# The Organizer’s Organizer: Bob Moses and the Fight for Voting Rights

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*Robert Parris Moses: A Life in Civil Rights and Leadership at the Grassroots*  
Laura Visser-Maessen, University of North Carolina Press, 2016, 456 pp.

Since June 2013, when the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in *Shelby County v. Holder*, [868 polling places have been closed](https://www.thenation.com/article/there-are-868-fewer-places-to-vote-in-2016-because-the-supreme-court-gutted-the-voting-rights-act/" \t "_blank) in Southern states. In Mississippi, which was at the center of the civil rights campaign that ultimately led to the act’s passage, some one-third of counties have closed polling places.

“We lurch,” says Bob Moses, a key civil rights organizer who helped cement the Voting Rights Act as one of the movement’s landmark victories and whose life is now the subject of an important biography by Laura Visser-Maessen, professor of American literature and culture at Radboud University in the Netherlands. Moses saw that in states like Mississippi, black voting rights were a radical proposition in multiple senses. Blacks constituted a majority of the Mississippi Delta population and were a significant demographic statewide. If they registered en masse, they would have the power to elect many city and county governments, school boards, mayors, and a substantial number of members of the state legislature. And, as in the rest of the Deep South, the black vote threatened the power of the racist Southern Democrats in Congress who had for decades blocked any legislation promoting equal rights. For Moses and his associates in Mississippi, broadening the franchise demanded an end to literacy tests, which excluded many black (as well as poor white) citizens. “The country,” he later said, “couldn’t deny a whole people access to education and literacy and then turn around and deny them access to politics because they were illiterate.”

By 2002, the Southern Democrats were largely the stuff of history books and Mississippi had nearly 900 black elected officials—one of the highest numbers in the country, up from just six in 1964. But with the Supreme Court’s *Shelby* decision in 2013 and the passage of a voter ID law in 2014, black political participation in Mississippi, as in many other states, is once again under threat.

“We will be fighting forever rear-end battles against different state and local governments that for one reason or other want to control who votes, and when and how,” Moses [told](http://wlrn.org/post/we-lurch-activist-bob-moses-current-fight-voting-rights" \t "_blank) a Florida radio station in 2014. “What we really need is an affirmative right to vote and a national presence through the government that assures proactively everyone’s right to vote.”

In Visser-Maessen’s carefully researched, well written, and nuanced account of Moses’s life, readers are the beneficiaries of a Toquevillian visit to U.S. shores that sheds new light on a man and a movement whose lessons could not be more valuable today. Moses was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)’s first full-time organizer in Mississippi—the belly of the beast of Deep South racism—and went on to become one of the most respected organizers of the civil rights era. His ecumenical approach led to the creation of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coalition of SNCC, Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and the state conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—the major civil rights organizations of the period. COFO sponsored the Mississippi Summer Project (better known as Freedom Summer) and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; I’ll say more about them shortly.

Visser-Maessen accepts Albert Camus’ notion that a person is what he does. She notes, “[Moses’] intelligence, determination, audacity, resources, sense of direction, and self-effacing style evolved into what became known as the Bob Moses Mystique.” Not only was Moses developing organizers among local black Mississippians (1961–63), but he also had to deal with the internal politics of SNCC as well as draw together northern white student radicals, liberal Democrats, and labor allies with the four major national civil rights organizations that were in COFO—and were themselves often in tension.

Visser-Maessen explores the complexity of this balancing act, and carefully wrestles with the distinction between a leader and an organizer. I think the distinction is more easily captured than she indicates: organizers’ core work and satisfaction comes from teaching others to act in the world through what I call “people power” organizations. Leaders’ core work and satisfaction results from moving organizations in directions they consider essential for pursuing their vision, goals, and interests. Organizers want to train and develop leaders, and get them to think that the best way to “deliver” is to involve “their people” in the struggle, not do it for them. Leaders in people-power organizations want to deliver for “their people.” Leaders and organizers may do similar things, but their action is in service of different roles and purposes. Moses embodied this idea of the organizer.

Robert Parris Moses was born in Harlem in 1935, the depth of the Great Depression. He was raised in a public housing project (which in those years was a step up from slum housing; I grew up in one), worked in a black-owned milk cooperative as a young boy, and had both Christian and pan-Africanist influences in his extended family upbringing. His grandfather was a respected progressive Baptist clergyman and former black college president; an uncle headed a branch of the NAACP; aunts were militant defenders of black rights; race and politics were continuous topics of conversation at home. His mother was a strong woman, a high school graduate who’d planned to go to college before marriage took her in a family direction. His father involved him in political conversations, always emphasizing the “little guy,” and taught him how to read people by listening and paying careful attention to them.

