The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization

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THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE
Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization

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The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) presents an enigma to the political analyst, an enigma left unsolved in descriptive histories by former members (Zinn, 1964; Lester, 1968; Forman, 1972; Sellers with Terrell, 1973). SNCC was founded in 1960 for the purpose of coordinating the sit-in movement then sweeping the South in an attempt to integrate bus stations, lunch counters, and the like. The following year, with the integration of public facilities largely achieved, SNCC moved into voter-registration work among

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poor blacks in the rural Deep South. Most of its members in this period from 1960 to 1963 were black southern college dropouts. After several years of almost total frustration in this effort, SNCC decided to bring its case to the nation. In order to dramatize the disenfranchisement of blacks in the Deep South, it threw all its efforts behind a challenge to the seating of the all-white Mississippi delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

Here was the beginning of SNCC's seeming success. The convention offered a compromise which had the effect of expelling the white Mississippi delegates and seating some of the black challengers. The following year, a federal Voting Rights Act was passed which sent federal registrars to the southern states, something SNCC had been demanding for years. The registrars effectively ended the mass disenfranchisement of blacks.

Meanwhile in 1964, SNCC had gained a large number of new, highly capable and enthusiastic members. Then in 1966 it achieved national fame when its chairman, Stokely Carmichael, enunciated the slogan "Black Power."

After this cavalcade of apparent successes, what did SNCC do? It rapidly faded out of existence! Depth interviews with about 50 former SNCC members suggest to me that the solution to this enigma (success leading to failure) lies in SNCC's almost unique organizational ethos and in the tension between that ethos and SNCC's pursuit of purposive goals.

SNCC's ethos was a product of its unusual incentive structure, which made it a "redemptive organization," one type of purposive organization in the typology which includes purposive, solidary, and material organizations (according to their incentive structure). This typology was developed by Clark and Wilson (1961) and refined by Wilson (1973: 47-48). Wilson (1973: 47) describes a redemptive organization as one which

> seeks not only to change society and its institutions, but also to change its members by requiring them to exemplify in their own lives the new order. The way in which goals are sought is

> as important as their substance. Moral and political enthusiasm are to be made evident in the routine activities of the members and in all organizational meetings.

SNCC fits this description very well. This study of SNCC will extend and elaborate on the characteristics of redemptive organizations. First, I will discuss what SNCC as a redemptive organization was *not*.

SNCC's members (who were all full-time activists) certainly did *not* join because of material incentives. Their salaries, which were paid very irregularly, ranged from $10 to $60 a week, with the mode about $10.

Nor did they join out of a belief in SNCC's ideological correctness, as did members of the Socialist and Communist parties. SNCC had no formal ideology. Its members plucked ideas from the works of Albert Camus, Karl Marx, Mao Tse-tung, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, and others, but there were no basic SNCC principles on which they all agreed.

SNCC does not fit Max Weber's famous classification of organizations as either bureaucratic, charismatic, or traditional (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 196-252). SNCC was obviously not held together by a bureaucracy or bureaucratic incentives. Almost all of its members were activists in the field, and the office staff was kept to a bare minimum.

Nor were SNCC's members drawn together by a few charismatic leaders at the top. Leadership in SNCC tended to be decentralized at the level of a state or local project. No one controlled the organization from the national office in Atlanta. Even at the project level, SNCC members rejected leadership. In many interviews activists actually denied that there were leaders in SNCC at all—because the word "leader" connoted to them a person who manipulated others, thus distorting the purpose of an organization.

SNCC did, of course, have leaders and they were an important source of its redemptive ethos. Such men as Bob Moses in Mississippi, Charles Sherrod in Southwest Georgia, and Bill Hansen in Arkansas were highly effective leaders not so much because of their intellectual acumen or organizing skills as

because of their moral courage, a quality which gave others a sense of hope for personal and social redemption. They were praised for this quality again and again in the interviews.

