
Direct Action
and Desegregation,
1960-1962

TOWARD A THEORY OF THE
RATIONALIZATION OF PROTEST

James H. Laue

PREFACE BY DAVID J. GARROW

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Series Editor's Preface

James H. Laue's *Direct Action and Desegregation* is one of the most—and perhaps simply *the* most—valuable historical sources for understanding the rich interplay of what in retrospect were undeniably the two most important years of the post-World War II black freedom struggle, namely the twenty-four months beginning with the onset of the southern student sit-in movement on February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Many summary treatments of the black freedom struggle, and particularly the 1954-1965 period, may unfortunately leave the general reader insufficiently aware of how truly crucial the early phases of black student activism were to the entire subsequent course of the civil rights movement and to all of American political life throughout the 1960s. The onset of the sit-ins, the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the evolution of black student attitudes towards older activists and other civil rights organizations during events such as the 1961 Freedom Rides and the 1961-1962 protest campaign in Albany, Georgia, represented three of the most influential occurrences in the black freedom struggle and in the burgeoning of youthful activism that so dramatically distinguished the decade of the 1960s from that of the 1950s.

Jim Laue's 1965 manuscript, based heavily upon his own extended 1960 and 1962 research trips across the South and his intimate participant/observer presence at any number of now-historic movement meetings and conferences, is as rich a discussion of that crucial two year period as any we are likely to ever have. Especially in Chapter Four, concerning the 1960 sit-ins, and Chapter Six, concerning the pre-history and early development of the Albany Movement, Laue has provided us with descriptive accounts that are and will remain of timeless historical value. While most any reader, and particularly oral historians and sociologists, will likely also be notably impressed by the perceptive and sensitive discussion of participant/observation that Professor Laue provides in Chapter Two, readers who are not social movement

sociologists should nonetheless not skip over the extremely rich material, particularly on SNCC and on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), that is contained in one of Laue's more theoretical sections, Chapter Eight. Although his typological discussions of Weber and Parsons will be of specific interest only to scholarly specialists, some chapter titles and introductory references ought not to obscure the very valuable historical materials and discussions that occur throughout the entire manuscript.

In part because Professor Laue's manuscript, as a Harvard dissertation, has never been available in a microform edition (as most other universities' dissertations are), it has never been extensively used even by many published scholars of the American civil rights movement. I am very pleased that Carlson Publishing's eighteen volume series on *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement* will bring James Laue's important work to the much wider audience it has long deserved.

David J. Garrow

Preface 1989

Thanks to the initiative of publisher Ralph Carlson, I have completed, in the relative safety of my study, the somewhat frightening requirement of carefully reading and analyzing something I wrote nearly a quarter of a century ago. The experience was both humbling and exhilarating.

Looking at the beginnings of the civil rights movement from this distance first made me sense the scope of historic racism in the United States and the enormity of the accomplishment of all those who "put their bodies on the line" to redirect that history. But I quickly found myself drawn to the more personal and subjective parts of the dissertation, which reminded me so vividly of the people, the crises and my participant observation research experience in the movement—which unquestionably were the most significant influences shaping my life and vocation today. As Andy Young, one of my mentors and heroes in the movement of the 1960s, said in response to my question about what he thought of northern whites who came down to get involved in the movement: "It's fine. Once you get shot at in a foxhole down here, you get religion—and you never lose it."

Young—the former Congressman and United Nations Ambassador and now the Mayor of Atlanta—is like the rest of us who were part of this movement: the commitment to social change and racial justice got stamped in through the experience, and informs our thinking, politics and personal values for the rest of our lives. That, indeed, expresses the major paradox which is at the heart of the theoretical perspective in my dissertation: that while the forces of rationalization and bureaucratization inevitably co-opt and constrain the charismatic idea, the process is never totally successful when the idea deals with life and death and identity issues, and has recruited committed adherents who never forget. The personal is not ultimately packageable and predictable. As I modestly reminded Max Weber in his language in the last paragraph of my dissertation, when a phenomenon like the sit-in movement becomes the "official business" of a rationalizing social system, it is at best futile to hope for the "complete elimination" of ". . . love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation."