

*Center for the Study
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WORKING PAPERS

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RIGHTS MOVEMENT"

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Philanthropy and the Civil Rights Movement

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PHILANTHROPY AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

During the past ten years an increasingly clear and unified perspective has been emerging within the scholarly community about the relationship between the civil rights movement and its outside supporters. This nascent consensus may well be surprising, if not offputting, to those who are not familiar with recent civil rights scholarship, particularly that being produced by sociologists, for it essentially concludes that philanthropy was "bad" for the civil rights movement, while internal radicalism was "good."

External assistance to the movement, academic interpreters increasingly are concluding, was not only not necessary for the southern movement's initial emergence in the 1950s or for its most significant local achievements in the south during the early 1960s, but it oftentimes was downright harmful to the movement's progress and development--both because competition for outside funds and support became a debilitating dynamic in the intra-movement relations between civil rights organizations, and because, certainly by 1966 but even as early as 1963, external philanthropic support had the effect--as well as usually the purpose--of bolstering the movement's most "moderate" groups--e.g. the National Urban League (NUL) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)--at the expense of those that were the more "radical" cutting edge of the southern movement, those whose popular and indigenous appeal within grass roots black communities, rural and urban, gave the black freedom struggle of the 1960s most of the political strength and media appeal that it possessed.

"Resource mobilization" (or "RM") has been for ten years now the reigning paradigm for the sociological study of recent social movements,

including the black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. When it was first initially developed in the early and mid-1970s by Mayer Zald, John McCarthy, and Anthony Oberschall, "resource mobe" was viewed as a progressive, politically-attuned and movement-oriented analytical perspective that would rightfully take the place of previous scholarly presumptions that viewed protest and rebellion largely in terms of the psychosocial stresses or personality needs of the protesters themselves.¹ By offering a far more explicitly political, and at least implicitly a much more "rational" explanation for the occurrence or non-occurrence of mass protest movements, resource mobe represented a very clear break from the psychologically-oriented, disfunction-attuned perspective that characterized the relatively sparse literature of the 1950s on local protest in America. While most of that literature--including James S. Coleman's brief monograph, Community Conflict,² the most oft-cited social movements study of that period--viewed protest as largely a result of internal individual discontent and psychological processes, resource mobilization gave far more credit to the strength and constancy of outgroups' political desires and consciousness, and contended that it was the ability to mount significant protests that ebbed and flowed, rather than the desire to redress continually significant but perhaps moderately fluctuating grievances.

Resource mobilization's basic contention that potential protesters' grievances and unhappiness were more or less constant across time--be they black Americans in 1956 versus 1946, or California farm workers in 1965 versus 1955--led to an attendant emphasis on how those potential protesters' resources for activism and mobilization would hence be the crucial factor in accounting for the onset and sustenance of mass movements. Such empowering resources could be either indigenously

internal to the protest population, or they might be external--the support and interest, financially, organizationally, and politically, of actual or potential sympathizers who were not themselves similarly situated, but who would be willing to take an active interest in the voicing and advancement of the protesters' cause. Since most resource mobilization scholars initially posited or presumed--perhaps more often unconsciously than consciously--that internal, indigenous protest community resources were, like grievances, relatively constant and unchanging across significant periods of time, early resource mobilization analyses of the southern civil rights movement and the heightened black activism of the 1950s and early 1960s initially focused upon the provision or availability of external--i.e. northern, and most oftentimes white--support and assistance to early southern civil rights activism as the crucial "take off"--if not initiating--ingredient in the emergence and growth of black protest during those politically eventful years.