SNCC's redemptive ethos consisted partly of a set of attitudes toward the world which were exemplified by the lives of these leaders. These attitudes constituted both more than and less than an ideology. They were both broader and deeper than ideology in the sense that they embraced life-style as well as political ideas and in that they called for a commitment in action as well as a mere affirmation of belief. They were also less explicit than ideology. Nowhere was there a pamphlet stating authoritatively "this is what you must believe to be a SNCC member." One would have been hard put between 1961 and 1965 to say precisely which ideas were basic to the SNCC world view. There was a high level of agreement among members about many things, but no clearly stated central tenets.

The redemptive ethos was more than a set of attitudes. It was also a strong sense of intimacy, solidarity, and loyalty among SNCC members in the face of what was increasingly seen as an implacably hostile world. The world was also seen in highly moral terms, more and more as time passed. SNCC was good; those who were not with it were against it, they were evil. One did not make compromises, because one does not negotiate about matters of good and evil.

To sum up, SNCC was a redemptive organization because it had:

(1) a moral ethos, consisting of a set of broad attitudes, shared by almost all members, involving a rejection of ideology (formal sets of beliefs);

(2) a sense of superiority to other institutions and to individual nonmembers;

(3) a very high rate of activism among members;

(4) pervasiveness, that is, an important influence on all or almost all aspects of its members' lives; and

(5) a belief in the equality of all members, which leads to the rejection of bureaucracy and of all formal leadership structures.

A redemptive political organization is in many ways analogous to a religious sect, as distinguished from a church, in the work of Ernst Troeltsch (1958) and others.

For example, it possesses a total rather than a segmental hold over its members. Virtually all SNCC members were totally absorbed in SNCC work at all times. In sects too, spirituality or grace is something to be lived or at least sought at every moment, not merely occasionally or one day a week (see Knox, 1950: 2). Like a sect, SNCC practiced the "priesthood of all believers"; every member was actively engaged in spreading its message.

SNCC's redemptive ethos gave its members the feeling, common in sects, of belonging to an elect group with special enlightenment. It played a role analogous to that of faith or "inner light" in sects; the members considered it superior to mere doctrine. For SNCC, moral impatience took the place of a systematic body of ideas, just as for sects millenialism takes the place of theology.

In sects, the "inner light" perceived by a member expressed in spontaneous displays of religious feeling ("holy rolling"). Similarly, SNCC expected its members' moral and political enthusiasm to help them to initiate new projects and experimental tactics. Going even further in a religious direction, the members of the Freedom High, a small, mostly white group within SNCC in 1963 and 1964, thought that SNCC members should strive chiefly for personal perfection (salvation). All of these are characteristics of sects as described by Wilson (1959).

But the Freedom High was short-lived; most of its adherents were soon driven out of SNCC. For SNCC was *not* a sect; it was a political organization and its political goal (racial justice) was central to its existence. My thesis is that it was the tension between its sect-like qualities and its political purposiveness that eventually destroyed SNCC.

There were a number of factors which made SNCC a moralist organization. The first of these was its origin in the sit-in

movement, with that movement's emphasis on moral confrontation with the evil of segregation and its quasi-religious tone (supplied by the many divinity students who helped lead it).

The second factor was the youthfulness of the membership. Zinn (1964) found that most Mississippi SNCC members in 1963 were 15 to 22 years old. Only the very young had the freedom from family responsibilities, the energy and the physical stamina necessary for SNCC work. And the very young are also often very moralistic. As Keniston (1968) and Fishman and Solomon (1963) show, the young see with fresh eyes the rampant injustice and suffering to which their parents have become calloused. And they have a shorter time perspective for the correction of these injustices than even those adults who perceive that they do exist. Moreover, they are less forgiving of those who cooperate in perpetuating the evils of the world.

