**Freedom is a Constant Struggle\*; Mike Miller. *CounterPunch Weekend Edition.* May 10-12, 2013.**

***The Civil Rights Movement in the Rural South Reconsidered***

### Books considered in this essay: *Thunder of Freedom: Black Leadership and the Transformation of 1960s Mississippi (Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century),* by Sue (Lorenzi) Soujourner (Kentucky University Press, 2013), *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York University Press, 2009)*,* by Kwame Hasan Jeffries, *Let The People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986,* by J. Todd Moye (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi,* by Emilye Crosby (University of North Carolina Press, 2005, *Barefootin’: Life Lessons from the Road to Freedom,* by Unita Blackwell and Joanne Prichard Morris, (Crown, 2006). The two classics on whose shoulders all these books stand—necessary reading to understand that period—are John Dittmer’s *Local People* and Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got The Light of Freedom*.

### *Thunder of Freedom* is the latest of a relatively recent group of county studies that look at the early-to-mid 1960s Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) community organizing and political work in America’s heart of darkness—the black belt counties of the Deep South, and the legacy it left. Its author and her now-deceased husband entered Holmes County as the massive Mississippi Summer Project that brought almost one thousand mostly-white northern volunteers to the state was drawing to a close. Planning to stay for a short period, they became deeply engaged in The Movement, earned the trust of local people, and remained for five years.

### Holmes had the highest percent of black land ownership of any Mississippi Delta county; a 1930s Farm Security Administration settlement in Mileston was the base that provided economic independence for leaders like Hartman Turnbow; blacks assumed direction of their movement in an almost seamless transition from days of fear to active engagement. Soujourner’s ear for local people is finely tuned; her account comes to a dramatic conclusion with the successful election campaign of 1967. Going back-and-forth from history and analysis to personal narratives of local people, her stories ring true.

### She credits SNCC with early Movement developments in the county, but the later SNCC role is not as clear in her account—for example, she observes that after Black Power, Rap Brown “openly advocated violence”—which is too broad to be accurate (he did say that “violence is as American as cherry pie,” and was otherwise provocative in his rhetoric). Though sensitive to black-white dynamics, she is less attuned to the complexities of the triangular relationship of white northern volunteers, local people, and SNCC organizers in which local people deferred to whites in ways they didn’t to SNCC’s black staff (she describes the “stifling effect of overbearing and overorganized white college students on black workers and leaders”). And she mistakenly speaks of SNCC as having difficulty “to organize new members.” (SNCC wasn’t a membership organization.)

### Holmes is a fascinating place: 80% black, still one of the poorest, most obese, lowest longevity and otherwise depressed counties in the U.S., its black community is also a richly textured and deeply interesting body of people. It is, perhaps, the place where Movement work penetrated most deeply into local culture and created a dense infrastructure of black-led organizations and local pride. Did this work leave a legacy of what Haiti’s Jean-Bertrand Aristide called “poverty with dignity?” I hope Sue Sourjourner will return to Holmes and give us an update.

### In *Bloody Lowndes*, Kwame Hasan Jeffries recounts the story of SNCC’s work to build an independent county-level third party in tyrannical Lowndes County. Stokely Carmichael led the SNCC organizing staff working there. Hasan quotes him: “SNCC people felt that if they could help crack Lowndes, other areas—with less brutal reputations—could be easier to organize…This might be considered a kind of SNCC Domino Theory.” The book captures Carmichael’s essence with the story of a confrontation at the local black high school with 15 local deputy sheriffs who threatened to arrest him and his co-workers. He notes, “…[T]here’s always…a confrontation between a civil rights person and the police. A direct confrontation in front of the [local] people [whose response to The Movement] will depend on how that confrontation goes. Who wins depends upon how well you handle this situation.” In this case, it is the cops who back down. Hasan continues, “Scores of students watched the confrontation in disbelief. Never before had they seen someone stand up to the police and escape without being beaten or at least arrested. Most did not even think it was possible.” And, “Carmichael’s direct and public challenge of the deeply ingrained culture of racial deference, which most people dared only dream of doing, left a lasting impression on the average African-American” as the story spread by word-of-mouth through the County.