Throughout the mid and late 1970s, resource mobilization's explanatory perspective served as a major guidepost for social scientists--and some historians--interested in civil rights scholarship. However, starting in the very late 1970s and early 1980s, an increasing number of sociologists who were analysts of social protest movements, including some who had published works that were significant contributions to "early" resource mobilization scholarship, began to realize that the implications, and some of the evolution of resource mobe were too heavily weighted towards a concern with the centrality and necessity of external assistance and resources in protest movement development. The emerging presumption, many feared, was that external supporters of protest movements seemed to be playing as significant--if not more significant--a role in the academic explanation of social movements such as the black freedom

struggle as the protesters--e.g. black southerners--themselves. Such a perspective, it was rightly feared, would give insufficient--perhaps vastly insufficient--credit to the indigenous roots of movement activism and the crucially essential value of indigenous community resources, especially long-term organizational resources.

This significant shift in the basic interpretive paradigm underlying scholarly research and writing on the civil rights movement has helped account for an increasingly critical evaluation and estimation of the roles played by external movement supporters--particularly foundations and other outside financial contributors--in recent and current-day academic work on the black freedom struggle. On the one hand, the overall importance that interpreters assign to the contributions--especially financial--made by external movement supporters has been very significantly reduced; simultaneously, and on the other hand, the evaluations of the motives underlying those external contributions have also shifted significantly, with much less attention being given to "conscience constituency" expressions of heartfelt sympathy and moral goodness, and far more attention being devoted to manipulative, social control or channeling desires thought to underlay most if not all of the organizational--and especially foundation--financial support that "outsiders" directed towards black civil rights groups throughout the 1960s. Indeed, there is some quite new and forthcoming scholarly work--and, as of yet, relatively underappreciated scholarly work--that seeks with considerable success to test in a measurable and documentable fashion the accuracy of this increasingly widely-accepted belief.⁵

Before pursuing that particular point more fully, there is an even more basic "resource" question that academic students of the civil rights movement need to confront explicitly and have not yet done so. This

question concerns the extent to which organizations such as the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) drew their financial incomes from their own members or group-member beneficiaries, versus the extent to which such civil rights groups, during the 1960s, had incomes that were supplied by non-members or non-beneficiaries, i.e. by white respondents to direct mail solicitations, by labor unions or non-black church groups, or by foundations.

While this is an explicitly historical question--what proportion of civil rights groups' dollar incomes came from within the black community, and what proportion came from interested whites or interested white organizations--and is hence open to express and direct answer, it is just as interpretively "loaded" a query as is the analytical issue of the centrality of "internal" versus "external" resources, which it so closely parallels. In addition to being "loaded," however, it also begins to raise a different but by no means foreign interpretive issue which is becoming of increasing interest to social movement scholars: how crucial a distinction is there between protest groups which very much depend upon their members--people who physically attend meetings and know each other--and protest groups which are actually composed simply or largely of paid staff and which depend financially not upon "members" but upon contributors who take no physical role in the work of the group, and whose "involvement" is essentially limited to reading a fund-raising appeal and writing a check. This distinction, spoken of in the sociological literature as the difference between "classical" social movement organizations ("SMOs")--those with actual participating members, members who benefit from achievement of the group's goals--and "professional" SMOs--those composed of staffs and financial

contributors, contributors who may well simply be sympathizers and not potential personal beneficiaries of the group's goals--is a distinction that may well highlight one of the civil rights movement's most significant but little-noted weaknesses, namely the degree to which its "cutting edge" organizations were predominantly dependent in fact upon external rather than indigenous sources of funds.

While the NAACP, with its "federated" structure--an actual membership which was structured into functioning local branches or chapters that physically met and carried out activities--had a large, dues-paying membership that actually supported a substantial percentage of the national NAACP's budget (and, similarly, occupied a substantial proportion of staff time and energy in the collection and processing of those dues), virtually all of the other major civil rights organizations of the 1960s--the Urban League, SCLC, SNCC, and, less so, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)--did not possess a major, stable, and dependable internal or indigenous funding base or fund-raising mechanism. Although CORE too had a federated chapter structure, encompassing many chapters whose histories which much more mercurial than the norm in the NAACP, all four of these other groups depended largely on either direct-mail fundraising (SCLC, SNCC, and CORE) or corporate and foundation gifts (NUL) for the financing of a very substantial part of their actual costs or dollar outlays.