For many reasons, these young people chose to concentrate their crusade against injustice in the rural counties of the Deep South, especially Mississippi. One of these reasons was that Mississippi, which had a reputation as the most racist state in the union, had some of the appeal of the conversion of the worst sinner. Also, little work was being done there by other black groups, mainly because of the white terror. In tackling the rural Deep South, SNCC could enjoy a sense of a special and superior mission, which proved to be an important source of solidarity.

SNCC's choice of locale became the chief cause of its difficulties in the next few years. Almost every SNCC member was jailed at least once in the next few years on such charges as "disturbing the peace" or "parading without a permit." Going to jail became almost an initiation rite. Nearly every male SNCC member (and many females) had been beaten, either in jail or on the street. SNCC offices were fire-bombed, its members were shot at (and sometimes hit), many of its close associates were actually murdered. Through all this, SNCC was almost entirely nonviolent (not in principle, but out of tactical necessity). This experience of persecution was pro-

bably the most important factor in shaping SNCC's moral ethos. It made SNCC righteously angry, defiant, uncompromising, and filled with suspicion as to the good will and sincerity of those who had never faced the terror. Until the beginning of 1964, most of SNCC's efforts were devoted to surviving in the face of fear and to helping its clientele, the poor blacks of the Deep South, overcome that fear and achieve political freedom.

After the spring of 1964 SNCC began to experience the tension between its ethos and its political effectiveness. There were five crises in rapid succession which destroyed it: (1) the challenge to Mississippi's delegation to the Democratic National Convention, (2) the sudden influx of several hundred whites into the organization, (3) the bad results of SNCC's inability to get along with other civil rights groups, (4) the loss of a financial base, and (5) an attempt to shift the base of operations from South to North. I shall describe these one by one.

THE CONVENTION CHALLENGE

In August 1964, a SNCC-founded and SNCC-backed organization called the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) attempted to have its delegates seated as representatives of Mississippi in place of the regular delegates at the Democratic National Convention. The narrative that follows comes from the *New York Times* (1964) and from interviews. The FDP delegates had been selected in a political process which paralleled the regular method of delegate selection in Mississippi but (unlike the regular Mississippi Democratic Party's practice) excluded no one on grounds of race. (Of course, almost no whites had chosen to participate in the FDP conventions.)

There was a further basis for the FDP challenge—that the regulars were unwilling to pledge support for the nominees of the convention, as required by a convention rule. (Most of the regulars later publicly endorsed Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate for president.)

Ultimately, after a great deal of backroom negotiations, demonstrations, and impassioned pleas, the Credentials Committee of the Convention offered the following compromise, which was approved by a voice vote of the convention: all of the regulars who signed the loyalty oath would be seated, plus two delegates-at-large from the FDP, with voting rights but without the right to sit in the Mississippi seating section. The rest of the FDP delegates were welcomed as honored guests of the convention. Moreover, it was promised that the call to the 1968 convention would announce that states which practiced racial discrimination in the selection of their delegates would be denied seating.

All the 1964 regulars did eventually withdraw from the convention; almost the entire FDP delegation did take the regulars' seats on the floor (but only two of their votes); and four years later, in 1968, the regulars (as well as half the regulars from Georgia) were denied their seats because of racial discrimination in the selection procedure.

However, to SNCC the compromise was totally unacceptable and was taken as evidence of pervasive racism and hypocrisy within the Democratic Party. First, the regulars lost their seats *not* as a penalty for racial discrimination but because they themselves chose to protest against the offering of the compromise by leaving and also to refuse to sign the loyalty oath to the convention's nominees. So the principle that delegates chosen in Jim Crow elections were unacceptable was not established. The change in the call to the 1968 convention was considered meaningless because it forbade discrimination against voters and most of Mississippi's blacks were *not* voters and had little prospect of registering. (This was before the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.) Moreover, the FDP's right to represent Mississippi was not acknowledged since its delegates were designated "at large"; nor was its rigiht even to choose its own delegates, since the two with voting rights were specified by the convention.

