

FREEDOM SOUTH

SNCC: THE BEGINNING OF IDEOLOGY

by Staughton Lynd

Five years ago this fall C. Van Woodward published an essay entitled, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," directed against "the disenchantment of the intellectual with the masses" so characteristic of the Eisenhower years. Woodward called on intellectuals to maintain the tradition of Henry George, Henry Demarest Lloyd, and Upton Sinclair, writers and thinkers who had thrown themselves into the popular movement of their day. He said:

One must expect and even hope that there will be future upheavals to shock the seats of power and privilege and furnish the periodic therapy that seems necessary to the health of our democracy. No one can expect them to be any more decorous or seemly or rational than their predecessors.

"The intellectual," Woodward concluded, "must not be alienated from the sources of revolt."

Woodward's article was itself part of a tradition: the prophetic tradition of American intellectuals who have called on their fellow craftsmen to join them in radical action. Emerson had issued such a call in his "American Scholar." He said, in 1837: "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it he is not yet man. Without it thought can never ripen into truth," Emerson went on: "Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not." As if anticipating the circle of students singing "We Shall Overcome," Emerson wrote:

I grasp the hands of those next to me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech.

The speech of which Emerson wrote, issuing from shared suffering and action, and articulating what is latent there, is not easy. It is all too easy to write about one's summer in Mississippi: so many have. But these reports rarely reach the level of intellectual encounter. Too often their tone is merely adulatory, and consciously or unconsciously the fun-raising purpose hovers over the words. I believe that the intellectual who fully engages himself must emerge with critical as well as positive responses, and his responsibility ends only when he has attempted to communicate these.

It is just here that inhibitions crowd in. For, to begin with, surely "the movement" is already magnificently articulate? Its leaders are themselves scholars-in-action. James Forman left graduate work in African studies to go to Fayette County, Tennessee. Robert Moses, before he went to Mississippi, had majored in philosophy and mathematics at Haverford and Harvard. The young man at the Jackson COFO

office who, late on June 21, received the telephone report that Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman were missing, is a specialist in Japanese culture. The young woman who took my place at the end of the summer as director of the Mississippi Freedom Schools had been an English instructor at the University of Washington. Now SNCC even has its own research department, headed by Jack Minnis, a candidate for the doctorate in Political Science at Tulane. SNCC offices are uniformly strewn with magazines and paperback books; the songs of the movement testify, in a different way, to its articulateness. Nor is SNCC anti-intellectual in the manner of the Russian Narodniks, who were ready to exchange Shakespeare for a pair of boots. At the Oxford orientation session which preceded the Mississippi Summer Project, Bob Moses twice drew on Camus in public speeches: once, comparing race prejudice to the plague which infects everyone; again, after the three were reported missing, to say that there was no escape from guilt, that so long as the problem existed we would all be both victim and executioner.

Such a movement would seem to leave little more to be said. And there are other inhibitions. Sometimes one hesitates to speak because one has been asked not to. Thus I attended a SNCC staff meeting just before the Summer Projects began, about which I feel free to say only that it once more affirmed the position that SNCC staff members should not carry weapons. Sometimes one hesitates to speak because the thing experienced appears to lie too deep for words. I attended a SNCC staff meeting at Oxford after the disappearance of the three which began with the song "Come By Here, Lord," verse after verse after verse with one person after another in the room taking the lead. And that is all I know to say about it.

But there are times when one hesitates to speak because one fears rejection, or because one feels that, as a temporary participant, one has no right to speak, or because (in the case of the civil rights movement, and if one is white) the privilege of speaking seems appropriately to fall to those who have suffered in silence so long. At these moments, I feel, one is actually failing in commitment: holding back a part of oneself. The point is precisely that dialogue should begin among all of us as we really are, with all our secret shames and hidden glories. The intellectual has a responsibility to take his place in the ring, but also, as Professor Woodward said, to "shape" and "try to make sense" of the movement in which he participates (these words have patronizing overtones in this context, yet is not exactly the intellectual's job to shape and make sense of experience?). If the scholar-in-action repudiates the role of participant-observer, he should at least be an observant participant. Thoreau quarrelled with the abolitionist movement until, as he put it, the memory of his country spoiled his walk; but when he did speak out, in "A Plea for Captain John Brown," he spoke the more forcefully because he spoke with the whole of himself. He who aspires to be a man for all seasons must be prepared to recognize, as More was, the season for plain speaking.

