HOW PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY BECAME WHITE: CULTURE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHOICE[*]

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Why do activists choose the organizational forms they do? Social movement scholars have tended to focus on activists' instrumental assessments of organizational forms' costs and benefits or on activists' efforts to balance instrumental calculations with a commitment to ideological consistency. Neither explanation is adequate. Organizational forms, like strategies, tactics, and targets, are often appealing for their symbolic associations, and especially, their association with particular social groups. The article fleshes out this dynamic through a case study of the rise and fall of participatory democracy in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Contrary to standard explanations for SNCC activists' repudiation of consensus-based and nonhierarchical decision making in the mid-1960s, I show that participatory democracy was abandoned when it came to be seen as ideological, oriented to personal self-transformation, and—no coincidence—as white. That was not the case earlier on, when participatory democracy was seen as practical, political, and black, and I account for that shift. Once established, however, participatory democracy's social associations shaped subsequent activist generations' view of the form's strengths and liabilities.

Activist groups have long wrestled with the dilemmas of operating as participatory democracies. Sustaining a decentralized, nonhierarchical, and consensus-based organization seems to mean sacrificing the quick decisions and clear lines of command necessary to winning concessions in a hostile political climate. Consensus decision making takes time, decentralization creates problems of coordination, and rotating leadership sacrifices the benefits of expertise (Freeman 1973; Polletta 2002; Mansbridge 1983; Rothschild-Whitt 1979; Rothschild and Whitt 1986; Staggenborg 1989).

In spite of these difficulties, in recent years, participatory democracy has enjoyed renewed popularity among activists, especially in the anticorporate globalization and social justice movements (Polletta 2002; Klein 2000). At the same time, however, critics have drawn attention to yet another liability of the form: that it risks alienating working-class people and activists of color. For some critics, the problem is that consensus-based decision making requires a commitment of time that people with families, jobs, and other responsibilities simply do not have (Treloar 2003). For other critics, however, the problem is that consensus-based decision making reflects a middle-class, white culture that is unfamiliar and unappealing to people who are not middle-class and white. An organizer observes, "When labor people or African-American people have to organize within the consensus model they are uncomfortable with it and the culture that comes with it" (Tarleton 2001). Leadership within activist communities of color is different than leadership in white communities. Another activist wrote in a 2000 critique of the

student left: "the reality is that certain individuals play roles (whether by choice or not) that are similar to de facto traditional leadership roles" (Rajah 2000). And a participant in a national anti-sweatshop organizing conference described consensus-based decision making, along with veganism and "not raising your voice in meetings," as among the "white activist cultural norms" that alienated participants of color (Larimore-Hall 2000). For these and other critics, consensus-based decision making is one of the "cultural trappings" of middle-class, white, progressive activism (Tarleton 2001); in a sense, it *is* white.

There is an irony. If these characterizations are right, a deliberative style that was appealing to white activists in the 1960s in part for its association with the militant wing of the black freedom movement—seen *as* black—is now unappealing to black activists because of its association with a white movement. At some point between 1962, when the term "participatory democracy" was coined by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and now, the term's symbolic associations shifted. What was "black" came to be "white."

In this article, I begin to account for that shift. I do so by tracing the rise and fall of participatory democracy in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In the early 1960s, SNCC organizers worked to register black voters and build political organizations in the most repressive areas of the south. For northern new leftists, SNCC activists were exemplary not only in the daring of their organizing but also in their determination to transcend hierarchies of all kinds within their own organization. In most accounts, their consensus-based decision making and decentralized organization inspired SDS's concept of participatory democracy and then a decade's worth of experiments pursued under its banner (Breines 1989; Lichterman 1996; Kazin 1998; Sirianni 1993). SNCC was also the first of the 1960s organizations to wrestle with the unwieldiness of participatory democracy, however. After an agonizing internal battle in 1964 and 1965, the group abandoned its commitment to decentralization and rule by consensus. Participatory democracy, in the standard account of SNCC's history, was ineffective in an organization grown in size and political stature, as well as out of kilter with a new black power agenda that was more focused on gaining power than on moral suasion (Carson 1981; Clecak 1981; McAdam 1988; Mills 1992; Stoper 1989; Gitlin 1987; Sellers 1990; King 1992; Morgen 1991; Matusow 1969).

I argue that neither the demands of environmental adaptation nor those of ideological consistency with a black power agenda can account for SNCC's abandonment of participatory democratic decision making. The first misses the fact that SNCC had grown dramatically in size in the previous year without jeopardizing its participatory democratic practices, that participatory democracy came under attack on local projects whose members often numbered less than a dozen, and that initially those who agued for retaining participatory democratic practices in the fall of 1964 did so on instrumental grounds. The argument that a Black Power agenda mandated a more centralized and hierarchical structure misses the fact that SNCC workers adopted such a structure before they embraced a Black Power agenda.

I make a different argument. What had once been seen as a politically effective organizational form came to be seen as the opposite when it was symbolically associated with both the organization's inability to formulate compelling programs and the dominance of whites in the organization. I say that participatory democracy was associated with those things because no one could say just how decentralized and consensus-based decision making stymied program development or how its abandonment would curb the role of whites. Rather, participatory democracy stood in for organizational problems that were difficult to confront, let alone solve. As a result, however, participatory democracy came to be seen by SNCC workers as principled rather than pragmatic, aimed at personal self-liberation rather than political change, and white rather than black. Because SNCC was widely seen as the cutting edge of militant black protest, moreover, its recasting of participatory democracy may have contributed to fixing that incarnation of the form as what participatory democracy *was*—for activists in the 1960s and after.