SNCC thought it had gone quite far by expressing its willingness to accept another compromise (suggested by Rep. Edith Green of Oregon) that treated FDP equally with the regulars. And it was deeply insulted at being treated *worse* than people whom it considered totally immoral.

In spite of all this, white and black liberals generally thought the compromise was generous and were puzzled at SNCC's rejection of it. The FDP delegates themselves (who were almost all local Mississippi blacks) seemed much more inclined to accept the compromise meant that it defined the convention challenge as a failure. This felt failure was in turn an important factor in causing the period of depression and turmoil which SNCC went through during the following year, and also in the fact that the FDP never again regained the organizing momentum of the heady summer of 1964.

Almost any other organization, recognizing the slowness with which so vast and decentralized an institution as the Democratic Party shifts its commitments, would have seen the proffered compromise as a victory. In fact, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC, Martin Luther King's group), the NAACP, the AFL-CIO, and most of SNCC's other allies urged SNCC to accept the compromise.

But SNCC by its nature as a redemptive organization could not accept the kind of partial commitment implied in the compromise. In discussing the convention in the interviews, SNCC members often spoke of backroom negotiations, of deals, of pressure, and of betrayals. It apparently shocked them that the Democratic Party operated so amorally that it seemed to regard the FDP and the Mississippi regulars chiefly as political rivals who must both be at least partly accommodated, rather than as the forces of right and justice fighting against the forces of evil and racism. The fact that the northern liberals in the party had important links to the southern conservatives (on whom they depended for votes in presidential elections) indicated to SNCC that these liberals were totally useless as allies of SNCC. A partial commitment was worse than no commitment at all, because it opened the

door to betrayal (see Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967: 58-85). Moreover, concessions in practice were meaningless without consessions in principle. Having been immersed in its own moral universe for several years, SNCC simply could not accept the moral universe of the mainstream of the American political system, in which "compromise" is not a dirty word but the very basis of all activity.

THE INFLUX OF WHITES

Simultaneously with the crisis created by the convention challenge, SNCC was undergoing another deep struggle. This one concerned the aftermath of the Mississippi Summer Project, in which over 800 whites, mostly northern students, came into Mississippi in the summer of 1964 to work with SNCC in organizing the blacks of Mississippi around the convention challenge, and also to draw national attention to the persecution of civil rights workers in that state. Over a hundred of these whites stayed on to work in Mississippi after the summer. Since before this SNCC had rarely numbered more than 100 members (and only about 60 in late 1963), the increase in numbers alone meant a transformation of the organization. These mostly intelligent and agressive new members could have provided the basis for a vastly expanded and far better publicized organizing effort. Instead, SNCC in Mississippi in the fall of 1964 and winter and spring of 1965 was almost paralyzed. The situation in Mississippi affected the entire organization profoundly. In almost every month in that period, there was a national SNCC staff meeting (membership meeting) lasting a week to ten days. The sessions were stormy and often lasted far into the night. The major disputes were: (1) how to socialize so many new members into the organization at once, especially since they differed from the old members in social class, race, and level of education; (2) whether whites could ever organize black people effectively; and (3) how SNCC should be structured and where its centers of power should be.

The meetings were a sign of the fact that SNCC was no longer functioning as a redemptive organization. It was too big, it was too diverse, and it had too many members who had never shared the unifying experience of the terror (and, since they were white, never fully would). SNCC met the problem by tightening its structure, driving out the newcomers (and those old-timers who were white or were closely associated with whites), and thus trying to restore the old SNCC. But this proved futile. Too much talent was lost, too many people were left disoriented by the long internal struggle, and for too many people the tension between SNCC's redemptive ethos and their personal desire to be effective opponents of racial injustice became painfully manifest. Many of those who left SNCC in early 1965 joined more moderate civil rights groups or the War on Poverty. Many others, unwilling to dilute their principles, dropped out of politics entirely.