### Hasan also captures that aspect of SNCC work that both made it radical and distinguished it from mass marches, demonstrations, sit-ins and freedom rides. At their best, SNCC “field secretaries” were organizers. They sought to engage the poorest blacks, who were the vast majority, in building local organizations that they would control. To do this, they sought, developed relationships with, encouraged, challenged and trained local leaders and potential leaders to take ownership of these organizations with SNCC staff leaving them after a couple of years to carry on the work. In particular, in legendary SNCC advisor Ella Baker’s phrase, they sought “strong local people”—those few blacks who stood up to racism and who whites didn’t mess around with. One of those people was John Hulett. “Our way,” said Carmichael, “is to live in the community, find, train, or develop representative leadership within strong, accountable local organizations or coalitions that did not exist before, and that are capable of carrying on the struggle after we leave. When we succeed in this, we will work ourselves out of a job. Which is our goal.” Acknowledging the SNCC contribution, local leader Frank Miles, Jr. said of Carmichael, “He didn’t want to take over or run us. We’re independent. He told us to take what we could use from what he gave us, and leave the rest.” Nor was Carmichael SNCC’s only contribution to Lowndes. The talented group who worked there included Cortland Cox, Bob Mants—who later returned and stayed making a continuing contribution there, Martha Prescod, Judy Richardson, Jimmy Rogers, Scott B. Smith, Willie Vaughn and others.

### In Lowndes, SNCC famously succeeded. A potent black political organization was built in 1966. John Hulett emerged as its leader, and subsequently—after a massive voter registration effort made possible by the presence of Justice Department voting registrars—ran for sheriff. He was defeated in the first campaign by a combination of white intimidation and violence, tampering with the vote, and because not all blacks would support the black-only Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO)—some stayed home, and most of the small black middle class (primarily teachers) voted for the white Democrats. Afterward, Hulett admitted, “We weren’t really prepared. We thought we was but we wasn’t.” But he noted, “Even though we lost, the people have strong confidence.” The Black Panther Party got 80% of the black vote, and 42% of the total. In 1970, John Hulett was elected sheriff. “As many as two thousand people from every corner of Lowndes County and from as far away as Detroit [where there was a community of former Lowndes blacks who’d migrated north, and who formed a “friends of” organization there] converged on the county seat.”

### Hulett was a distinguished sheriff for 30 years, treating whites and blacks with equal justice. He built a political machine as well, and played an important role in electing other blacks. He also violated basic principles of organizational accountability in a secret deal he made with a key white power structure figure who was willing to break with the solid wall of white racism. Hasan gives us the details; they are worth pondering. He says, “…people lost sight of the importance of grassroots agitation and democratic decision making. This created an opening for those who rejected freedom politics to introduce a new kind of black politics, one that privileged mobilizing voters over educating them, ranked individual interests higher than group interests, and placed winning reelection above fighting for freedom rights.”

### I find these juxtapositions unfortunate: losing principled, often called “educational,” campaigns confirms people’s sense of powerlessness; individual interests are always present in a context of group interests, and organizers have to know how to work with both; are you supposed to run losing campaigns to fight for freedom rights? And the hopeful signs on which Hasan concludes his book, a couple of nonprofit organizations that no doubt do good things but that lack either the developmental capacity or political clout to make a real dent, aren’t up to the task he assigns them.

### But Hasan is on-target when he notes, “Over-investing in elected officials and the Democratic Party kept African Americans from developing new grassroots leaders…As a result, African Americans were not in a position to resume collective action when their investment in electoral politics yielded a poor return.” I will return to these questions later in this essay.

### J. Todd Moye’s *Let The People Decide…*takes us to the home of Movement heroine Fannie Lou Hamer, and tells the story of her emergence as a national leader of the Freedom Movement. Charles McLaurin, a local Mississippian who became one of SNCC’s first field secretaries in the state, figures prominently in the book; his is a story worth knowing. This is also the home of U.S. Senator James O. Eastland, as vicious a racist as one might encounter in American history, and for many years one of the most powerful men in American politics.

### Moye describes the under-utilized power of boycotts. A mid-1980s complex struggle over school integration and a school superintendant led the black community’s Concerned Citizens to call and lead a cross-economic class successful boycott of white businesses. “[M]embers of Concerned Citizens learned how a well-organized boycott could force a local power structure to the bargaining table. They also learned that when a business community leads, the elected officials will follow…From the campaigns of the ‘classical period’ of the civil rights movement [1950s/60s], Concerned Citizens learned the importance of good public relations and management of the news media…They used mass meetings in local churches to disseminate information, discuss strategy, and energize their troops. It was no coincidence that they sang the same freedom songs civil rights workers had sung twenty years before to steel their purpose in similar struggles.”