From these financial situations stemmed two significant political facts of life, facts which are especially clear in the case of SCLC, whose funding situation was most oftentimes more clear cut--or quasi "ideal type"--than that of SNCC or CORE. First, the level of financial resources available for organizational activism was unpredictable, depending largely upon donor response to the latest mailing, which in

turn, movement staffers quickly learned, seemed to depend heavily upon the level of major media coverage that the soliciting group had recently been receiving. Second, the heavy majority of such direct mail contributors was nonsouthern whites, political liberals who were disproportionately Jewish. Hence, civil rights organizations' fund appeals had to be crafted towards an essentially northern white audience, and that audience's short-term level of interest--and check-writing enthusiasm--could vary very greatly, depending upon how much or how little press coverage civil rights recently had been receiving. Thus SCLC and other civil rights groups regularly found themselves in a mercurially "boom or bust" financial cycle--overwhelming contributor response in the immediate wake of heavily-covered protests like those of May, 1963, in Birmingham, and March, 1965, in Selma, but minimal response and over-stretched budgets during intervening doldrums.⁶

The most continually immediate result of movement organizations' unpredictable finances was the undesired preoccupation of their leaders--e.g. Martin Luther King, Jr., for SCLC--with generating income and meeting the payroll. When one has the opportunity and occasion to review all of the hundreds of wiretapped and transcribed telephone conversations that King had with various advisors during the mid-1960s and which have now, thanks to the Freedom of Information Act, been released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, one repeatedly is struck by the extent to which King regularly was preoccupied with the relatively mundane details of SCLC's monthly financial survival. Such was also oftentimes the case with SNCC's young leaders, who repeatedly found themselves in the unpleasant and almost demeaning position of having to ask King and SCLC, or other movement-related organizations, for a financial transfusion.

King and his advisors were keenly aware of the desirability of

building a stable and dependable fund-raising base, one not dependent on the vagaries of direct mail fund-raising. Not surprisingly, their instinct was to turn first to the churches, to try to build a nationwide network of churches--mostly black and predominantly Baptist--that would pledge a regular monthly contribution--out of their own weekly collection--to SCLC. However, in part because SCLC only started to pursue this program as late as 1966, when the glow of the southern movement was past its peak, and in part because of internal, personnel tensions, the effort essentially came to naught.⁷ Somewhat more successfully, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, through a series of northern-based "Friends of SNCC," was able to achieve some structured fundraising,⁸ but none of the three major, cutting-edge southern organizations, SCLC, SNCC, and CORE, was ever able to create for itself a stable base of external financial support.

The southern movement's financial reliance on direct mail income also had the deleterious effect of stimulating the already-inevitable competitive tensions that existed among different movement organizations, for even as early as 1960-1961 the young activists in SNCC began to realize that to the degree that national news media coverage of southern black activism focused upon Martin Luther King, Jr., rather than upon less heralded local activists, northern contributors' dollars flowed more to King's SCLC than to the more heavily involved network of young civil rights cadre fielded by SNCC. As the belief spread among movement organization staff members that direct mail contributions were to some significant extent a zero-sum game--that which went to one organization was that which alternatively could go or could have gone to another, had publicity about the groups been allocated differently--competition for publicity and hence for dollars became a regular fact of movement life.⁹

Prior to the post-Selma, post-Watts era there was relatively

little significant foundation support for southern-oriented civil rights organizations. What little there was stemmed from the interest of Taconic Foundation president Stephen R. Currier and the involvement of former Southern Regional Council executive director Harold Fleming, who worked closely with Currier. Encouraged by both Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and Kennedy Justice Department Civil Rights Division chief Burke Marshall, Currier and Fleming created the Voter Education Project (VEP), an SRC adjunct, to encourage movement organizations to pursue voter registration programs and to channel foundation--mainly Taconic--dollars to movement groups for this express purpose.