My purpose in rehearsing this story is not only to set the historical record straight, however, but to contribute to theorizing about why movement groups choose the organizational

forms they do. Contrary to those arguments that conceptualize organizational choice in terms of activists' efforts either to adapt to objective environmental demands or to juggle those demands with the imperatives of ideological consistency, I emphasize rather the symbolic associations of particular organizational forms. Such associations shape what counts as strategic, as well as what counts as ideological. By studying how symbolic social associations shape tactical choice, and with what effect, we can gain a better understanding of particular movement trajectories as well as how movement-spanning tactical repertoires change. We can also gain purchase on the social construction of rationality in organizations more broadly, an area of growing concern to organizational theorists (Lounsbury and Ventresca 2003). Before I turn to SNCC's experiment with participatory democracy, let me develop this alternative perspective on tactical choice.

CULTURE AND ORGANIZATION

Why do groups choose the organizational forms that they do? And even more broadly, why do they adopt any strategy or tactic? The social movements literature on the topic has tended to emphasize either activists' instrumental adaptation to environmental exigencies or their efforts to reconcile instrumental concerns with ideological commitments. So, researchers in the first vein have identified political-structural conditions in which one organizational form rather than another is likely to be effective (Kitschelt 1986; Amenta, Halfmann, and Young 1999), and have drawn attention to the organizational features of movements that predispose them to more or less tactical innovation (McAdam 1983; Minkoff 199; McCammon 2003).

Researchers in the second vein have pointed out that activists are principled actors as well as instrumental ones. "Movement tactics are not solely a function of environmental constraints and adaptations, but are also constrained by anchoring master frames," Snow and Benford write (1992: 146). In other words, tactical choices are shaped not only by the strategic imperatives of retaining rank and file support, garnering steady funding, and avoiding repression, but also by activists' explicit normative political commitments. For example, many groups seek to prefigure the society they are striving to build in their own relationships and practices. So they may strive for consensus in decision making, avoid tactics that can be construed as violent in any way, and reject differentials in status and authority, even if those choices diminish their capacity to act effectively (Breines 1989; Epstein 1991; Downey 1986).

The latter perspective is a valuable corrective to a purely instrumentalist one. However, it risks reproducing a strategy/ideology divide whereby strategic decision making is represented as nonideological. That misses the fact that what *counts* as an opportunity, what counts as an obstacle, what counts as strategic, and what counts as ideological are all ideological in the sense that they are informed by cultural values and assumptions. How can we get at those values and assumptions and their influence on strategic action? The concept of a "repertoire" of collective action (Tilly 1995) is useful here in capturing the fact that in any given era, activists make only limited use of the range of strategies available to them. As Charles Tilly puts it, "existing repertoires incorporate collectively learned, shared understandings concerning what forms of claim making are possible, desirable, risky, expensive, or probable, as well as what conesquences different possible forms of claim making are likely to produce. They greatly constrain the contentious claims political actors make on each other and on agents of the state" (1999: 419). Elisabeth Clemens uses the repertoire concept to account for political actors' adoption of organizational forms:

> [T]he distribution of repertoires is determined by a culture's rules or prescriptions about what actors may use what organizational models for what purposes. Organizational models may be categorized as 'appropriate for men,' 'appropriate for politics,' 'appropriate for rural communities,' and so forth. (1996: 208)

In other words, tactical choices broadly, and the choice of organizational form more specifically, are governed not only by a logic of instrumental rationality (or one of ideological consistency) but also by a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1989).

Wary of treating repertoires as fixed, most scholars have concentrated either on the macropolitical shifts as a result of which repertoires have changed dramatically (Tilly 1995; Tarrow 1998) or on the dynamics by which activists are able to innovate within, and effectively move beyond, a particular repertoire. The insight behind the latter is that people can transpose modes of interaction from one setting to another, indeed from one institutional sphere to another, modifying those interactional modes in the process (Sewell 1992; Clemens and Cook 1999; Armstrong 2002). People can thus capitalize on the trust-generating familiarity of old associational forms as they use them for entirely different ends. So, for example, Clemens (1997) shows that women activists barred from formal politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century drew on alternative associational forms—the club, parlor meeting, and charitable society— to become a major force for social reform. (See also Honig, 1985, and Brodkin Sacks, 1989, on how activists capitalized on the normative expectations characteristic of familiar non-political forms, respectively, Chinese "sisterhoods," and family; and Minkoff, 2002, on how hybrid organizational forms benefit from the legitimacy of—and resource flows associated with—the parent form.)

Scholars have devoted less attention to the dynamics by which repertoires *constrain* activists' ability to use organizational forms effectively. The result has been a view of actors as strategic choice makers rather than as exercising choice within constraints (but see Conell and Voss 1990). Scholars have also tended to conceptualize repertoires as a set of familiar interactions between authorities and challengers (Tilly 1995), thus neglecting the fact that activists' notions of what is appropriate come from their interactions with opponents and allies as well as authorities. Activists' choice of organizational form may be influenced by the symbolic association of particular forms with particular social groups. Sometimes, activists are explicit about the symbolic associations that guide their choices. Radical feminists, for example, developed a full rationale for their repudiation of bureaucratic organizational forms that were associated with patriarchy. At other times, however, the social associations that guide organizational choice are not made explicit. For example, in studying an alternative health clinic that operated along firmly collectivist lines, Sherryl Kleinman was surprised by members' insistence that each meeting be recorded in "minutes that had a bureaucratic look—lengthy, well-typed, with lots of headings, subheadings and underlinings" (1996: 38-9). One staffer created an uproar when she submitted the minutes of a previous meeting in longhand and with illustrations, and staffers carefully rewrote the minutes line by line. Kleinman had never seen anyone actually refer to minutes from earlier meetings and there was no evidence that staffers believed that imitating mainstream organizational procedures would get them more clients or funding. Rather, Kleinman argues, minute taking in as conventional a way as possible was associated with "serious" organizations, which this organization wanted to be. Had she asked members about their ideological commitments, they likely would have denied any desire to model themselves on mainstream health organizations; to the contrary, ideologically, they were vested in their status as an alternative organization.