### But a transition had taken place from Sunflower’s early sharecropper, day laborer, domestic, tenant farmer, welfare recipient leadership of The Movement to what emerged after the mid-1960s. While the vast majority of the county’s blacks remained poor, leadership shifted to the still-thin, though growing, strata of middle-class. When faced with a black-led strike at a major local employer in the important catfish industry, this leadership buckled despite support for the strikers and their unionization effort from Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. James Lowry, then head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The workers voted the union in, and, in 1990, accepted an inferior contract after 13 weeks of striking. Moye is surely right when he says, “Their decision said more about the economic hardships strikers faced and the easy availability of replacement workers than it did about the attractiveness of the new agreement.” But his book concludes on a questionable note: “…[E]conomic development and diversification worked toward the creation of a black middle class, which in turn created more common ground between black and white residents of the county…By forcing the county’s citizens to look for points of agreement, Concerned Citizens gave the community a gift.” That they failed to act in solidarity with the strikers dramatically diminished the gift.

### *A Little Taste of Freedom…,* by Emilye Crosby takes the reader to Claiborne County, and captures the decline of what SNCC had built in the state. “While SNCC was struggling for direction and COFO [the SNCC-developed alliance of the state NAACP, CORE, SCLC and SNCC] was disintegrating, the Voting Rights Act…opened the door to widespread black voter registration…Ironically, Charles Evers [statewide leader of the NAACP who replaced his much more admired brother Medgar after the latter’s assassination by a white racist], who had played little positive role in the Mississippi movement, was now positioned to take advantage of the news laws and Mississippi political leaders’ grudging acceptance of the inevitability of some change in the status quo.”

Charles Evers was a leader in the old style—charismatic, solo operator, deal-maker with his own personal interests always included in the deals, unaccountable to anyone."Ultimately,” writes Crosby, “white Mississippians found it easier to negotiate with Evers than to respond more directly to the broad-based concerns of a diffuse black community." This formulation led to a correspondence between myself and Crosby. I asked her*, “*Isn't the problem that there wasn't an alternative collective leadership rooted in the ‘diffuse black community’ with whom negotiations could take place?   She replied*,* “…I should have said…that ‘white Mississippians had no interest in dealing with the real issues at stake and that they found it easier to negotiate with Evers over ... whatever... than take up the challenge of addressing and reversing centuries old racial inequalities....’ .”

But the problem remained: there was no one else with whom to negotiate who could “deliver” in the black community.

John Dittmer got his oars in these waters as well. He wrote me, "…I agree with your concluding analytical comments…I think you have hit upon something important in Emilye's book, a problem that goes far beyond Claiborne County.  I think the [Mississippi] Sovereignty Commission [a state-funded body that pursued the white power structure’s agenda] and Charles Evers were made for each other.  He was the recognized leader…and he would make a deal for small gains that included personal gains for himself. Without Charles, which group would there have been to negotiate with?   I don't know…And you're right about SNCC, MFDP, etc., in terms of negotiating with the white power structure.  It never really came to that.  In most cases, white leaders and businessmen decided to obey the 1964 and 1965 laws in response to federal pressure (and fear of economic retaliation from outside the state if they didn't).  And when it came to jobs, whites went to the Urban League and black colleges beginning in the late 1960s. Nobody sat down with Lawrence Guyot or Annie Devine [leaders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party] and negotiated anything more than permits for a demonstration, etc.  Or at least I think they didn't. And if not, what does this mean?  I agree with Bob Moses that it was a huge mistake to disband COFO in 1965, for without that grass-roots base the Freedom Democratic Party could not live up to its democratic promise...Maybe Annie Devine put it best when she said, ‘What could have been a beautiful revolution just petered out’!”

In a follow-up correspondence, Crosby wrote, “And, yes, absolutely, the problem is that there wasn't that alternative collective leadership insisting that whites negotiate with them and/or holding Evers or whoever accountable for how they ‘represented’ the people.” And she says of Hasan’s Lowndes County book, “he really traces that issue of collective leadership/ accountability in what he calls ‘freedom politics,’ its rise and decline. At times I find the trajectory of some of these movements heart-breaking.”

Indeed heart-breaking. And the experiences told in these stories of the Deep South’s freedom movement are matched by equally heart-breaking stories from the movement in the north, from the labor movement, and from the experience of community organizing.

