

On Sunday night Stokeley Carmichael addressed the SSOC (Southern Students Organizing Committee) Conference at Gammon. He talked about how SNCC organizers organize, and about some of the 'philosophy' underlying what SNCC people do.

I recorded most of Stokeley's talk and many of the questions and answers which came up in the discussion that followed. Two points stood out in what Stokeley said: first, that SNCC organizers work from within -- organizing the people; and secondly, that people all over this country have the right to participate in making the decisions which affect their lives. (Most of the discussion which followed the talk centered around the second point.)

Stokeley Carmichael:

I want to talk about four things. First, about history and about why I think SNCC people are "The New Abolitionists." Secondly, about the structure of our society. Thirdly, about the changes that are necessary if the people who are in motion all around the country are to get what they're looking for. And finally, about red-baiting.

The first important group to oppose slavery in this country was the Transcendentalists. They were followed by the Abolitionists. Neither of these groups faced Slavery as an institution, head-on. Neither saw a need to organize. Both offered solutions from outside the South. There was no motion of the slaves within the south.

The next opposition to slavery came from John Brown. He attacked slavery as an institution. But he didn't work from inside. He said, for example, that he would be unwilling to give guns (if he had been successful in his attempt to capture Harper's Ferry) to the slaves.

Then in the early 1900's you had DuBois and the NAACP developing. The NAA also worked from the outside, helping people from outside. In the 1920's you got the Urban League, and they did the same thing.

Now I say SNCC is different, because we work from the inside. We work with the people, helping them to find ways of dealing with their own problems, and proposing solutions to them.

(Now it's interesting that when Jimmy Lee Jackson died, President Johnson didn't do anything. But when Rev. Reeb, a white minister from the North, died, President Johnson sent flowers to his wife. And people at Spellman College decided that they had to be the first Negro college in the South to send money to Mrs. Reeb. So they took up a collection and sent money to Mrs. Reeb. And that march from Selma to Montgomery started out as a protest march against what happened to Jimmie Lee Jackson; and then it became a march in protest against what happened to Rev. Reeb. Now, I'm not saying we shouldn't pay tribute to Rev. Reeb. What I am saying is that if we're going to pay tribute to one, we should also pay tribute to the other. And I think we have to analyze why that all happened -- why Johnson sent flowers to Mrs. Reeb, and not to Mrs. Jackson.

Now, about the structure of our society. The way you get in in our society is through status. And one of the ways you get status is by haing an education. Buy only an elite group can get an education. The average cost for tuition in a private school is \$710 a year. That's only for tuition; that doesn't cover books, and clothes, and transportation. The average family income is between \$4800 - \$5200 a year; and Negro family's make less than that. So you don't have to ask why Negro students don't have a y motivation to go to private schools. And state schools average \$1,000 a year for tuition. Scholarships are available, but only for the gifted. ut not everybody is gifted, and the average student doesn't stand a chance. So the avenue to getting in in this society is closed to him.

[Stokeley then talked about jobs, and the fact that our society is becoming more and more technical. As a result the unskilled -- black or white -- are hing put out of work. He moved from there to the question of the changes needed in the structure of our society if people are to get what they want. Hw quoted Robert Parris as saying that the best way to keep a man in slavery is to give him the vote and call him free. Stokeley then said that the Negro in this country is a symbol of the large segment of people -- black and white -- all over this country who have no say in the decisions which affect their lives.

Now the people who run the Poverty Program of the Federal Government are all rich people. Because of the structure of our society, poor people are told that they can't run the poverty program because they're not qualified -- because they can't analyze and comprehend the complex situation and therefore would be unalbe to solve the problems. And they believe that. So "experts" -- and that usaully means people with PhDs run the program. But I contend that the poor people are intelligent enough to run that program -- that they can sit down and propose solutions to their own problems. The same thing is true of the voting bill. All of the people who have been trying for so long to vote know what the problems are. They should write that voting bill and take it to President Johnson. And if this country is sincere about that voting bill, there should be no debate about it in Congress.

Nonone in this room had any voice in deciding whether or not we should send people to Viet nam. That's the way things are done in this country -- from the Top down. They should be done from the Bottom up.

THE ONLY RADICAL THING THAT'S HAPPENING IN THIS COUNTRY RIGHT NOW IS THAT PEOPLE ARE BEGINNING TO DEAL WITH THE QUESTION OF HOW THINGS GET DONE IN THIS COUNTRY -- AND HOW PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN DECIDING HOW THOSE THINGS GET DONE. IF PEOPLE COULD PARTICIPATE FULLY IN MAKING THOSE DECISIONS (AND THEY CAN'T NOW) THEN THAT WOULD BE A RADICAL CHANGE IN THIS COUNTRY. It's not radical if SNCC people get political offices, or if M.L. King becomes President, if decisions are still made from the Top down. If decisions get made from the Bottom up, that's radical.

