply what national establishments are responsible for the nightmare life in the Black Belt. Ladybird Johnson has plantation holdings in Alabama. The men who control Harvard University also control Mississippi

Power and Light, one of the key companies intertwined with the Mississippi Dixiecrat machine and the White Citizens Councils. Mississippi white taxpayers receive far more Federal revenue in proportion to their taxes than do New Yorkers. Wealthy individual contributors to the national cause of civil rights also direct companies which repress Negroes in Natchez. Men like Senator James O. Eastland and Representative Jamie Whitten, to whom the Democratic Party gives high privileges, are conscious land-owning overlords of the murderous territory they call the Delta. The Department of Defense has spent perhaps one billion dollars in Mississippi since the 1940's. The examples could go on and on; the point is that Mississippi is not an isolated wasteland left outside of "mainstream America." It is more nearly a deliberate creation of the nation's liberal political and economic elites and, as such, raw testimony to the unspeakable qualities of ordinary American life.

That SNCC is beginning to attack the privileges of this elite is only one way to understand the challenge that the movement is beginning to present. The immediate signs that the challenge is serious include the phenomenal growth of staff into the several hundreds; the constantly upward spiralling of the organization's annual budget; the fashioning of a Freedom Democratic Party; the attention and controversy presently surrounding the Mississippi Project in general.

Most Americans, including those with official policy responsibilities, have been able to adapt what

happens in the movement to their comfortable view of the world. After all, they believe, it is kids, keeping America's conscience spirited, held within responsible bounds by the more established Negro leaders. Now and then, of course, nasty incidents are rumored, such as when SNCC chairman John Lewis' speech had to be censored at the Washington March, but that is the price of a little revitalization. Such has been the pattern of thinking among many people. But now the student movement is changing direction in ways that create uncensorable discomfort. The emphasis has been on exploding dramatic racial incidents in the country's face. Now, in addition, the effort is to create lasting grass-roots movements of the people who are most exploited so that others may have their comforts. The emphasis has been on gaining support from national sources of liberalism, such as student and religious organizations, and from the sympathetic middle classes in general. Now, in addition, the effort is to seek coalition with movements of poor all over the country even if this upsets some vested interests in the backyards of Northern SNCC supporters. In many circumstances, this challenge has rejuvenated healthy thinking and tentative steps toward a new radical spirit. In other instances, it has met rejection or produced alarm.

Rumors are nowadays heard around parts of the liberal-labor community, to take one major example where the SNCC challenge is creating a disturbance, that SNCC is becoming irresponsible, even perhaps "leftist". These claims started becoming intense last

summer. Over what? To begin with, national liberal and civil rights organizations had no program of insurgent community-level action, especially after the long period of lobbying for the Civil Rights Bill. Their next project, after the Bill, was to support Johnson against Goldwater, mostly through propaganda-educational programs coupled with a "moratorium" on demonstrations. SNCC, on the other hand, was sending hundreds of organizers into the back reaches of Mississippi to organize a political movement — the Freedom Democratic Party. The FDP "supports" Johnson, but in a way that commits it to less than any other state party in America. The general SNCC attitude towards the Civil Rights Bill was one of justified skepticism: 1) the bill narrowed existing precedents which the government could use if it were serious about going into the rural areas; 2) the bill dealt in no way with the needs of the poor rural people SNCC was organizing. But SNCC had an operating assumption about how to get the bill through Congress, while not having to take energy away from work on immediate problems facing poor people in the community. That strategy has been learned from five years' experience — to prod, disrupt and threaten established power with common sense issues, such as the right to vote, to gain concessions from the establishment and to build a permanently-committed movement. SNCC thus acts as the lever which forces the Administration to make concessions, and the spur which moves civil rights groups to press harder for legislative victories.

have come to depend too much on the favors and blessings of that elite.