Just as the cultural associations that drive organizational choice may in fact run counter to the group's ideological commitments, they may also have instrumental liabilities. For the black Baptist ministers who founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, organizing the group along the lines of the Southern Baptist church (Fairclough 198; Morris 1984) provided the mutuality of expectations that made for stability. At the same time, the ministerial structure created persistent and destructive jockeying among SCLC officials for Dr. King's favor (Fairclough 1985). Another example: When anticorporate globalization activists today refer to styles of participatory democratic decision making, especially those that rely on hand signals and vibes watchers, as being "Californian," they mean not only that those techniques are common among Californian activists, but also that they are part of an ethos valuing self-liberation over political

change and valuing how things "feel" over what they can accomplish. That cultural association sometimes leads activists to devalue practices like the use of hand signals that actually speed up decision making and thus can help them to accomplish the practical, externally focused change they want (Polletta 2002).

These examples call for systematic attention to the symbolic associations and oppositions that structure activists' choices of organizational forms, to the social sources of those associations and oppositions, and to their consequences for movement groups' trajectories and impacts. I do this in the following by tracing the rise and fall of decentralized and consensus-based decision making in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. To parse SNCC workers' changing assessment of participatory democracy, I studied tape recordings, transcripts, and minutes of meetings, along with internal memos and correspondence in which SNCC workers described the challenges facing their organization and commented on tactical options. Personal correspondence and journal entries proved especially valuable in elucidating gaps between what was said in staff meetings and what was said outside them. These materials help me to tease out the changing social associations that were responsible for participatory democracy's characterization variously as effective or self-indulgent, political or personal.

SNCC, 1960-1964

SNCC was established in April 1960 as a coalition of campus sit-in groups. Its founders were adamant that the organization, which at the time was a coordinating committee made up of campus representatives and a few adult advisors, should do nothing to jeopardize the autonomy of local groups. "In relation to local protest areas, SNCC's role is suggestive rather than directive," they agreed. Nationally, "SNCC may serve as a spokesman, but in a cautious manner in which it is made quite clear that SNCC does not control local groups" (SNCC 1960; see also Jones 1960). Student activists believed that the strength of the movement lay in its spontaneity, spontaneity that its local organization made possible.

In their deliberations as a group, students dispensed with parliamentary procedures and strove for consensus. In part, they wanted to discourage sophisticated northern students from dominating discussion with their ready command of parliamentary maneuver. But SNCC's participatory and consensus-oriented style also reflected a powerful ideological impulse. From the beginning, the group sought to operate as a beloved community that would transcend race as well as hierarchies of all kinds. To operate in radically democratic fashion was to prefigure the radically democratic society SNCC wanted to build on a grand scale, to make the means reflect the ends. The impulse was one familiar to Quaker pacifists and, in fact, pacifists played key roles in SNCC's founding (Polletta 2002).

Without discounting the influence of a broadly Quaker philosophy on SNCC's deliberative style, however, another set of influences proved equally important. For early SNCC mentors Ella Baker and Myles Horton, participatory decision making was a practical organizing tool. Trained in a tradition of radical labor education that was Deweyan in inspiration, Baker and Horton saw participatory decision making on local projects as a means to build leadership among people who had been denied opportunities for regular political participation (Polletta 2002; Payne 1995). As SNCC evolved from a coalition of campus sit-in groups into a cadre of organizers in the deep South in 1962, that rationale for radical democracy became more important. On local projects in the next few years, SNCC workers sought to defer to local residents' agendas and aspirations. In project meetings, the organizer often introduced a problem for discussion and encouraged participants to discuss the issues involved and the options available. Collectivist decision making helped people without formal political experience to assess the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action and to link tactical decisions to longer-term visions. Mississippi project head Bob Moses explained later:

> We were trying to give the people we were living and working with ownership of
> the movement. . . . The meeting—that's your tool for building. So how do people
> take ownership of meetings? And there you get into what has come to be called
> participatory democracy. . . in which the people who are meeting really get more
> and more of a feeling that this is [their] meeting. (interview with Bob Moses 1992)

Decentralized organization allowed organizers to tailor movements to local conditions. Discussions on local projects about what counted as leadership chipped away at local residents' belief that only the properly credentialed could lead. And among SNCC staff, many of whom were political novices themselves, participatory decision making was a way to train a new generation of political activists. In SNCC's early years, then, the tension between principle and pragmatism that is supposedly at the heart of participatory democracy did not exist. That would change, but for reasons that are captured neither by historical accounts of SNCC nor by sociological models of tactical choice.

Letting the People Decide, 1964

By the fall of 1964, SNCC had grown dramatically in size and national stature. The Mississippi Summer Project brought over eight hundred mainly white volunteers south for the summer, and after three civil rights workers disappeared early in the summer, the project was rarely out of the national spotlight. In August, SNCC helped organize a challenge to the seating of the segregationist Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention. While the challenge proved unsuccessful, with the Mississippi challengers rejecting a compromise offer of two seats, both it and the summer project demonstrated SNCC's ability to mobilize national support (Forman 1997; Gitlin 1987).

If SNCC had a new external profile, it was also a very different organization internally. A number of volunteers stayed on in the fall, doubling SNCC's staff (McAdam 1988; Carson 1981). SNCC now had projects across Mississippi as well as in Southwest Georgia and Alabama, a sophisticated fundraising apparatus around the country, and a million dollar budget. For executive secretary James Forman, these changes called for a new organizational structure. Forman believed that SNCC should capitalize on its success by restyling itself a mass organization rather than a roving cadre of organizers (Forman 1997). At minimum, it should implement a centralized structure that would allow it to compete with the other civil rights organizations for political influence. As Forman saw it, those in SNCC who opposed such a move were motivated by a middle-class individualism that refused to sacrifice any measure of personal freedom for the good of the organization. "Freedom high," he and others began to call them.