The expulsion of the whites pointed up a major problem: racism within SNCC. Before 1964, when there were only a small number of highly dedicated whites in SNCC, their presence had not created serious problems. After the Summer Project and convention challenge, however, some blacks in SNCC began to question both the effectiveness and the motives of the large number of new white members. The new whites were enthusiastic, self-confident, mostly better educated than the blacks and often more skilled at typing, expressing their ideas at meetings, putting out news-letters, and other organizing abilities. Therefore, in many places they began to take over the day-to-day and week-to-week decision-making. This angered the blacks who had been working in SNCC for several years and were really much better at the essential work of communicating with and encouraging local black people. The whites, in fact, tended to reinforce the tendency of local blacks to defer to white people. For example, a white volunteer who asked a local black person to vote might receive the reply "yessir, boss!"

Blacks in SNCC also began to question the motives of the whites for coming to work in the Deep South. The whites

seemed to have come to learn about life or to find themselves, to help the poor benighted black people and earn their gratitude, to act on an ideology, to satisfy a need for engagement or political activity, to play the political game, to atone for guilt, to escape themselves, and for any number of other reasons which did not seem legitimate to the blacks. None of these motives could form a satisfactory basis for a redemptive commitment.

Probably the blacks in SNCC also had motives that were not totally altruistic, but they were right in believing that the whites' commitment would never have the same meaning as their commitment. The blacks, after all, were fighting in their own cause, whose outcome would directly affect their personal destinies. The whites were merely giving a little of their time to somebody else's cause. (On the whole question of white-black relations within SNCC, see also Levy, 1968 and Poussaint, 1966.)

If SNCC had not been a redemptive organization, it could probably have dealt with the fact that different members had different levels and types of commitment. But the complete equalitarianism and the complete unity of sentiment necessary to sustain the redemptive ethos were incompatible with different types of membership. After all, a redemptive ethos involves seeing everyone in the world as either "sinners" or "saved." Partial salvation, partial commitment is not possible.

For almost any organization, the absorption of so many new members, especially new members who were different in important ways from the old members, would be a serious problem—but few would have been so crippled by the crisis as SNCC. Most would have been sustained by the tremendous opportunities for renewal and expansion of activity presented by the new members. In fact, it would be difficult to think of another example of an ongoing voluntary organization which went into a rapid decline a few months after tripling its membership.

PROBLEMS WITH OTHER CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS

At about this time (the spring of 1965), SNCC faced another serious problem. It began to reap the consequences of its long-term bad relations with other civil rights organizations. SNCC people had always despised the NAACP, regarding it as a corrupt group concerned chiefly with gaining advantages for the black middle class. (SNCC's clientele had, with few exceptions, always been the poorest of the poor.) However, SNCC had a policy of never publicly attacking the NAACP or any other black group, a policy which it almost always adhered to.

By the spring of 1965, the national leadership of the NAACP had become very concerned about Communists in SNCC. A few white conservatives had been saying for some time that SNCC was Communist-infiltrated, but now the NAACP became one of the most zealous participants in a broad attack by liberals and liberal groups on alleged Communist influence in SNCC (see Kopkind, 1965a and Evans and Novak, 1966).

The NAACP has always been meticulous in maintaining the "purity" of its own membership and associates, so as not to antagonize powerful anti-Communist liberals or give its racist enemies extra fuel for attacking it. SNCC could not understand such toadying to one's enemies and to doubtful allies at the expense of one's own people. SNCC refused even to reply to the charges. Its leaders would say only that SNCC did not require a loyalty oath and that they personally were unconcerned about fighting the battles of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. They might have added that SNCC's redemptive ethos was totally incompatible with that of the Communist Party, and that a person who joined SNCC either adapted to that ethos or left. What SNCC did, instead, was to take a moral stand against McCarthyism. Its failure to deny the charges explicitly hurt it a good deal with the liberals who were its chief financial backers. But the last thing SNCC would do

would be to compromise its principles by yielding to McCarthyistic (or any other external) pressures. After the 1964 Democratic Convention, it was extremely suspicious of the commitment of liberals and the NAACP anyway—and when they began to attack it publicly, SNCC became even more alienated from them.