THERE IS ANOTHER WAY to find the root of this new radicalism and the liberal disaffection with it. On one of the SNCC posters is pictured a sharecropper, in overalls and workshirt, sitting out front of his shack. A torn hat shades his face so darkly that his eyes gleam remotely, as if veiled. The poster says "One Man, One Vote". This poster reminds the observer that Southern Negroes need the vote, but also something deeper is conveyed by that man's presence. The question it seems to raise is: what will happen to America if the people who least "qualify" for leadership begin to demand control over the decisions affecting their lives? What would happen to Congress with all those sharecroppers in it? What would happen to bureaucracies if they had to be understood by the people they are supposed to serve? What would happen to the military if the people were responsible for their own defense? What would happen to banks and corporations if people wanted a say over how they were being operated? What would happen to reformers and negotiators if their "constituencies" decided to speak for themselves? What would happen to schools if the teachers questioned the kids about what is important to know, and the kids answered back and decided how to learn it? What would happen to professors if poor people could give lectures on poverty?

These questions are among the most upsetting ones that this coun-

try can be asked to face, because probably the most thoroughly embedded, if subtle, quality of American life is its elitism — economic, political, social and psychological. This will startle only those who remain enthusiastic about the American definitions of power, freedom, equality and democracy. The meaning of all of these terms has been distorted by the emphasis on private control, commercialism and the other segregating features of entrepreneurial and modern corporate capitalism. By American definitions, power is to be in "responsible" hands, kept carefully from both dictators and mobs. Freedom is only doing what you want, so long as it doesn't interfere with the "freedom" of others. Equality is the absence of arbitrary barriers to opportunity. Democracy exists when Negroes, workers and the poor are allowed to choose between the images of Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater. But the terms are dead, their literal meanings reversed by two outstanding realities of American life: power concentrated among a few, voicelessness and absurdity the condition of the many. The search for new terms is characteristic of the SNCC revolt.

The American system has an uncanny way of demanding universal conformity to means and channels of change which keep control monopolized at the top. Thus, Hubert Humphrey wanted to pick two "good" representatives of the FDP to take honorary seats at the Convention; after all, they would be televised as representatives of a petitioning branch of the Democratic Party. Thus, too, all our "officials" believe the FDP is "illegal", no

matter how morally right its general cause may be. And thus, national organizations complain that SNCC has no definite lines of authority or spokesmen. When these kind of questions are raised about SNCC instead of just the familiar red-baiting cliches, then it is sure that America's underlying habits of change are being challenged as much as its immediate political and economic arrangements.

WHY SHOULD HUMPHREY decide on the dress of a Mississippi farmer? Why not have the FDP representative on television in his overalls, and why not have him talk in his Delta vernacular when reporters gouge him with questions? What if the FDP is the only political party which is *legal* in America and what if the so-called laws are made and administered by men who are criminals because they trade nonchalantly in human life? What if "lines of authority" are harnesses made by the system and what if "spokesmen" turn out to be coffin nails standing upright until they can be hammered down to keep the dead from returning?

SNCC has been turning away from these orthodox American definitions of the way humans should organize themselves. The special character of their revolt draws, in part, from its origins in the experience of Negro oppression. Negroes are outsiders, everywhere identified and segregated, whether they participate in beneficent institutions, such as the universities, or more terrorizing ones, such as the Southern plantation areas. Sharp self-consciousness of exploi-

tation has emerged among the young intellectuals and the isolated sharecroppers. The Black Belt may at first seem to be a sad, damaging, dying and desolate place where, as the Mississippi signs advertise, "past and present go forward with the future". But it is, too, a place remote enough from urban industrial society to make possible the beginning of a counter way of life. In these rural areas, contact among Negroes is veined thickly with direct human issues — the worth of men is likely to be measured by what they do, not as much by the labels and organizational imagery they project. Since the society is largely pre-industrial, men tend to have a direct and coherent relation to their work which contributes also to integrity of their personality and social relations. Consciousness of persevering through historical suffering, in addition, has a way of creating the strength with which a movement must be infused. These qualities of Black Belt life, in turn, give responsibility and strength to the Negro students who become organizers. The honesty, insight and leadership of rural Negroes demonstrate to the students that their upbringing has been based on a framework of lies. One of these is that schooling creates understanding; another is that the American dream will be fulfilled. The movement takes root in places which testify tragically to the flaws of American morality and promise.