Forman's account has been the basis for numerous scholarly characterizations of the organizational battle that emerged in SNCC in late 1964 as one pitting practical centralizers versus utopian decentralists, pragmatists versus ideologues, freedom highs versus "hardliners" (inter alia, Carson 1981; Mills 1992; Gitlin 1987; McAdam 1988). But, in fact, the objections to Forman's plan were initially made on practical grounds (SNCC 1964a). Organizers worried that centralizing authority in Atlanta headquarters would restrict their freedom of action in developing local movements. They were already concerned that funds sent to SNCC were benefiting Atlanta rather than Mississippi field projects. Project workers outside Mississippi, for their part, worried that centralization would continue to favor the Mississippi project over other states. Most organizers, middle- and working-class alike, believed that SNCC's strength was in its capacity to nurture indigenous movements. As one put it in a meeting in October, "Are we interested in building a political empire for SNCC, or in building local leadership?" (SNCC 1964b). No one bothered to answer a question that was perceived as rhetorical. For many organizers, centralized, bureaucratic, and parliamentary structure was not only impractical but was also unappealingly associated with northern whites. One field worker described, "white college-educated Northerners [who] have a tendency to take command of an assembly through rapid-fire parliamentary maneuvers which leave local people baffled and offended" (Nicolaus 1964).

To be sure, most staffers recognized that SNCC's formal structure, which still vested power in campus representatives, was obsolete. They complained bitterly about the administrative logjams that prevented desperately needed resources from reaching local projects (Miller 1964). But they were not convinced that a centralized bureaucracy was the answer. In response to Forman's proposal for a conventional structure, with an executive secretary hired by an executive committee and in charge of administrative staff, some SNCC organizers proposed a "loose structure," in which programmatic work groups would meet periodically to solve problems and coordinate common efforts (Hayden 1964). Loose structure proponents cited not the requirements of ideological consistency—of enacting a participatory democracy in the here and now—but Mississippi field organizers' need for organizational flexibility.

However, discussions of the alternate proposals, most intensively at a week-long retreat in Waveland, Mississippi, in November 1964, failed to yield any consensus. Instead, SNCC workers simply reaffirmed their commitment to letting local people set the course of the struggle (SNCC 1964c). They reminded each other that this was what distinguished them from the mainstream civil rights organizations and their erstwhile liberal allies. As a Shaw, Mississippi volunteer wrote to a northern supporter about her project's decision to picket a local merchant, "That is, the people, residents of Shaw, decided. This is important, because staff people don't make this kind of decisions. This is where we differ from M. L. King and his officers. In their work the staff people make the decisions, rather than letting the people in the town where they're working decide what they want to do, when and how." SNCC, by contrast, would "let the people decide" (Gellatly 1965).

Yet, in the following weeks and months, it became clear that letting the people decide was not yielding the radical programs it was supposed to. There were several problems. In addition to activists' exhaustion, in some cases local residents seemed drawn to fairly moderate programs, putting young activists who saw themselves as the radical cutting edge of the movement in a difficult position. "Too damn many nursery schools, and milk programs," one organizer phrased a not infrequent complaint. "Question of whether we are a social service agency or a band of revolutionaries. . . . It was decided we were the latter" (Schwartzbaum 1964). How that decision squared with a commitment to letting the people decide was unclear. As one organizer agonized, "How do we deal with poor people whose aspirations are justifiably middle class?" (Kelley 1964). But it was also unclear just what a band of revolutionaries should be doing. By the fall of 1964, the group faced thorny programmatic questions. Should they continue to appeal to a Democratic Party that had betrayed them in rejecting the Mississippi Challenge? Should they shift from political organizing to economic organizing? Should they try to galvanize local movements or build a mass organization? Questions like these threatened to bring up differences of long-term political vision among SNCC workers. Such differences had been obscured as long as SNCC was pursuing moderate programs with radical potential such as voter registration. Now, with no obvious program capable of connecting local claims with national ones and winnable issues with radical possibilities, SNCC workers became increasingly aggressive in their efforts to push local people to articulate their "real" interests and increasingly critical of each other for failing to draw out in black communities the radical interests they knew were there (Turvitz 1965a).

The endless injunctions to let the people decide thus reflected the group's programmatic uncertainty as much as they contributed to it. But the effects were destructive. In staff meetings, organizers began to attack each other for their failure to let the people decide. Exercises of initiative were increasingly seen as power mongering and arguments for a particular line of action labeled manipulative. In field reports during this period, organizers complained about provisional decisions attacked for being imposed on staff and strategy sessions halted to discuss "why people don't speak." "Who decided that?" became a familiar, dreaded rebuttal. A staffer described a Mississippi meeting:

> I asked someone to deal with the two personnel problems. . . . We sat there and nobody talked, and Stokely said he was the only one there who was willing to make decisions. He said people were afraid someone would ask them who gave them the right to make a decision. (Baker 1964)

For some staffers, centralizing decision making became appealing as a way to avoid seemingly endless, enervating discussions like these. But the ensuing debates over just how to restructure the organization also reflected the group's programmatic confusion. Some staffers recognized as much. "People here are incapable of dealing with the real problem, which is lack of programs," one staffer complained in a meeting in which people were battling over how to restructure the organization (SNCC 1965c). But drawing attention to the group's avoidance of the topic did not seem to remedy it. Minutes of meetings during this period show that when issues of agenda were introduced, the discussion often shifted, sometimes abruptly, to organizational structure. Why? "Sometimes it's more comfortable to talk about structure, because it's so concrete," staffer Judy Richardson explains now. "And goals were so much more difficult to talk about" (interview with Judy Richardson 1992). In other words, SNCC workers battled over how decisions were made and resources allocated because the real problem— generating the sense of radical purpose that would reenergize organizers and appeal to residents—was difficult to get a handle on. For all contenders, then, the preoccupation with structure, whether tight or loose, radically democratic or hierarchical, both substituted for *and* thwarted a discussion of goals. "If you're locked in this structural struggle," says staffer and hardliner Dorothy Zellner now, "then you're not thinking what are we going to do next" (interview with Dorothy Zellner 1992).