The spring of 1965 also saw SNCC come into conflict with SCLC and Dr. Martin Luther King, this time far more dramatically than ever before. Both SNCC and SCLC had been working in Selma, Alabama on voter registration, SNCC for two years, SCLC for a few months. Progress was very slow, and therefore SCLC decided to sponsor a march to the state capital at Montgomery 50 miles away to demand voting rights for black people. The march would be in defiance of an order by Governor George Wallace. SNCC opposed the march as yet another one of Dr. King's tactics which (in SNCC's view) would give him a lot of glory overnight and undermine the long-term efforts to develop local people's confidence in their ability to achieve political goals on their own. The SNCC project in Selma decided not to participate officially in the march. The march eventually became three marches; the first one, in which the nonviolent marchers were turned back at a bridge near Selma by police led by Sheriff James Clark and using whips, guns, horses, and tear gas; the second march, two days later, in which by prior agreement with the police the marchers turned back at the same bridge ("making secret deals with Jim Clark" was the way SNCC members described this, since neither SNCC nor the public had not been told of the agreement); and a third march, two weeks after the first, in which an estimated 3,200 people participated, including hundreds of Northern whites, protected by almost 4,000 federal soldiers. This march provided the push necessary to bring the Voting Rights bill, which had been languishing in committee, up to the floor of Congress and get it passed. The Voting Rights Acts sent large numbers of federal registrars to the Deep South, who quickly accomplished what SNCC

and other black groups had been vainly attempting for years: the mass registration of black voters in the South.

So Dr. King's "glory-seeking" had resulted in an enormous success for the entire civil rights movement—but not a success for SNCC. SNCC defined its goal not as the passage of specific laws but as teaching people (which did not mean federal registrars) to act politically on their own behalf. Of course, the Voting Rights Act opened up previously undreamed-of possibilities for the self-organization of black people in the South—but not at all in the way SNCC had been hoping. SNCC envisioned its followers as developing a kind of "alternative politics" for America—a politics which was more decentralized, idealistic, intimate, noncoercive—in short, more redemptive. The Voting Rights Act in effect co-opted the people whom SNCC had been counting on to build the new politics by luring them into standard two-party politics.

In the year that followed passage of the Voting Rights Act, most of SNCC's projects in the Deep South (with the notable exception of Stokely Carmichael's Lowndes County Freedom Organization) were either dead or dying. It was clear that SNCC was going to have to change if it was to continue to exist.

THE MOVE NORTH

The logical direction for SNCC to look at this point was North and to the cities. By 1966 the political awakening of black urban youth that had begun with the 1964 and 1965 riots had become quite widespread. Moreover, the continuing mechanization of southern agriculture was driving increasing numbers of blacks northward and cityward. There were fewer and fewer southern counties with black majorities, and two northern cities (Washington and Newark) by then had populations more than half black.

But SNCC faced severe problems in moving. Its membership (staff) had been decimated, and it faced strong competition in the North with other groups in recruiting new members.

LOSS OF A FINANCIAL BASE

Moreover, its financial base had all but disappeared, partly because of its own behavior (such as sending Stokely Carmichael to Havana and Hanoi, and also issuing a strongly anti-Israeli pamphlet, thus alienating its anti-Communist and Jewish supporters). No doubt it was also the case that white liberals were becoming chary of supporting blacks now that they were getting so militant.

SNCC's only hope at this point seemed to be to form alliances with other groups. It had always been able to work harmoniously with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in the South because CORE's southern chapters had a redemptive ethos similar to SNCC's But how in 1967, a planned alliance with national CORE for the purpose of forming a new political apparatus for black people never got off the ground. And a working alliance with the Black Panthers in 1968 lasted only five months, ending in bitterness and violence. It would have been very surprising, in the light of the explanation offered here, if SNCC had been able to maintain an alliance with the urban-bred Panther Party, which had such a different ethos.