Almost from the start, in 1961-1962, significant political controversy within the movement clouded VEP's role and purpose, for some activists in SNCC worried that the real intent behind VEP--on the part of the Kennedy Administration if not Currier and Fleming--was to divert movement activists from more directly disruptive challenges to southern segregation, through the encouragement of voter registration work instead, while also expanding southern voting roles with black voters who likely would support John F. Kennedy for re-election in 1964.¹⁰

These SNCC concerns about the possibly diversionary and manipulative purposes underlying the creation of VEP and foundation financial support of the southern movement grew in strength in 1963 and 1964, when Currier, with a major assist from National Urban League executive director Whitney Young, established "CUCRL" (pronounced "kook-rul"), the "Council for United Civil Rights Leadership," as a dual-purpose supra-organization: one that would both provide a rubric for regular, structured interactions among all the major black civil rights leaders, and one that simultaneously would collect and then distribute to those organizations on a pro-rated basis all of the foundation dollars that philanthropic institutions wanted

to direct to the movement. SNCC's doubts and criticisms broke into the open when CUCRL then subsequently channeled far larger amounts of philanthropic funds to organizations such as the NAACP than to SNCC.¹¹

The post-1965-1966 expansion of foundation giving to black civil rights organizations has, in retrospect, allowed scholars to expand and extend the critical perspective that the young SNCC activists first applied to VEP and CUCRL, and to do so in ways that are generally persuasive and have been readily accepted within the modestly-burgeoning literature on late '60s interactions between the foundation community and black America. Indeed, the consensus that has emerged and that continues to grow holds not only that the increase in foundation interest in black organizations in the late 1960s was a rather direct byproduct of the massive and violent urban disorders that characterized the summers of 1965, 1966, and 1967 in several dozen American cities, but also that that heightened philanthropic interest had clear "social control" motives, motives that are most clearly reflected by how foundation dollars were very predominantly channeled to the most "moderate" and respectable of black organizations--organizations such as the National Urban League and the NAACP.¹²

The most specific academic proponent of this persuasive interpretation is Herbert Haines, a young sociologist who has termed the basic dynamic involved therein the "radical flank effect."¹³ In other words, it was the presence, visibility, and--in the urban disorders context--violence of black radicals, both the rhetorical proponents of "black power" and the physical proponents of "burn, baby, burn," that actually stimulated and hence account for--or deserve credit for--the sudden and very substantial increase in foundation support of "responsible" black organizations. What Haines basically is arguing is a point that

the sagacious Bayard Rustin articulated more briefly and more pointedly to Martin Luther King, Jr., during that "long, hot summer" of 1967--that intemperate, seemingly dangerous radicals do more to enhance the attractiveness of more moderate, more respectable proponents of fundamental social change to previously ambivalent or disinterested observers--including foundation officers--than anyone or anything else.¹⁴ In short, the positive payoffs from the exertions of a Stokely Carmichael or an H. Rap Brown could be seen--and can in retrospect be measured, as Haines has done--in the significant increase in foundation support registered by moderate black organizations, particularly the National Urban League, at the tail end of the 1960s.¹⁵

Haines's work, and the work of perhaps the leading sociologist who also is studying these relationships, J. Craig Jenkins of Ohio State University, indicates very clearly that external support for social protest movements such as the black freedom struggle is very inherently reactive in character. That conclusion accords quite easily with the broader interpretive evolution that "resource mobilization" has been undergoing over the past decade, namely towards an interpretation that stresses the crucial initiatory roles played by indigenous, local activists and resources, and the purely secondary supportive and reactive roles that were and are played by external financial contributors, be they individuals or foundations.¹⁶