"Tight structure" increasingly seemed some solution. Forman's proposal for centralization had had few supporters in the fall of 1964. Southern black organizers, especially, had been wary of an arrangement that would shift power from the field to Atlanta headquarters. By winter, however, many organizers were beginning to rally around proposals for more centralized structure as a way to get past the group's programmatic paralysis. "Southern staff workers favor strong leadership and structure," a staffer reported in February 1965 (SNCC 1965a). Hardliners' "guarantee" that they could move SNCC beyond its current crisis (Sellers 1990) was more hope than claim. Just as the endless injunctions to "let the people decide" were as much a product of SNCC's programmatic vacuum as they were responsible for it, so the centralized structure hardliners proposed was appealing more for its association with programmatic certainty than for any evidence of how it would actually provide such direction. Such a structure probably could keep better track of personnel and resources and shorten meetings. But its capacity to generate the programmatic initiatives that were desperately needed was by no means clear.

Why, then, was tight structure appealing? In part, it was simply the fact that it was an alternative to what SNCC had now and what so clearly seemed not to be working. Tight structure came to *stand for* programmatic direction. The relationship between the two was not specified. But through repetition, it became conventional, a matter of common sense. There was another reason for the increasing appeal of centralized and hierarchical structure: it had come to be seen as a bulwark against the dominance of whites in the organization. That perception represented a real shift. As I noted earlier, conventional organizational forms had long been associated with northern white activism. As late as 1965, someone described southern black "old guerrillas" in SNCC who "distrusted any and all kinds of organization, which they associate with white, bourgeois northern culture" (SNCC 1965a). Consensus decision making, for its part, was seen as a way to prevent northern whites' domination through their command of parliamentary maneuver. In other words, it was seen as black and southern rather than northern and white. However, that view was losing currency, a shift evident in complaints that began to circulate in late 1964 about the freedom highs.

Freedom Highs and Hardliners, 1964-1965

The term freedom high denoted a preference for decentralized structure and consensus, but also a generalized animosity to organization and a penchant for personal freedom above organizational responsibility. Freedom highs were "against all forms of organization and regimentation," staffer Cleve Sellers wrote later.

> If a confrontation developed in Jackson, Mississippi, and a group of freedom high floaters was working in Southwest Georgia, they would pile into cars and head for Jackson. They might return to Georgia when the Jackson confrontation was over— and they might not. . . . They loved to bring meetings to a screeching halt with open-ended, theoretical questions. In the midst of a crucial strategy session on the problems of community leaders in rural areas, one of them might get the floor and begin to hold forth on the true meaning of the word "leader." (Sellers 1990: 131)

More concerned with their own liberation than with political power for black southerners, they were indulging their dislike for authority at the expense of any kind of concerted action, said critics. Their reverence for the untutored wisdom of the poor, a kind of "local-people-itis," prohibited anyone from making any suggestions. And their preoccupation with democratic decision making was stymieing SNCC's ability to formulate new programs (Forman 1997).

Who were the freedom highs? Bourgeois sentimentalists, said Washington SNCC staffer Mike Thelwell in a widely circulated satire in the fall of 1964. "[T]he children of the middle-class with the middle-class intellectual penchant for nuance, metaphor and symbol, impelled one suspects by middle-class neurosis and guilt" (Thelwell 1964). James Forman too later described their anti-authoritarianism as middle class—as well as an import from the white new left. New York SNCC staffer Elizabeth (Sutherland) Martinez says now,

> I remember a long discussion, there must have three hundred people there, and after a whole day, no agreement on the program could be reached. And I remember some people attributing it to the fact that with the influx of white people had come an influx of ideas about participatory democracy that required consensus before you could agree on anything. How could you have three hundred people reaching consensus on a program in all its details? And [people felt] that it was a northern white import, from SDS. (interview with Elizabeth Martinez 1995)

Was there any basis to the characterizations? Some who were labeled freedom high were more interested in the philosophical underpinnings of their work than other SNCC workers, more willing to make bold statements in meetings about the virtues of a leaderless movement, and more sensitive to breaches of a radically democratic ethos. Some proponents of decentralized structure, especially northern white ones, were in close contact with white new leftists who, at the time, were finding in SNCC's collectivist decision making a wholesale challenge to conventional notions of politics and organization. But loose structure proponents were now being held responsible for a variety of problems: the exhaustion and burnout that was leading some of the most effective organizers to abandon their projects, the confusion about just what "letting the people decide" should mean and, most important, the fact that no one knew what to do next.

The characterization of freedom highs as white was also questionable. "The 'freedom highs' are essentially white intellectuals, hung up in various ways," a staffer wrote in the spring of 1965. "Maybe these whites are trying to break free of the need to be like the strong people (which they can't ever be like 'cause they're not black) and their role as supplements to the work of the 'strong people'"(Cobb 1965). In fact, many of the proponents of decentralized loose structure were black, and some of the hardliners were white. When SNCC's executive committee went through a personnel list to root out unproductive workers in April, most of

those identified as "floaters"—people also described as freedom highs—were black (SNCC 1965c). Today, black SNCC staffers see the freedom high/hardliner debate as having class and regional dimensions, pitting Atlanta staff against Mississippi field organizers, and northern student sophisticates (black and white) against less educated Mississippians (interviews with Julian Bond 1992; Judy Richardson 1992; Betty Garman Robinson 1996). In SNCC workers' accounts at the time, however, those conflicts were gradually displaced by a black-white cleavage—but one that was mapped onto positions on organizational structure.

There was good reason for the sharpening racial tensions. Black staffers skeptical of the summer project to begin with had seen their fears materialize. White volunteers' inexperience and unfamiliarity with the intricacies of southern race relations created awkward and occasionally dangerous situations. Whites sometimes offended black southerners by flouting norms of dress and demeanor and they intimidated with their command of formal political skills (COFO 1964a). Black workers had also worried that their own roles in the movement would be overshadowed, and with a press corps focused almost exclusively on the white volunteers, this concern too seemed sadly realistic (interviews with Julian Bond 1992 and Betty Garman Robinson 1996). After the summer, far more volunteers stayed on than expected, and eighty-five of them were added to the staff in a decision that many longtime staffers perceived as simply handed down. No matter the benefits of more manpower, staffers lamented the erosion of what had been a tight-knit group of friends. "They didn't know who the hell you were; you didn't know who they were," said one staffer later (Harris interview in Stoper 1989). "It used to be a band of brothers, a circle of trust, but that's not true anymore," another SNCCer complained in a meeting (COFO 1964c).