So SNCC never took hold in the North. Its redemptive ethos, so dependent on a particular mix of circumstance, belief, and background, was like a delicate plant. It was not easily transplanted into new soil—nor could it survive, under changing conditions, in the old soil. SNCC could not change its ethos and, given that ethos, it was capable only of limited responses to political opportunities—and mostly self-destructive ones. So SNCC flowered and died in a very brief span of years.

What can be concluded from this strange tale of success through failure and failure through success? I say success through failure because during the period 1961-1963 when SNCC was encountering almost total frustration in its voter registration campaigns, its members described it as the most "meaningful" and "beautiful" group they had ever known. I say success also because in spite of the hardships, danger, and

frustration of SNCC life, SNCC in that period always had a stream of new members to replace the old. And the old members left not in disillusion but in exhaustion (they usually lasted no more than a year). The many ex-SNCC members interviewed were almost universally very positive in their feelings toward SNCC. This was true even of the whites who were forced out in the spring of 1965.

SNCC's failure through success is more obvious. The compromise offered at the 1964 Convention, the advent of so many talented new members, the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the national fame that Stokely Carmichael brought with his "Black Power" slogan—all these look, to the outsider, like successes and opportunities for more success. Yet within SNCC they were experienced as failures and portents of greater failure.

That SNCC was a strange kind of organization is clear. Very few other political organizations have resembled it, even radical one. For example, the Socialist and Communist parties in America, far from being redemptive, have been basically ideological organizations.

SNCC has sometimes been compared with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), also know as the Wobblies. As Renshaw (1967) relates, in the period 1905-1920, the IWW challenged the conservative, bread-and-butter unions of the day by being radical and visionary. Yet the IWW was very different from SNCC. It was bureaucratic and large, with a peak membership of about 100,000. Its disputes over strategy and structure were fought out among the top leaders in the language of European radical ideologies (Marxism and syndicalism), whereas SNCC's disputes directly involved the entire organization and had little to do with any ideologies.

SNCC has also been compared with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and there are a number of similarities in values and attitudes between members of the two groups. In fact, before 1965, when it was engaged in small-scale community organizing, SDS did seem to have a redemptive organization. But SDS then began organizing students around the issues of the Vietnam war, the draft, and student

power. It became a large organization with thousands of members, some very active, most of them almost entirely inactive. Moreover, some of the leaders began a serious effort to develop an ideology, in order to explain to people how their problems were caused by deep-rooted failures of the American system. Other leaders continued to hold the more redemptive viewpoint that to explain this to people was to preclude their discovering it through experience, which was the only way to gain real knowledge. So SDS after 1965 retained some redemptive characteristics but was too large and diffuse to be really a redemptive organization (on SDS, see Kopkind, 1965b; Blumenthal, 1967; Jacobs, 1968; Brooks, 1965).

The Weathermen (now called the Weather Underground), which split off from SDS, does seem to be redemptive. Its members live together in collectives of 10-30 people in which they study revolutionary doctrine, write, organize, and participate in Maoist-style self-criticism sessions. Kifner (1970) describes them as having a "quality approaching religious fanaticism." Since this group is now underground, it is blocked from engaging in almost all forms of activity.

No wonder SNCC did not have the instinct for staying alive in a political world. It was held together almost entirely by incentives that are atypical of political organizations. Just as SNCC's incentive structure was nonpolitical, so its contribution was also nonpolitical, or rather prepolitical.

That contribution was a challenge to the extreme rationality and individualism of the American system. This challenge came not through anything SNCC taught but precisely through its redemptive nature. SNCC offered its members a kind of total universe which made possible a full commitment, an unmediated caring about the values and the people in that universe. Many of its members report that before 1964, they often experienced a sense of harmony and certainty that is rarely felt by other Americans. Their lives were not fragmented. Instead of filling a series of largely unrelated roles

(parent, employee, citizen), they filled only one role: SNCC worker. Instead of balancing in their heads a multiplicity of values, all of them tentative, they had one certain, absolute set of beliefs. The group provided a world order which is far more complete and stable then any that individuals could assemble for themselves.