Visser-Maessen weaves together the diverse threads that shaped who Bob Moses would become: non-institutional Christianity; Quaker pacifism, and world travels made possible by Quaker programs; Gandhian nonviolence; reaction to the paternalism and often thinly disguised prejudice of predominantly white, liberal private schools, colleges, and individuals; the political left; linguist Ludwig Wittgenstein; and, most of all, Camus’s existentialism. In the early 1960s, Moses met Bayard Rustin, Pete Seeger, Allard Lowenstein, and other figures who would later become allies in his Mississippi work. Moses was an excellent student, a good athlete and campus leader, and, at the same time, a reserved and quiet person. Pulling strands of his youth together, Visser-Maessen shows how they all shaped “his later activist philosophy—agency, ownership in learning, grassroots leadership, the inherent worth of each man, self-determination, careful listening, and an identification with the working class. . . . Notions of community and racial solidarity were central.” In 1960, he heard Martin Luther King, Jr. aide Wyatt T. Walker extol King’s leadership and emphasize the importance of following him. After the talk, Moses said to Walker, “Don’t you think we need a lot of leaders?”

Later that year, Moses went south; he met students engaged in Atlanta’s sit-in movement. At first, the students viewed him suspiciously. He was different from them in many ways: older, northern, Harvard educated, well traveled internationally, and familiar with left ideologies. Some of them thought he might be a communist. They watched him carefully. But he did grunt work—putting out mailings and daily manning a picket line, among other things—that impressed them. And he didn’t try to impose any of his beliefs on them.

At the time Moses arrived in Atlanta, SNCC was planning a conference to broaden its base of student affiliates. There were few attendees from Deep South states. Moses said he’d take a trip to identify and invite people and see what was happening in the field. Ella Baker, a largely unsung heroine of the civil rights movement, gave him a list of contacts—black activists making up an informal network seeking to break racism’s iron grip on the region. At the end of his trip, he submitted to SNCC a list of some 200 names. Jane Stembridge, a white southerner who was SNCC’s first full-time employee (she ran the SNCC office in Atlanta) and Moses’s contact person during the trip, was deeply impressed. So were others. Moses’s quiet, persistent, competent, and thoughtful work was gaining a reputation.

From Ella Baker, Moses learned an elaborated view of grassroots organizing. Her aphorism, “strong people don’t need strong leaders,” would become a SNCC theme. Among the strong people Moses met on his trip was Amzie Moore. A veteran of the Second World War who had become an independent businessman in the Mississippi Delta, Moore was looking for a way to break voting barriers that resulted in almost no black voter participation in towns, counties, and the second congressional district of the state, where blacks were a majority of the population. Moore took Moses in and made him family.

Moses was persuaded by Moore’s argument that voter registration, not public accommodation desegregation or school integration, was the key to black freedom. They devised a program in which SNCC would send a substantial force of full-time workers into the Delta to engage its black majority in politics. This was the beginning of SNCC’s transformation from a coordinating committee of campus-based groups to a cadre of full-time workers, some of whom became organizers.

Moore and Moses decided that the first voter registration project should be in minority-black southwest Mississippi, not the majority-black, plantation region of the Delta.

Visser-Maessen describes Moses’s careful work with existing leaders in McComb, as well as their own investment—money (local funding for the project was substantial), time, meeting space, homes in which SNCC people lived, and the risks (to life, limb, property, and job) they took.

After being jailed on a phony charge, Moses used a contact in the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division to secure his release. Moses later called the 1957 Civil Rights Act’s protection afforded voting rights workers a “crawl space” that made it possible for SNCC to continue its work. Without it, he said in later years, the activists would have rotted in jail.

During this period Moses confronted fear and nonviolently responded to physical attacks: “I learned to live with my fears . . . [you just] pick one foot up and step forward, put it down and pick the next one up . . . [you learn] the importance of daily routine carrying you through. . . . The question of personal fear just has to be constantly fought. . . . [It’s] an inside question [to which] I don’t know if there is any answer at all.”

It was in Amite County, a black-majority county with just one black voter registered when SNCC arrived, that Moses had to deal with deaths that resulted from the civil right’s movement’s work. First, in September 1961, Herbert Lee, a courageous local farmer engaged in the voter registration efforts, was shot in cold blood by a white neighbor and childhood friend who was also a local politician. Then, in January 1964, Louis Allen was murdered when the FBI leaked to local whites that he would give testimony at the grand jury hearing that challenged the official “self-defense” argument used by Lee’s killer. The deaths, along with other difficulties, put a chill on action in southwest Mississippi; the action moved to the Delta.

Moses’s overriding commitments were two: build SNCC as an organization of organizers—particularly young African Americans from Mississippi and the rest of the Deep South—and build black people-power vehicles in the state.By 1963, however, it was evident that without a change in tactics Mississippi black lives would continue not to matter—not to the local power structure, the federal government, the national news media, or to white America. That realization set in motion a number of decisions, the most important of which was to bring the country to Mississippi in the person of mostly white volunteers. The first foray in this direction was the Freedom Vote, a parallel election held in protected spaces in the black community: churches, barbershops, beauty salons, restaurants, and elsewhere. Some 83,000 AfricanAmericans cast ballots, clearly demonstrating their interest in becoming equal citizens. Dozens of white student volunteers from Yale and Stanford brought the nation’s news media with them. The National Council of Churches brought hundreds of clergymen—Catholics, Protestants, and Jews—to Hattiesburg to participate in a voter registration support day. The media came again.