In conclusion, the growing body of interpretive literature analyzing the relationship between the civil rights movement and its non-black, non-southern contributing supporters is more and more articulating, sometimes explicitly and sometimes only implicitly, two basic conclusions: first, a social change movement preferably ought to draw upon member beneficiaries for its financial needs, rather than be in a position of

relying upon the unpredictable interest or support of non-member outsiders for essential monetary sustenance. Once a movement is in the position of such reliance or dependence upon outside contributors, it is vulnerable not only to the exigencies of the "boom and bust" world of direct mail solicitation, but also to the dangers--and especially the perceived dangers--of cooptation or control by substantial outside supporters such as foundations. Even if a VEP or CUCRL style external benefactor is not purposefully or knowingly desirous of coopting or otherwise altering a movement's course, the same potentially divisive fears that characterized SNCC's reaction to CUCRL likely will characterize any movement situation where substantial dependence upon outside philanthropic supporters becomes a well-known fact of life. Any predominance of outside support, then, quite automatically becomes a double-edged sword: the givers may want only to stimulate, not control, but the issue of control, of movement vulnerability to cooptation, is almost inevitable.

Second, while philanthropy may thus be potentially "bad" for a movement, the behavior of the foundation community in the late 1960s seems indeed to suggest, as Haines and Jenkins have argued, that radicalism in a movement is "good"--that only the threatened scourge of dangerous, irresponsible, uncontrolled extremism will be enough to goad outside philanthropists into substantial and active support for more mainstream movement proponents of meaningful social change. In short, when one puts both of these emerging conclusions together, one can appreciate quite clearly why the images and lessons that come forth from the history of the civil rights movement and its relations with outside supporters are not ones that will give easy comfort or reassurance to those who occupy the roles of potential philanthropic supporters of

social protest movements.

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1. See McCarthy and Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," American Journal of Sociology 82 (November 1977): 1212-1241; and Oberschall, Social Conflict and Social Movements (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973). See also J. Craig Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements," Annual Review of Sociology 9 (1983): 527-553.
2. Coleman, Community Conflict (New York: Free Press, 1957).
3. See Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory;" also see Jenkins and Charles Perrow, "Insurgency of the Powerless: Farm Worker Movements (1946-1972)," American Sociological Review 42 (April 1977): 249-268.
4. See Aldon Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-In Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization," American Sociological Review 46 (December 1981): 744-767, and Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement (New York: Free Press, 1984). Also see Doug McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), and McAdam, "Tactical Innovation and the Pace of Insurgency," American Sociological Review 48 (December 1983): 735-754. But see Lewis M. Killian, Review of Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, Critical Mass Bulletin 8 (August 1983): 1-5, and Killian, "Organization, Rationality and Spontaneity in the Civil Rights Movement," American Sociological Review 49 (December 1984): 770-783.
5. See Herbert H. Haines, "Black Radicalization and the Funding of Civil Rights," Social Problems 32 (October 1984): 31-43.

6. See David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1986), pp. 264, 270, 278, 301, 319, 353, 368, 429, 450-451.
7. See Garrow, Bearing the Cross, pp. 429, 446, 460, 468.
8. See Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 108, 173.
9. See Garrow, Bearing the Cross, pp. 166-167, and Carson, In Struggle, pp. 70-71.
10. See Garrow, Bearing the Cross, pp. 162, 163. Also see Reese Cleghorn, "The Angels are White," New Republic 149 (17 August 1963): 12-14.
11. See Garrow, Bearing the Cross, pp. 270, 276, 278.
12. See Haines, "Black Radicalization and the Funding of Civil Rights," and J. Craig Jenkins and Craig M. Eckert, "Channeling Black Insurgency: Elite Patronage and Professional Social Movement Organizations in the Development of the Black Movement," American Sociological Review 51 (December 1986): 812-829.
13. See Haines "Black Radicalization."
14. See Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 573; also see Rustin, Strategies for Freedom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).
15. Haines, "Black Radicalization."
16. Haines, "Black Radicalization," and Jenkins and Eckert, "Channeling Black Insurgency."