The particular alienation of American Negroes forms an irritation which this society has never salvaged; but the SNCC revolt involves other kinds of alienation felt by whites as well as Negroes.

There is a widespread disenchantment in America, represented not in the form of party, movement or class but in the form of shallow loyalties, deep apathy, explosive aberrations. The only threat these attitudes seem to pose is a remote one, a kind of degeneration, being observantly managed and glossed by the respectable powers. But viewed from another direction, these patterns of alienation are the preconditions for a real break away from the present social order. Take the obvious examples of authority cheated — students to teachers, workers and management, welfare clients and the agencies; these surely are signs of informal organization against the system. Out of these deep feelings, many come to SNCC, and through that experience the feelings are reinforced. SNCC represents a chance for the disaffiliated to retain their posture of alienation while still being relevant to the prevailing political and racial terms of American discussion. This opportunity is being used, by SNCC staff, to try the construction of alternative institutions — freedom schools, cooperatives, the FDP — which carry at least the seeds of a new consciousness. This goes far to break down an obstructing dilemma faced by those who would keep alive the radical content of protest. Usually those seeking immediate relevance are forced to insure themselves to the claims of established power; this leads to an appeased and, at best, rhetorical radicalism which offers no social alternatives in its practices. In the other direction, alienation has been twisted into ineffective forms of protest, from beat withdrawal to destructive pathologies.

This is not a revolt that can be easily explained within the bodies of historical knowledge we know as liberalism and marxism. Both ideologies have tended to assume the possibility of rational self-interest based on "material" needs. While it is clear that the SNCC revolt involves "material" denials in the areas of schools, jobs, housing and voting, the driving force is to practice resisting the clamps of orthodoxy and let this resistance be the foundation for new patterns of work, love and politics. These needs perhaps cannot be absorbed by the reform tradition of organizing people simply on the basis of material gain. But neither is SNCC a form of religion stressing personal relationships at the expense of institutional change. It is a revolt being organized on a long-term basis because there is nothing worthwhile to be gained at present; which expresses emotion and anxiety as well as legislative demands; which finds a way to make a public and political issue out of alienation and abuse.

THE CONCLUSION of *The New Abolitionists* contains several speculations about SNCC strategy that should be singled out for additional comment. Zinn is uncertain how SNCC will respond to the series of problems faced by Northern Negroes who are surrounded by ghetto poverty and liberal rhetoric. Secondly, he includes a hopeful note about the possibility of an interracial alliance of the poor, along populist lines, emerging across the South. Finally, he asks whether SNCC

will fulfill a promise it now con-

tains in blurred form: to recognize that there are other supreme human values, along with that of racial equality, which deserve attention. For any society, whether totally white, or totally black, or perfectly mixed, can be controlled by an elite of power, can ignore the most wretched poverty, can destroy the right of protest, can engage in the mass murder of war. (p.240)

For insight into the first problem, that of organizing in ghetto areas, one can look to the difficult experiences SNCC has had already in Southern cities. At the time of this writing, there are no grass-roots organizations in the urban areas to compare with the rural FDP. The cities, some in SNCC feel, are centers of social disintegration, family disorder, unemployment and other crushing ills; in addition, they are occupied by more moderate or liberal political machines which compete for mass Negro loyalty; for these and other reasons, community organizations have not been built effectively in Jackson, Atlanta and other cities. It may be that the development of a powerful FDP in the rural counties can create a momentum that will make urban organizing a greater possibility; if true, then it would be possible to start in the rural areas of the other Deep South states and develop parties that carry over into the larger cities.

SNCC may bring its experience in Southern rural and urban areas into the North at some future point. The most probable reason for this expansion might be the need for organized Northern support, at the community level, for the developing southern movement. For instance, already the FDP has sought support, not only from the established organizations,

but also from new grass-roots movements being built in Northern ghettos. If this could be extended politicians might be more responsive to the FDP, and the movement might be able to move towards greater political and financial independence from national interests wishing to dilute or compromise its program. However, the problems here are immense. In the North, it is likely that people are more damaged and boxed in by complex alternatives than in the South; there is an organized Negro middle-class more expansive and powerful than the "teachers and preachers" who act as conservative elements in many Southern situations; there is a liberal establishment, including the Negro middle class, which produces a confusing array of leaders competing for the support of the poor; there is a would-be Left in the North, which often manages to impose its own sectarian insights into an already difficult scene. These differences between the Northern and Southern contexts should not be overstressed, however, based as they are on inadequate experience. Furthermore, it may be the similarities which stand out more impressively. In both areas, it is the irresponsibility of the national political-business elite which is being confronted; it is a matter of winning over the decent forces in society; and most of all, the poor everywhere build up their own styles and mechanisms for staying clear of the majority society. To put it more positively, in the North as well as the South, there still is a democratic feeling, a sense of class, and a courage unshattered by society, among many Negro poor.

Our experience in Newark, for instance, shows at least that there are people with a sense of outrage, and a willingness to organize themselves into a social movement. Incidentally, nothing could be more impressive than to see the enthusiasm of Newark people as they returned from a meeting with the FDP where they discovered, for the first time, that a movement composed of "the little people" is beginning to grow. It may be a long time however, before there exists a mass Northern movement with which the FDP can align itself primarily.

Will it be a Negro movement, or a movement which spurs the organization of poor whites? There is hope among some SNCC organizers that the example of "little people getting together" in the FDP will have an effect on the whites who hear about the development through television or other media. In addition, there have been minor but unsuccessful attempts to organize poor whites in the Northeast and Gulf sections of Mississippi. In these places, many whites were found to retain personal or racist rationales of why they "failed" to do well, and there was a greater resentment towards "freedom riders" than towards the Mississippi government. These shreds of information, however, have to be compared to the more positive experience in the mining country of Appalachia, for instance in Hazard, Kentucky, where it has been possible to organize unemployed miners on a mass basis. The miners who are organized tend to take very strong positions in favor of an interracial movement. This has been found as well in smaller

organizing efforts in Cleveland where whites are being reached by a Students for a Democratic Society community project. We can expect increasingly that whites will find reason to consider the alternative of organizing themselves in alliance with the Negro movement: youth unemployment, the threat to employment, gripes with the labor leadership over intolerable working conditions, the starving of education, housing and social services, all create uneasiness among the millions of whites on or below the edge of poverty. The danger, of course, is that these whites may shift loyalties to a fascist movement, or their resentment of the Negro may be too great for them to be organized on a coalition basis. These dangers, however, may be real ones only to the extent that the marginal whites are neglected by the labor and civil rights movements. Until there is a massive effort at organizing whites, by SNCC, SDS, labor unions or civil rights groups, the real potential for an interracial movement probably will not be known.

THESE PROBLEMS cannot be considered apart from the question of what kind of transition SNCC is capable of making. The organization has gone from a small group coordinating student demonstrations to a striking force of young people opening up crisis areas of the South; to a staff organization with its goal the creation of independent people's movements. At each moment SNCC is beckoned to adopt the customs of "normal" American organizations. These customs include: projecting an organi-