The Freedom Vote’s success prompted bolder plans for what now is remembered as the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, when more than 800 mostly white, northern students from mostly middle-class and elite families were recruited to participate in various programs in the black community.

Early in the project, two volunteers and a local activist were murdered in a conspiratorial act that involved the Ku Klux Klan and local sheriff. A national outcry ensued. President Lyndon Johnson ordered U.S. military personnel into the state to dredge rivers and dig up suspicious sites to find them. Mississippi’s governor claimed the three missing people were in hiding, and that it was all a trick to gain sympathy for communist agitators. As federal troops combed they state, they found the bodies of black Mississippians who had been lynched earlier. Mainstream media and politicians accused SNCC of provoking violence for its own nefarious ends before the three organizers’ bodies were finally found two months later.

Freedom schools, community centers, and health screenings were all part of the summer effort. But its central focus was voter registration and the development of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), organized to challenge the white “regulars” who made up the state’s official Democratic Party at the August 1964 Democratic Party Convention. In a bitter struggle that revealed President Lyndon Johnson’s determination to keep an insurgent black-led party out of his Democratic Party, MFDP lost.

The summer’s activities took place as if in a cyclone. The reader would get lost without Visser-Maessen’s skillful guidance, which also captures the complexity of the substantive issues that emerged on the journey.

Many of us believed the MFDP’s challenge would be successful. With hindsight, it is easy to say we should have known better. Two rules of power operated against MFDP: first, when you borrow someone else’s power (in this case the national liberal-labor-civil rights organizations), if your and their interests diverge, theirs will prevail. Second, it is short-term, not long-term, interests that typically determine political decisions and outcomes. When Lyndon Johnson turned the screws on his liberal and labor allies, they capitulated and abandoned their initial support for the MFDP challenge.

Typically, major defeats lead to disarray and conflict among the defeated as they seek to explain why their anticipated victory was not realized. I want to note three consequences of defeat here.

Many movement workers suffered deep fatigue and burnout; psychiatrist Robert Coles said it was “a state of mind comparable to shellshock or posttraumatic stress disorder.” Noted African-American psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, a careful student of racism’s impact on black mental health, was astounded at the psychological impact of Mississippi civil rights workers’ continuous exposure to danger.

The energy that was devoted to organizing and politics took new forms, many of them some version of dropping out. (The hippies were a white, northern expression of this.) In SNCC, militant rhetoric and slogans, African-influenced personal styling (dress and hair), and distancing from whites increasingly characterized the organization. Countercultural politics took the place of alternative institutions like the MFDP, freedom schools, and community centers.

For others, things got worse: depression, alcoholism, drug addiction. Lives of quiet despair sometimes exploded years later, as when former Freedom Summer volunteer Dennis Sweeney murdered his one-time hero, former liberal congressman and Mississippi movement supporter Allard Lowenstein.

A third expression was seeking to understand failure by a turn toward ideology. Its language drew from Fanon, Marx, Garvey, Malcolm X, Sartre, and others. Vissar-Maessen is sympathetic to this move. But ideology can become a rationalization for defeat and grow detached from an organization’s capacity to meaningfully struggle toward a goal—thus creating even greater frustration, anger, and demobilization. I think this was the effect the ideological turn had on the black freedom movement; it was a major part of the undoing of SNCC.

The people with whom Bob Moses initially worked in Mississippi epitomized Ella Baker’s “strong people.” Independent black businesspeople, farmers, and sleeping car porters all worked in relatively autonomous circumstances. The self-employed businessperson’s market was the black community, which provided insulation from the white power structure. The sleeping car porters had the protection of an African-American-led union; their travels took them out of the South and exposed them to places where greater freedom existed. The independent farmers overcame extraordinary obstacles simply to survive.

*Robert Parris Moses* ends in 1967, when it was becoming safe for black citizens to engage in politics. Soon, the black church, black teachers, and other more cautious black people and their cautious organizations were entering politics. Ella Baker’s and Bob Moses’s “strong people” were not able to withstand their conservatizing presence because their base in the black community didn’t go deep enough. The old MFDP was marginalized. Only in a few places did it have the depth of popular support to withstand the cooptation that became the national Democratic Party’s modus operandi in Mississippi after the 1964 convention.

In a sensitive and moving epilogue, Visser-Maessen brings readers up to date on her subject’s life after Mississippi, including his involvement with the Algebra Project, which teaches algebra to lowest quartile students who otherwise would be tracked out of the opportunity to attend college. The project continues Moses’s emphasis on bottom-up participatory democracy, through what he calls the “demand side” of education.

Reading Visser-Maessen’s biography brought back a flood of memories of my time on the SNCC staff and my experiences then with Moses as well as the rest of the remarkable young people who made up that organization. But you don’t need to have had those experiences to appreciate the book. It will bring the tumult, vitality, hope that turned to despair, and intellectual debates of those times to anyone who reads it. The lessons in this book are as important to our country today as they were half a century ago.

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