White newcomers, for their part, came south awed by SNCC organizers and were taken aback by the barely concealed animosity they encountered. They were bombarded with rules — about not leaving the project, not using cars for their personal needs, not socializing with local young people—but exposed to SNCC workers ignoring the rules. They wanted guidance from project directors whose authority had been impressed on them but found them taciturn. In response, some white newcomers asserted the dictates of the model community against the antagonism they were encountering. Records show that an enormous amount of time was spent in project meetings discussing the roles, responsibilities, and prerogatives of project directors, with newcomers calling simultaneously for more guidance and more democracy. "Problem is that people can't trust the project director," a worker complained in Gulfport. "Who decides who goes where and what to do if people don't work out?" Another questioned the "whole concept of a project director as a feudal lord." And a third said plaintively, "There are people who are in positions of power and they are interested in retaining this power and then there are the have-nots" (COFO 1964a).

Comments like these, accusatory and often framed in an idiom of democracy and power, were understandably annoying to native southerners who had long ago proved their commitment to the struggle. One project's long and contentious battle with its project director prompted local black activist Annie Devine to intervene. "Unless you forget yourself and relate to the people, you'll go away without doing anything," she warned. A white project worker protested, "All here agree that our commitment is to the people . . . . Discussions of this sort are perfectly in order; they help us function better and work better for the people of Mississippi." Another put in: How can I hope to get rid of authoritarianism in Miss. if I leave it in the Canton staff? . . . It's like the bossman telling his sharecropper to get off the land just because the sharecropper thinks differently from the owner. (COFO 1964b). A northern white volunteer comparing her situation to that of a sharecropper sounds downright embarrassing. On the other hand, these statements were made after the black project director had announced that white volunteers would have to leave Mississippi permanently to go home and fundraise (COFO 1964b).

"If a white man were project director I wouldn't be in the movement," a black project worker declared in an interracial discussion in late 1964. "We have to organize something for ourselves" (COFO 1964b). By late 1964, many black activists were very interested in issues of

racial identity and consciousness and some wondered whether these issues could be talked about in integrated gatherings. "Although it had always been an issue in the organization," black staffer Cleve Sellers wrote later, "the role of whites had never really been openly discussed"—and was not, he says, until 1966 (Sellers 1990: 157). Other former staffers say that there *was* open discussion about the role of whites in the movement after the summer. But it tended to be about the liabilities of white organizers in black communities, not people's ambivalence about an essentially black movement becoming interracial. Bob Moses observes now, "There's a real need for black people to close the door and meet in their own group, and people were threatened by this. It was a need in the SNCC meetings. The SNCC meetings dragged on interminably partly because they could never do this. So people could never say what they felt" (Bob Moses n.d., interview with Clayborne Carson). In one project's meeting, after a long debate about the nature of legitimate authority—just the kind of discussion that hardliners criticized—an older minister who was participating remarked, "The thing that bothers me is that there really is a basic black-white problem here which you don't say but which is at the bottom of a lot of what you're saying. Why don't you deal with your black-white problem?" (COFO 1964a).

The "black-white problem" was tough for an interracial group to confront, let alone resolve. And indeed field reports during this period make occasional but never more than passing reference to racial tensions on staff. With decision making the central organizational concern and racial antagonisms difficult to talk about, debates over organizational structure and decision making both engaged and stood in for those thornier antagonisms. Earlier tensions between northerners and southerners, newcomers and veterans, and field staff and office staff had been supplanted by a new one, between proponents of tight and loose structure and, less overtly, between blacks and whites. By the spring, a form of organization that black southerners had pioneered was becoming unappealing by its association with whites. "Whites tended to be for loose structure and southern Negroes were the ones most resentful of whites," staffer Julian Bond put it a few years later (quoted in Stoper 1989: 276).

The new formulation of the problem absorbed other organizational problems. "Floaters," for many people, had referred to people whose exhaustion and burnout had led them to abandon their assigned projects. But floating, along with other disciplinary infractions such as people misusing cars and drinking, were now subsumed under epithets of "anarchist" (King 1965c) and "obstructionist" (SNCC 1965f) and attached to the loose-structure position. "Look at the people at Waveland who supported loose structure," one staffer paraphrased the now standard line. "Look what they've been doing since Waveland; don't you think it's strange that the very people who don't want structure are off doing whatever they like without anyone in a position to ask them for an account of their actions?" (King 1987: 484). By February, whites had come to be seen as insisting on participatory democratic practices to retain control of the organization. A white staffer reported that the drive for "looser structure" was being told in terms of "conspiracy theories about white intellectuals" (King 1965a).

Those promoting centralized and more hierarchical structure were not an organizational faction bent on gaining acceptance for a particular agenda or ridding the organization of whites. The appeal of top-down structure lay rather in its relationship to inchoate preferences and problems. A self-consciously strategic orientation and preference for centralized authority stood in for programmatic certainty and an organization not dominated by whites. But such an orientation did not offer any methods for achieving programmatic coherence or reducing whites' role. Indeed, since a decentralized structure would have vested personnel decisions in project directors, it would have enabled them to curb the role of whites on their projects if they proved a block to effective organizing. Moreover, SNCC's most successful projects in the past had been launched by individual organizers. Decentralized and informal structure here, as in other movements, had facilitated individual initiative and tactical innovation. The source of top-down structure's appeal was not its capacity to yield more efficient outcomes or its consistency with an existing ideology but its symbolic resonance.

