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SOME NOTES ON EDUCATION

What we have discovered over the last few years of our activities in the South, is that oppression and restriction is not limited to the bullets of local racists shotgun blasts, or assaults at county courthouses, or the expulsion of sharecroppers from plantations, but that it (oppression and restriction) is imbedded in a complex national structure, many of the specifics of which are at times difficult to discern, but which govern every facet of our lives. What is relevant to our lives is constantly defined for us; we are taught it in every waking hour; it is pounded in us via radio, T.V., newspapers, etc., most of which are the tools of our oppressors. Definitions are articulated to us through the use of terms such as, "qualified", "responsible", "security", "patriotism", "our way of life", "the American way of life", "Nigger", "leader", "politics", and a thousand others, infinitely more subtle and complex. Our lives are pointed out for us in a million irrelevant directions, and what we are finding we have to deal with if we're talking about change (whether in Mississippi or New York) is, who points out and determines the direction of our lives; how do they do it and get away with it?

The most immediate implication of an exploration into this question seems to be an examination into the day to day realities of our existence as only we can know it. One of the things that is vividly clear to us in the south today is that we are denied through the use of political machinery. The part of this machine that we have come into direct contact and conflict with, has been state political machinery. This state machine has done at least three things that we've experienced at many levels. It has kept us: (1) separated (through the use of segregation laws, by playing white against black, by perpetuating the myth that we can never get together without knowing what they know -- e.g. in other words, without being "qualified" and they define that word), (2) ignorant (communications media orient us to the irrelevant, the "qualified" gear us to become "responsible" to them, the lie of "white folks business" is perpetuated, we wander confused, aspiring to "the American way of life" rather than our own, our schools are committed to a policy of non-think, and students to an attitude of no-questions), (3) afraid (through the use of Gestapo-like law enforcers, by binding us in THEIR laws and customs, which operate above us because we're not "qualified", tacitly endorsing terror -- e.g. the White Citizens Council getting money from the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, the perversion of justice in the courts). We have found that we cannot even talk about an end to oppression and restriction in the south without these structures feeling responsible to the people of the south (or the nation). Government structures (which include all the institutions that relate to it, e.g. schools, churches, banks, communications media, big business -- these control the thinking and create the values) cannot feel this responsibility, for they have isolated themselves from people in the interest of maintaining their positions. Consequently, we are governed from a kind of isolated authority which has wrapped

us in structures that evade our efforts to function in them at any level. In this, lies the crux of our dis-franchisement. As we begin to trace what this governing monster called "american way of life" we are discovering that avenues of knowledge as to what it is and how it works specifically, are not available to us. We have begun to suspect that the key to dealing with it does not lie in plowing through all the intricacies of how it operates top to bottom, which we mostly cannot see anyway, but rather, with its effects locally, and our daily oppression.

You're in Mississippi, or Alabama, or Georgia, or Arkansas, defined by somebody as "nigger". This reality is understood only in terms of what it is, for there is no place to understand why it is. Attempts to understand why, means the asking of questions, the exposure of inconsistency, and the asking of more questions. To encourage questions, is to encourage challenge, which is to encourage overthrow. To talk about why a policeman hits a Negro across the head, is to talk about why that that policeman does not feel responsible to Negroes, and who he is responsible to, and why they don't feel responsible to Negroes, and what can be done to make them feel responsible, or who can be placed in those positions that will feel responsible, and how they can be placed in those positions, and whether or not those positions are necessary. This kind of question and exposure undermines those persons in isolated authority, because people might organize themselves around the fact that they can make these authorities irrelevant; which is to leave them with no authority at all. This is the latent threat of the "Negro Movement" in the south, for "keeping the niggers in their place" is just an extreme of keeping people in their place, all of which is keeping everybody from dealing with what is relevant in their lives, or even finding out what relevancies they have to deal with. This kind of questioning threatens, so this kind of questioning is not allowed. Discontent has been forced underground, where it rumbles, and is felt more than seen.

Yet, sometimes, this undercurrent of discontent is expressed; maybe by a handful of kids wearing SNCC buttons to school, or by someone standing up in civics class wanting to talk about voting, or the "freedom riders". It gets scribbled on a piece of paper sometimes: "If the white man is free, why can't the black man be?" And sometimes, these expressions soar:

I wish that I was free
free as I can be
I'd fly, oh I'd fly
away over the sea
I'd fly over the mountains
I'd fly over the sea
And I'd be as proud
proud as I can be

But I'm not a free bird
not as free as I can be
that is why, oh that is why
these chains are binding me

If given a chance these expressions can be beautiful. Yet too often, it is muttered bitterly, and in a vacuum, as Earnest George of Mississippi mutters: "Can't teach me a damn thing in school that a nigger in Mississippi don't know already". The Brewer brothers of Tallahatchie County got the education they needed. They heard while being pounded to the floor of a plantation store by a group of white men, shortly after a trip north, "you're back in Mississippi now nigger".

What other knowledge is needed, and can be expected of Earnest George, the Brewer brothers, and millions like them as long as they must exist in a society built to cage them? Their function has been reduced to acting on what is defined for them -- defined by the cop with the stick.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO RELEVANT EDUCATION

People in the south, essentially black people, are beginning to build their own life. They are setting their own standards of "qualifications". They have found that they have not been able to participate in the life that they have always known. Up to this point of new building, the contradiction of all the kinds of education that they have experienced (from an attack by a cop, to public schooling) has been that it bore no relevance to functioning in a society that was not theirs. As people have started motion and agitation in their communities, they have discovered that they need an education that is geared to the relevancies they discover while building this new life if they are to function and participate in it. For, education is not the development of intellectual skills, but a preparation for participation in living.