The role of people in the Movement comes from the fact that they have skills and information which they pass on and make available to the local people.

Now, about red-baiting. Red-baiting doesn't effectively stop the movement in Mississippi because our strength lies with the people, and they don't even know what a "Communist" is. So if X, Y, and Z get red-baited, they just keep rights on working. If people want to effectively stop the Movement, they'd have to try red-baiting people like Mrs. Hamer. And I'd like to see them try that. (Laughter.)

[Stokeley then talked about what the role of the President in this country should be.] Johnson's job is to do what the people want him to do. There is no forum for making him know what the people want him to do now. That needs to be developed. Now Johnson acts and then comes to us to justify what he's done -- like putting us in the war in Vietnam.

Now only a few people in this country have information about Vietnam. So only a few people can decide what to do there. But yet they tried to send me to Vietnam. Don't I have a right to decide that? They wanted to send me into a situation I knew nothing about. Because THEY HAVE THE INFORMATION AND THEY WON'T GIVE IT TO ME. People have to have information if they're going to make decisions about their own lives.

After Stokeley finished his talk people asked questions, mostly about his idea of having people participate in making decisions which affect their lives. Some of these questions are recorded below.

Question: If the Soviet Union sent a missile to New York tomorrow, would we have to have a referendum so that the people could decide whether they wanted to retaliate or not?

Stokeley: Yes. Maybe I don't want to retaliate. There are pacifists and other people who might not want to retaliate.

Question: It seems that you're reacting against a misuse of power, but you're going to far. You seem to be against any use of power at all -- against even any kind of representative government.

Stokeley: Maybe so. Because I learned in school that representative government is the best. But I found out since that it doesn't work very well. I think majority rule stinks. The trouble with our educational system is that it gives us all of these values -- it tells us what is good. And we never think about it, never challenge it. That's why only the "experts," only the PhD's are qualified.

Charlie Cobb suggested at this point that maybe the Russian people needed to have a referendum too, on whether or not they wanted to send that missile to New York. Maybe if this kind of thing happened, people would find out that people everywhere else are just people. Geographical barriers would be broken down from Florida to Alaska to Siberia to Russia.

Question: (to Stokeley)

What alternative do you propose to majority rule?

Stokeley: I'm not proposing any alternatives. I'm only saying that people have a right to decide whether they want majority rule or not. Maybe they'll decide to keep it; I don't know.

Discussion went on for about an hour more, with people raising objections that Stokeley's ideas were "unrealistic," they they "wouldn't work," that "you can't run a country if 180 million people help make the decisions," that "you have to have leaders." (Stokeley questioned whether that was true -- that you have to have leaders.)

At one point someone suggested that if you didn't have representative government, and leaders, the "whole efficient machinery of government would break down." Stokeley smiled and said "Well...."

Some people accused Stokeley of being an anarchist -- of wanting a society with no order, or structure at all. Stokeley explained that he wasn't advocating anything -- except the right of people to make decisions about things that are important to them, that affect their lives. He said that maybe you could run the country by consensus, instead of by majority rule. Charlie Cobb suggested that perhaps people could rotate through Congress -- making decisions there about the very specific things they cared about. He said that most people don't want the responsibility for running the whole country; they just want some say in very specific concerns -- like whether a dam will be built in Colorado, or California, or Nevada -- and who will get how much water.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the whole talk and the discussion which followed was the kind of confrontation that occurred between Stokeley and some of the students. Some people got Stokeley's point rather quickly and left the room; others raised objections to what he was saying. Most of these objections came, I think, because people were trying to deal with what Stokeley was saying within the context of their usual way of thinking about things. That is, they resisted considering Stokeley's ideas seriously because they knew that if Stokeley's ideas operate, then things change; then, the order of society is threatened, "the whole efficient machinery of government breaks down," as one person put it. So long as the students judged Stokeley's ideas on the grounds of how 'logical' or 'practical' they were, they couldn't fully consider them. I don't know what this says, exactly; maybe it means a fear of change and disorder in society -- even if that disorder is necessary. Someone should analyze that, I don't know how many students agreed with Stokeley. That's not too important. The thing is, they tried to deal with the questions he raised about how our society operates; and what role people have, and should have in decision-making.

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