Organizational Reform, Spring 1965

By early 1965, hardliners had organized to gain control. In the February staff meeting held to decide on a new organizational structure, hardliners were accused of intimidating local people and silencing opposition. But by the meeting's close they had gained the upper hand, winning a reformed executive committee and plans for firmer administrative structure (King 1965b). Of the nineteen members of the new executive committee, eleven were Mississippi fieldworkers and most were native Mississippians (King 1965b). Since proponents of decentralized organization had argued for giving field organizers more power, this might have been construed as a victory for them. But by the February meeting, Mississippi organizers were firmly on the side of tight structure. Shortly after the staff meeting, a new personnel committee conducted a systematic review of every SNCC staffer in order to root out those who were insufficiently productive (SNCC 1965c). Organizational hierarchy, not its absence, was now associated with political militancy. SNCC's efforts at "tightening up" were being guided by an image of "how a tough militant organization is supposed to work," San Francisco office head Mike Miller complained (Miller 1965). But the tide had turned. "We're not individuals anymore—just 'screwed up' or 'freedom high,'" a white proponent of loose structure wrote to Jim Forman (SNCC 1965b).

What was the relationship between SNCC workers' bid for a more centralized structure and its new Black Power agenda? As I noted earlier, analysts have argued that when SNCC workers abandoned efforts at moral suasion in favor of gaining independent black political power, they also adopted the kind of top-down organization that could efficiently mobilize people for power. But SNCC's adoption of a more centralized and hierarchical organizational structure *preceded* rather than followed its espousal of Black Power. During the period of organizational reform that I have just described, staffers voiced in informal conversations some of the components of Black Power: skepticism of liberal alliances, an attraction to political organizing outside the Democratic Party, frustration with nonviolence, and a growing belief that the movement should be all-black. But these ideas were still tentative and difficult to express in an interracial group. In a sense, the progressive association of participatory democracy with whites made it easier for SNCC workers to take the first steps to becoming an all-black organization.

Consider again for a moment a memo that circulated in the spring of 1965. "Who goes off to do work? Who goes off to do personal freedom? Who goes off to do irresponsibility?" the memo asked, answering, "The 'strong people' who tend to fit the 'rugged ragged' black SNICK worker image are the ones who go off to do work. . . . The 'freedom highs' are essentially white intellectuals, hung up in various ways. Maybe these whites are trying to break free of the need to be like the strong people (which they can't ever be like cause they're not black) and their role as supplements to the work of the 'strong people.' It sort of ties into the white-black question (which has simply taken another shape) and the need to have a black run and controlled organization" (Cobb 1965). The memo, written by a black staffer who himself had been associated earlier with the freedom highs, now connected the loose structure position with discipline problems and with the dominance of whites—in order to ask explicitly whether whites should be excluded from SNCC.

References to whites' self-indulgent allergy to organizational structure helped to crystallize leanings toward racial separatism. This explains self-described hardliner Cleve Sellers's later observation that the hardliners "were primarily black. We were moving in a Black Nationalist direction" (1990: 132). There was actually no reason that top-down organizational structure would further a nationalist agenda. Rather, ideological positions and racial allegiances had been mapped onto organizational preferences. While a number of whites labeled freedom high drifted away from the group after the February 1965 meeting, most black staffers associated with that label remained. By November, SNCC's staff meeting included only one of the whites who had advocated loose structure. The few whites remaining were hardliners (Polletta 2002).

If the hardliners' victory began to solve the racial problem, however, it did not solve the programmatic questions the debate had also reflected. Clear lines of command and strict cost

benefit analysis of strategic options could not by themselves supply the programmatic direction that was so desperately needed. One staffer reported that "people really have no ideas for programs. . . . This is a reason that a lot of SNCC people have gone off to the frontiers of Alabama" (Turvitz 1965b). SNCC's Alabama head reported in April that dozens of Mississippi staffers were leaving their projects to come to Alabama, this in spite of efforts to dissuade them. "People came because of frustration on their projects" (SNCC 1965c). By November, SNCC's Mississippi staff had dropped to one third of what it had been the previous fall.

Could SNCC have weathered the programmatic crisis better by sticking with its original participatory democratic structure? Given the polarization around organizational structure, some change was probably necessary. On the other hand, research suggests that decentralized organizational forms are better equipped to generate new programmatic and tactical ideas (Staggenborg 1989)—precisely what was needed at that point. The symbolic associations that were established during the debates over organizational structure also had more enduring effects. The recoding of participatory democracy—as principled but impractical, oriented to transforming selves rather than gaining power, and implicitly as white rather than black— went on to shape SNCC's tactical choices after the debates were over. Once a nondirective organizing style was associated with white freedom highs' penchant for endless, unproductive talk, it made sense to abandon that style. Their mistake, staffers agreed in 1966, was that they had "assumed that when we went into a community, we did not assume leadership." They referred to this as their misguided "Camus period" (SNCC 1966a; see also SNCC 1966b). They were determined not to make the same mistake again.

SNCC workers now were willing to forego time-consuming discussions about the proper relationship between organizer and community. Instead, a shared racial identity would make the relationship one exclusively of common interests. Stokely Carmichael, who had been clearly aligned with neither side in the structure debate, did reject what was seen now as a romantic refusal to exercise leadership. When he launched the organizing project in Lowndes County, Alabama, that would be the incubus for Black Power, he "got out of that bag of manipulation," he said shortly after. "I went in there with certain ideas. One idea was to organize people to get power. And if that is manipulation, so be it" (Carmichael 1966: 127).