### *Barefootin’* is the first person narrative of one of the lesser-known, but equally impressive, women who emerged as leaders from SNCC’s organizing and voter registration work. In the tiny town of Mayersville (Issaquena County, MS), Unita Blackwell, a sharecropper family's daughter, was moved to action by SNCC, became a SNCC field secretary, got active in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and as one of its delegates voted against the infamous 1964 Democratic Party Convention two-seat "compromise," (that refused to deny seating to the racist white Democratic delegation, and instead offered two at-large seats to the MFDP), was elected mayor of her town and slowly got absorbed into mainstream politics. She kept her personal integrity intact, but was coopted nonetheless. She slowly shifted from being an actor in a movement to becoming an advocate for people and provider of services to them.  She won a MacArthur genius grant, hob-nobbed with the Clintons (about whom she has nice things to say), and did good things for the black community from which she came.

### That Blackwell remained principled as an individual makes the contrast between the kind of leader she became and one who remains connected with a mass movement all the clearer. She reports her experience in a UMass planning course: “The point was to teach planners how to listen to all the people and let them discuss and argue, try to be helpful, and then figure out how to resolve the matter. As planners, we learned to develop plans around the people. The people are the power, because they are usually going to pay the bill. But the people don’t always understand all the issues, and a planner has to help them, keep them involved and informed. Many projects take ten to fifteen years to get done; legislation and elections, new programs, new guidelines, a dozen other bureaucratic realities of problem solving slow the process. I was already learning these things firsthand as a mayor. Voters often don’t understand why things can’t be accomplished overnight, and those who are opposed to an idea will try to wear you down…Among the good things about keeping the same mayor in office are that voters can hold that person accountable and the mayor can finish the plans she or he put in action.” Blackwell’s story encapsulates what happened to The Movement, and makes clear that the problem of cooptation is not simply one of individuals selling out.

### All these books are worth reading. All of them are highly recommended. You cannot hope to understand the freedom struggle in the south without digging deeply into the detail. In different ways, each raises important and disturbing questions for those who seek economic justice and participatory democracy.

### Is there a pattern in the rise and fall of more radical movement organizations? If so, what is it and what is to be learned from it? A courageous few organizers entered forbidden terrain. Not only was the organizing difficult, but their lives were often at stake. They identified “strong local people,”—individuals willing to stand up for what is right, and worked with them to break through the fear that prevented others from standing up as well. Often these people had a niche of economic independence: retired Pullman Sleeping Car porters, owners of businesses that catered to the black community, independent farmers and others. In the face of firings, evictions, house and church burnings, denial of credit or welfare benefits and murder, a few local people stood up in the spaces opened by movement pioneers. They told sheriffs and chiefs of police—as Greenwood’s Sam Block replied to Chief Larry who told him to leave Greenwood, “If you don’t want to see me no more, then you’d better leave town yourself.” The SNCC people, in Bob Moses’ “earned insurgency” phrase, stayed the course and won the respect and trust of local people.

While they didn’t do a lot, Justice Department attorneys sometimes filed suits and got arrested SNCC workers out of jail. That created a wedge between local and federal authority that local people could see—a sign of hope. Other signs of support from the north helped as well: shipments of food and clothing arriving in a huge truck from a Friends of SNCC group to a local movement headquarters was one of the most visible of these signs. Famous people visited: in Greenwood alone, Harry Belafonte, Theodore Bikel, Bob Dylan, Dick Gregory and Pete Seeger were among the “name” artists who visited the town. An outrageous action by the powers-that-be might have moved a number of the people on the sidelines sufficiently for them to act—as the beating of a local person or cutting off from welfare or food stamps of blacks who sought to register to vote.

Then a tipping point was mysteriously reached. Significantly more rank-and-file community people began to get involved. At this point, local African-American leaders who had also been watching began to participate as well—a classic of, “there go my followers, I better catch up so I can lead them.” This was particularly true of most of the black pastors and the thin layer of black middle class who weren’t independent of white power; but it also included black teachers. This was also a time of danger for SNCC and its radical program that sought real economic and political democracy, not simply the right to vote or an end to segregated public facilities.

In 1964, a key moment arose in this pattern: President Lyndon Johnson and the northern liberal establishment concluded that they had to nip this radicalism in the bud. They denied the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s (MFDP) “challenge” to recognition of the racist “regular” Democrats at the Party’s quadrennial convention. Stunned by their inability to coopt the Freedom Democrats with their “compromise” offer, they created new structures in Mississippi that they and their allies controlled. With Poverty Program dollars, political patronage and other tools, they bypassed the leadership that emerged from The Movement.

