
The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

THE GROWTH OF RADICALISM
IN A CIVIL RIGHTS
ORGANIZATION

Emily Stoper

PREFACE BY DAVID J. GARROW

CARLSON
Publishing Inc

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, 1989

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Series Editor's Preface

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) represented the cutting edge of the southern black freedom struggle from 1960 to 1966. Formed in April of 1960 by southern black college students in the immediate wake of the initial lunch-counter sit-in movement that had begun in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, SNCC's young activists played crucial roles in the 1961 Freedom Ride and then initiated intensive and dangerous local-level grassroots organizing and voter registration projects in a number of rural deep South locales.

The two earliest and most significant SNCC projects were in Mississippi and in southwest Georgia, and aside from Clayborne Carson's valuable *In Struggle* (1981), which functions best as an intellectual history of SNCC's evolution rather than as a comprehensive organizational history, these important early SNCC efforts have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve. In time John Dittmer's immensely promising work on the black freedom struggle in Mississippi will help to fill at least some of this gap, but at present the overall amount of academic attention being directed toward SNCC is disappointingly small. SNCC's importance and impact as one of the five major organizations involved in national civil rights politics—along with SCLC, CORE, the NAACP, and the National Urban League—has been usefully chronicled in a number of significant works on the movement and its interactions with the federal government, but SNCC's equally if not more important local, grassroots role has not even begun to receive the level of analysis and appreciation that is deserved.

The relative lack of scholarly literature on SNCC is to a considerable extent mitigated by the valuable autobiographical memoirs of James Forman (*The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 1972) and Cleveland Sellers (*The River of No Return*, 1973), by Howard Zinn's participant-observer *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (1965), and also by oral history-based academic studies of white movement volunteers that parenthetically offer important

perspectives on SNCC: Sara Evans's *Personal Politics* (1979), Mary Aickin Rothschild's *A Case of Black and White* (1982), and Doug McAdam's *Freedom Summer* (1989). Additionally, the extremely rich trove of SNCC papers presently archived at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta offer an especially valuable resource that so far has not been at all adequately mined by scholars or other writers.

Next to Carson's book, however, no other work is more valuable to an academic appreciation of SNCC's development and internal life between 1960 and 1966 than Emily Stoper's important but until now little-utilized 1968 Harvard dissertation. Based upon fifty-one lengthy and substantive interviews conducted in 1966-1967, Stoper's work is a very early and extremely important history that traces the internal development of SNCC, its growing disillusionment with the federal government, and its often troubled relations with other civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and SCLC. Particularly in her sections on the interrelationships between different civil rights groups, and in Chapter Three's pioneering discussion of SNCC's attitudes towards leadership and structure, Stoper's analyses give prescient articulations of themes and interpretations that in subsequent years would figure heavily both in activists's memoirs and historian's overviews. Additionally, Stoper's organizational analysis of SNCC as a "moralist" or "redemptive" group—see her notable 1977 *Journal of Black Studies* essay which is reprinted in this series's *We Shall Overcome*, Volume Three, pp. 1041-1062—is likewise an insightful contribution to our understanding of SNCC.

I am very pleased both that Carlson Publishing's series of volumes on *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement* is able to include Emily Stoper's significant work and also that this book is able to provide as an appendix extensive transcriptions and selections from Stoper's extremely valuable and almost uniquely early oral history interviews with important activists such as Jane Stenbridge, Charles Jones, and John Lewis. This volume should be a notable contribution to future scholarly appreciation of SNCC's history and importance.

David J. Garrow

Preface 1989

Re-reading my twenty-year-old dissertation on SNCC sent me on a journey back into the familiar/strange world of that peculiar epoch of American political history known as the '60s. I quickly became absorbed in both the pleasures of contemplating an antique for its own sake and in musings on its meaning from the perspective of today.

When I originally wrote about SNCC I saw it as a particular kind of political organization, a "moralist" (later renamed "redemptive") organization. As I re-read the work, several alternative interpretations came to mind. For example, it seems odd to me that I did not also see SNCC in terms of the rise and fall of the New Left. Probably I was too absorbed in the New Left myself at the time to be able to stand back and look at it as a historical phenomenon. But today it is apparent to me that SNCC's emphasis on community organizing, its attempt to build parallel institutions, its moralism, its belief in the need for and the possibility of redeeming America, its increasing sense of frustration and disillusionment, its interest in the idea of violence in its later years—all seem fairly typical of SDS and other New Left groups. SNCC's eventual demise can be seen as having been caused in large part by the same causes as the demise of the New Left in general—the sense by its own participants that their original idealistic aims had ended in bitter and futile conflicts and the fact that these conflicts in turn antagonized much of the American public. Even more deeply, the New Leftists as a group came to feel that the original reforms they had sought—integration, an end to the Vietnam War, more rights for certain disenfranchised groups—could be granted without really satisfying them, because they were looking for something else, though what it was they were not entirely sure. The Freedom High in SNCC seemed to foreshadow an important development of the '70s, a turning inward by a great many individuals to examine their own deeper values and motivations, in many cases through the personal growth movement.

As I read the dissertation again, I also saw in retrospect the foreshadowing of another phenomenon of the '70s, namely, the women's movement. During the time I was completing this work in 1968, I was quite blind to the