zation image that reaches the maximum number of people; constructing a fixed hierarchy of command to make immediate decisions regarding crises as well as decisions about long-range programs; and so on. These alternatives are not to be sloughed off just because they are part of the orthodox American celebration of efficiency. They are rooted in real perceptions of real needs: SNCC is under constant attack from every direction, its financial base is shaky, decisions do need to be made rapidly. These feelings heavily influence the organization already. Against them are other feelings, however, also based on real perceptions of real needs. There is the proven need to avoid tailoring publicity to simply what the media wants to hear, or what will raise the most money right away. There is the need to get across a message about racism and poverty through all the distortions put in the way by official agencies. There is a need to make as many SNCC people as possible competent to decide on policy, so that the maximum number do effective work and the possibilities for elite control are minimized. There is the need to overcome the effects of specialization, which invites hierarchy and keeps people from reaching their maximum potential for responsibility and activity. There is a need to give organizational substance to the "one man, one vote" demand, extending the power of voice and vote to every person directly affected by organizational decisions. And there is the need to demonstrate, by example, the beginnings of another way of life.

It is a set of conflicting needs such as these, roughly stated here, which indicates that SNCC's own problems are related to those it is posing for society. It is impossible to build up an entirely new society using people and materials that are part of the existing order. But it is just as impossible to revolutionize this society by employing its prevailing styles of bureaucratic organization, because those styles are meant to work only for groups that want integration into the existing pluralist structure of rewards, privileges, roles and opportunities. There is no escaping the American way of life entirely, not even in the Black Belt. It beckons and sways the movement, not because the movement is corrupt, but because at least some progress seems to require accommodation to the wishes of the more satisfied and integrated elements in American life. But if there is no escaping the American way, how can it be changed? Perhaps no group is looking harder for the answer to this question than SNCC. Part of the answer lies in the sources of protest which SNCC has tapped: not just people who want "more", but people who want "no more" of a rotten society; not just people who are satisfactorily accommodated but remain humanitarian, but people who are beyond accommodation because their alienation is so great. The movement's strength comes from the humanism of rural people who are immune to the ravages of competitive society. That this humanism inspires students from the ravaged society is a sign that a permanent base of revolt is possible among millions.

Maxwell Geismar and the Jacobins

Michael B. Folsom

Michael B. Folsom is a graduate student in English and American Literature at the University of California at Berkeley. He is currently doing research on the literary history of the American Left.

Maxwell Geismar, *Henry James and the Jacobites*. Boston. Houghton Mifflin. 1963. \$7.00. Pp. 462.

THE MOST GENEROUS official reviewers* have greeted Maxwell Geismar's *Henry James and the Jacobites* with some variation of

*See, for example, Orville Prescott, *N. Y. Times*, October 7, 1963. At least two radical critics have been more generous still. Truman Nelson (*National Guardian*, November 7, 1963) and V. J. Jerome (*Political Affairs*, March, 1964) speak in terms of almost uncritical adulation. Nelson's piece has been described, with some justice, as "hysterical." More sober Jerome wrote for publication in Czechoslovakia. The Czechs will be surprised, if they read the book, to discover it filled with crude psychologizing. Jerome, whom I'm sure disapproves of that aspect of the work, just forgot to mention it. Such uncritical thinking will not help the Czechs, American radicals, or Maxwell Geismar. For a fine example of what a Marxist (albeit one who is protected from our Jacobinical geist by 3,000 miles of Atlantic water) can find in James to respect and enjoy, see Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel*, vol. II, pp. 13-34, N. Y., 1960.

the following: "Oh, dear. We know how silly the Jacobite critics can be, but Geismar is too, too extreme. He damages his own cause. We agree with his aims, sort of, but not with his means." Now that is very easy to say — and certainly there is some truth in saying it — but those who so speak, by and large, have no sense that the Jacobite cult typifies a mortal crisis in American intellectual life. As a result they cannot begin to understand the staunch indignation and moral vision which inform Geismar's lengthy polemic and which often lead him critically astray. They cannot understand any more than "moderates" of "good will" can grasp the root forces which drive Negroes to block innocent streets or face death in pastoral Mississippi.

As literary criticism, *Henry James and the Jacobites* is often no more sensible than a 117th