The SNCC outlook stands most sharply in contrast to that of the liberal—the person who makes a point of seeing every issue from all perspectives and of being always prepared to trade off his or her values for each other. The liberal is a specialist in living with a minimum of conflict in a complex, atomized, shifting world. Without the liberal, the American system could hardly exist. The liberal makes possible the relatively peaceful coexistence of many highly diverse groups. The liberal is the keystone of a society which fails to give its members any sort of total viewpoint or meaning.

It was to this society that the early SNCC offered an alternative. But the pressures and the temptations proved too great for that alternative to last. The history of SNCC after 1964 is the history of the gradual breakdown of the earlier total universe leading to its dissolution.

But the SNCC experience offered a kind of model, a definition, a direction to the rest of the New Left. Some of SNCC's members became prominent in other New Left groups. Tom Hayden, after working in SNCC during 1961 went on to become one of the founders of SDS in 1962. Mario Savio, a 1964 summer volunteer, that fall became the best-known leader of Berkeley's Free Speech Movement. The Black Panther Party took its name from the nickname of a SNCC project, Stokely Carmichael's Lowndes County Freedom Organization. SNCC's ethos served a kind of prepolitical role by presenting a model of an alternative politics to the New Left and a critique of America's values which is of potential interest to many more people—though very few outside the New Left heard the message. It was very hard to understand and it got mixed up with the more frightening simultaneous Black Power message coming from SNCC.

In short, SNCC's contribution was precisely that it was a redemptive political organization. There are probably thousands of redemptive organizations, from motorcycle gangs to religious sects. They are rarely explicitly political. (Those that are political, like SNCC and also CORE in the South in the early 1960s, tend to be very short-lived or to have a very short redemptive phase.) Those Americans who feel the need for the rewards of intimacy and moral certainty offered by a redemptive ethos do not generally seek them in politics. SNCC is of interest because it attempted to do both things: to be political and to offer its members the satisfactions of a redemptive ethos. The story of how it failed provides an illustration of the reason the American political system is not likely to provide its citizens with a sense of community or meaning for their lives.

SNCC's story also shows the limitations of compromises, concessions, and reforms as a government strategy for dealing with dissident groups. Most groups, even radical ones, can be influenced to some extent by these three basic techniques of American government and can even work temporarily with reformist groups for reformist ends, as the Communist Party did during the Popular Front and as the Black Panthers are doing now. But to a redemptive group a compromise is always an implied insult (because it denies the absoluteness of the group's moral right); a concession is always a trick (because it is never given in a redemptive spirit but may sway people from the redemptive group's position); and a reform is always a sham (because it does not change the underlying immoral or amoral system). The rejection of the convention compromise makes perfect sense in these terms. If the government is faced with further redemptive political challenges—by the remnants of the New Left, by young people, by black people—it can expect further rebuffs to any concessions it offers.

But in another way a redemptive group is extremely vulnerable to offers of reform. Its lack of adaptability means that its base—of both financial supporters (white liberals, for

SNCC) and active followers (poor rural southern blacks, for SNCC)—can easily be stolen. The redemption-oriented core of active members is then left impotent and frustrated and more morally offended than ever. I do not know what effect this usually has—whether it stimulates other, even more angry redemptive challenges like the Weatherman; whether it reinforces the determination of nonredemptive reformist groups like SCLC, to continue "working within the system"; whether it encourages redemptive groups like SDS to transform themselves into something else; or whether it merely increases apathy and cynicism and a kind of simmering anger among the excluded groups (like blacks and youth) to which redemptive organizations seem to appeal. Probably all four to different degrees. In any case, this will have to be the subject of further research.

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