In fact, the Lowndes County project proved to be a remarkable exercise in community-wide organizing, and its local leaders proved fully capable of running their own show. However, in public statements in late 1965 and into 1966, SNCC workers increasingly began to talk about their role as one of "awakening" (SNCC 1966c) or "educat[ing]" (SNCC 1967a) the "black community" to its own interests. Speaking in the "tone" of the community was a way to radicalize it, to "break open the chains in the minds of people in black communities," some SNCCers argued (SNCC 1966c). James Forman, who had once been dismissive of what he called "local-people-itis," in which organizers exercised no influence whatsoever, nevertheless found this new talk discomfiting. "The whole generalizing about 'the black community feels this' and 'the black community feels that' has to stop," he insisted. "It is presumptuous of us to feel that we know what all the black community is saying and doing" (SNCC 1967b). The danger of claiming radical spokesmanship for the black community—and of abandoning efforts to wrestle with the relations between organizers, leaders, and communities—was that it represented black people as a passive mass awaiting direction by leaders. Whether leaders were thought to lead on the basis of their mainstream political credentials or their racial authenticity, the model remained one in which leaders' accountability was a function of their individual characteristics rather than a result of institutionalized mechanisms for citizen input, scrutiny, and challenge. SNCC workers had begun to envision and experiment with just such mechanisms in their Mississippi projects. That experimentation was curtailed once it was viewed as impractical and apolitical. Under the mantle of radicalism, SNCC workers began to revert to a more traditional notion of leadership (see also Reed 1986 and Robnett 1997).

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN A CHANGED REPERTIORE

What happened to SNCC's earlier conception of participatory democracy—as practical and political, a means of building leadership and the mechanisms that would keep leaders accountable to their followers? By the late 1960s, participatory democracy was flourishing among white progressive activists in the new left, antiwar, back-to-the-land, cooperative, and women's movements (Rothschild and Whitt 1986; Stoecker 1994; Mansbridge 1983; Case and Taylor 1979). Activists celebrated consensus-oriented and decentralized decision making not for its capacity to train leaders but for its congruence with a radically egalitarian and personalistic worldview. They celebrated it as a radical alternative to mainstream politics rather than as a means by which those excluded from mainstream politics might gain access. Did the earlier version of participatory democracy drop out of activists' repertoires altogether?

In some ways, SNCC's brand of community organizing aimed at building political power continued strongest in the community organizing led by followers of organizer Saul Alinsky (Polletta 2002; Warren 2001). Today, Alinsky-styled organizing, much of it based in congregations, counts upward of three million participants, the vast majority of them low-income people of color. Alinsky-styled organizers put a premium on just the kind of leadership building that SNCC workers emphasized. Like SNCC, they see residents rather than organizers as leaders, and they often rely on consensus-based decision making to keep members committed to the group. However, critics have complained about Alinsky organizing's single minded-focus on defining immediate goals at the expense of discussing of how such goals fit into longer-term political visions. The result is not only difficulty in forging longer-term agendas but an impoverished form of political education. Moreover, with a leader defined in Alinsky's terms as someone with followers, there is little of the critical questioning of what should count as leadership that was so important a part of SNCC's conception of democratic organization. Alinsky organizers are proud of their success in promoting low-income women as leaders. However, a persistent tendency to view leadership training in terms of pushing people and challenging them, and a persistent view of the ideal organizer as blunt and confrontational has ignored the sometimes different ways in which women have led successfully (Polletta 2002; see also Katherine Sciacchitano's 1998 discussion of a similar gap in labor organizing).

So, even as community organizers today champion their commitment to radical democracy, their practice of it may lack some of the features that made SNCC's version so innovative. Does that mean that those features have been lost from contemporary activists' repertoires altogether? Answering that question is impossible given the little we know about the ways in which movement organizations since the 1960s have enacted commitments to internal democracy, especially low-income organizations and those made up mainly of people of color. Paul Lichterman's (1996) study of organizational forms among antitoxics activists in the 1980s suggests that participatory democracy is alive and well in middle-class suburban and working-class black movement organizations, though in forms that are very unlike the participatory democracy practiced by an upper middle-class white group of Green activists. This only calls for more research on the variety of forms that commitments to equality and democracy take in movement organizations. Such forms may reflect distinctive political traditions, but they may also reflect modes of religious engagement or professional styles that are familiar to organizations' members (Polletta 2002; Bordt 1997).

I want to conclude by highlighting the implications of this case for our understanding of activists' choice of organizational forms and their consequences for movement trajectories. The punchline of this article in this respect is that separately or together, activists' commitments to instrumental effectiveness and ideological consistency do not adequately account for why they choose the organizational forms—and, more broadly, the strategies and tactics—they do. I have argued that some forms may be attractive mainly on account of the social groups with which they are symbolically associated. Such associations can be negative or positive and they can shift over time. In SNCC, over the course of five years, decentralized and participatory

organizational forms first became appealing because of their perceived contrast to the organizational forms preferred by mainstream political organizations and civil rights groups, and then became unappealing by their association with northern whites.

The perceived effectiveness of particular organizational forms reflected their social symbolic associations. One implication is that groups may miss some of the strengths of particular forms on account of their associations. Another implication, more specific to participatory democratic groups today, is that such groups may find it difficult to recruit members given a perception of participatory democracy as middle-class and white. Coalition work is often held out as a promising supplement, if not alternative, to trying to create a diverse membership in any one organization. But this case suggests that forging coalitions may be difficult, not only on account of explicit ideological differences and competing resource needs (Staggenborg 1986), but on account of the symbolic valences of the working styles of the member groups. Coming up with a joint organizational structure may be especially difficult.

If activists' ratings of particular organizational and tactical options come in part from the groups with which those options are symbolically associated, which groups will they be? We can speculate that activists may see the practices of the group that was formed before they were—perhaps with whom they are often compared and with whom they compete for membership—as a negative model. Thus, strategies, tactics, and styles associated with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were unappealing to SNCC members; those associated with old left groups were unappealing for SDS; those associated with SDS were unappealing for most women's liberation collectives; those associated with Californian antinuclear protest were unappealing for some contemporary anticorporate globalization activists. This may be a similar dynamic to the "product differentiation" that Zald and McCarthy (1980) described with respect to movement goals and tactics. On the other hand, where the two groups are unlikely to compete for membership or support, one may be more likely to see the other as a positive model and to judge favorably the strategies, tactics, and ideas associated with them. Thus, SNCC was a model for SDS and third-world revolutionary organizations were a model for SNCC. Of course, this is just the beginning of an answer to a question that is complex. It invites us to probe much more deeply the Durkheimian question of how social relations become the basis for conceptual categories—a question, of course, that goes well beyond the study of social movements.

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