In Mississippi, MFDP’s statewide leadership tried mightily to resist. They declared allegiance to the national party, and urged voting for President Johnson despite his rejection of them. But patronage dollars and new organizational structures were too often able to undermine MFDP. The Lowndes County, Alabama answer to the problem was an independent county third party—something possible because of an earlier populist reform hidden in the small print of Alabama’s election code. But it, too, could not withstand the pressures of cooptation.

This was, unfortunately, about the time that a combination of post-traumatic stress and internal ideological disputes began to tear SNCC asunder. As SNCC veteran Charlie Cobb put it, “We didn’t know how to be an organization of organizers.” SNCC was in disarray, and unable to provide the kind of leadership that only it could have provided in this situation because it had the experience and detachment to have a broader view. SNCC had convinced often-illiterate or semi-literate domestics, day laborers, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, welfare recipients and other poor black Mississippians that they should not only vote, but that they should democratically control their organizations. To hold their leaders accountable to the more radical program that promised to transform their living conditions would have required a presence that SNCC might have provided. The painful results were, on the one hand, marginalization of the early stalwarts or the movement or, on the other, cooptation.

None of us have found our way out of this conundrum.

Often the organizations we build die or are marginalized well before they accomplish their broader visions. Though they may “win” specific, often important, victories along the way they aren’t the distance runners needed for the long march through the institutional maze of American life.

Or they might be "prophetic" voices, on the margins by their own choice where they are useful if someone else is organizing but, by themselves, are like most prophets--voices in the wilderness—sometimes right, sometimes self-righteous but ineffective.

On the other hand, the organizations are coopted, in which case they become part of business as usual, adornments trumpeted by the official celebrants of democracy who point to them as living examples of how real our democracy is. At worst, the cooptation is limited to leaders who are bought off with status, money, prestige or a combination of all three—appointments to commissions, grants, patronage jobs and “honors” being the most obvious.

The next worst is ditto for the leaders, but there are some trickle down benefits to a constituency. For example, government, corporate or foundation funded programs that serve a limited number of people illustrate what could be if there was the power to broaden the benefit but never get to that point because their political function—perhaps unrecognized by the grantee—is to weaken the people power capacity to struggle for more fundamental change.  An endless parade of “innovative programs” creates competition among supplicants for funding, but fails to change basic relations of power and wealth.

Finally, there is a cooptation which has positive dimensions:  a significant group of people move from being have-nots of one kind or another to have-a-little-want-more, or even to relatively secure middle-class.  The West Coast longshoremen epitomize the last:  their average annual income places them well within the middle-class; their benefits are out-of-this-world, the envy of everyone who has to deal with co-pays, deductibles, donut holes, etc (they have a Cadillac health care plan in which they pay for nothing!).  Their organization, the International Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU), remained politically on the left, supported a wide range of progressive policies—including in foreign affairs—and has long-been an example of racial equality in most of its locals as well as in its international leadership. But when you look more closely—for example in San Francisco politics—they were integrated into the Democratic Party establishment.

Chicago’s Back-of-the-Yards, where Saul Alinsky got his start, is also an example of the last.  An entire community was lifted up by the combination of the Packinghouse Workers Union’s collective bargaining and the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council’s community organizing work. A poverty-stricken slum was turned into a stable working class community.

To an extent, the entire industrial working class that was organized by the CIO is an example of the last, until the 1970s when corporate America decided to take back what they'd been forced to give--and the unions were too weak to hold onto what they’d won. “At the banquet table of life,” said Sleeping Car Porters’ Union President and dean of civil rights movement leaders A. Philip Randolph, “there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take and keep what you can hold. If you can’t take anything, you won’t get anything. And if you can’t hold anything, you won’t keep anything. And you can’t take anything without organization.” (Alinsky’s aphorism on the subject was “your victories are only as good as your ability to enforce them”.)

But even the best examples failed to continue organizing. The difficult question is whether it is possible to both win substantial benefits for people who are on the lower rungs of the socio-economic status ladder while at the same time building forms of democratic people power that can continue to challenge the present political oligarchy and the economic plutocracy whose interests it generally serves. In the 1970s, ILWU’s International Secretary-Treasurer, Lou Goldblatt, told me in a conversation on this subject, “We are in a continuous struggle over prerogatives,” a more analytic way of stating this civil rights movement song’s conclusion: “freedom is a constant struggle.”

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**\*This version of the *CounterPunch* essay is corrected for some minor errors that were not caught before the article went to print, and includes a few elaborations of points made in the original.**