The foregoing makes a pretentious preface to some jottings from a scholar's summer notebook: and yet it is the one thing I want most to say. There is now going on within SNCC, and within the civil rights movement generally, a fascinating intellectual ferment. The need for broader alliances, uniting white and black, North and South, is conceded on all sides. But some talk of a Populist alliance between Negroes and labor, while others suspect the Administration of using the AFL-CIO bureaucracy to domesticate SNCC. There are those who think the Freedom Democratic Party can compel Democratic re-alignment and that every effort should be bent toward acceptance

by the 1968 Democratic Party Convention. There are those, on the other hand, who believe that the FDP must grow into a third party. Many speak of appealing to the United Nations, even of moving to Africa. Others think the movement should keep clear of all suspect and subversive causes. Many confess that they are not prepared to die for a hamburger and the vote, and see no answer for the Negro's problem but socialism. Bob Moses, in contrast, insists that his concern is "limited gains," and Jim Forman agrees with his former teacher, St. Clair Drake, that the movement should seek first the political kingdom.

This dialogue is going on among full-time workers ordinarily too overwhelmed by tomorrow's meeting to give their minds to the issues. Moreover, there is in SNCC - along with the paperbacks, and the bull-sessions, and the hostile-yet-nostalgic ambivalence towards higher education - a mystique of action which forever interrupts the process of thinking ahead. What is in the making in the movement is simply a long-run plan, a strategy. But talk of this sort tends to get labeled "ideology." And so the ideology which, willy-nilly, is beginning, wears the end of ideology as a mask; and the movement backs into the future with its eyes closed.

What tends to be forgotten, it seems to me, is that an ideology is an articulated hope. Movements need hope. Newcomers to Mississippi this summer were astonished that northern whites were so readily accepted as teachers in the Freedom Schools, and that Negro youngsters in Mississippi showed so little bitterness and hate. Howard Zinn, discussing the problem with me, conjectured that the reason is that Southern Negro youngsters still have hope that the American dream will come true for them,

whereas children growing up in the Northern ghettos see nothing ahead. I am inclined to go one step further, and to argue that violence and black nationalism - whether they express themselves in Harlem or among the SNCC staff - are symptoms of despair about the future. Many, if not most, SNCC staff whom I know at all well believe with a part of their minds that the American dream can be realized, and moreover recognize the value of this belief from the standpoint of public relations; yet with another part of themselves despair, feeling that so deeply prejudiced a society as ours can never create a permeating atmosphere of equality.

Thus the penalty for non-ideological thinking is an undercurrent of despair; a tendency to restrict the focus of vision to the next, and the next, and the next tactical action; and a failure to make contact with groups who might be partners in a more broadly-conceived movement. From one standpoint this can be viewed as a commendable pragmatism, a creative refusal to be drawn into stale political bickerings. But it can also be viewed as a withdrawal from reality: as a refusal to face such questions as: how can you win power in Mississippi as Negroes move North? Can you get freedom if you don't get jobs also? Perhaps the fact that the Freedom Democratic Party paid attention to being seated and so little to program reflected not just strategy, but the difficulty SNCC itself experiences in facing programmatic problems. At a memorial service for Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman in Neshoba County, where they were killed, Bob Moses condemned America's action in bombing North Vietnam: he said the lesson of the deaths was that men must stop killing. Yet at Atlantic City Moses' party pledged allegiance to the man who ordered the bombing. The dilemma of victim and executioner is literal and cruel. But must it not be faced?