

A GOVERNMENT
OF THE BLACK,
BY THE BLACK,
AND FOR THE BLACK.

by Christopher Jencks and
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Recent developments in the Southern civil rights movement may have been upsetting and confusing to many who follow the movement from a distance. There has been a marked decrease in the visible and news-making forms of protest: sit-ins, protest marches and picket lines. Then, just as the movement seemed to be gaining victories in the form of national legislation like the 1965 Voting Rights bill, there appeared increasing signs of political disunity. In Alabama the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee organized an all black political party--the Black Panther party--and ran into criticism from the more moderate Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Last May at its convention, SNCC reshuffled its leadership and moved in the direction of more militancy and greater emphasis on a black orientation within the Committee.

These events signify more than a mere faction struggle in the civil rights movement. They are symptoms of an underlying conflict over political strategy.

To understand the nature of this conflict, it is useful to look at the state which now has the nation's highest proportion of disenfranchised Negroes: Mississippi. More Negroes than whites are born each year in Mississippi. But for obvious reasons, once Negroes are old enough to leave the state, they are far more likely than whites to do so. As a result, Negroes constituted only 36 per cent of the adult Mississippi population in 1960, and this proportion is expected to fall to about 32 per cent by 1970. Even these statistics exaggerate the potential influence of Mississippi Negroes at the polls. All voting studies, North and South, show that individuals with low incomes and poor education are less likely than others to exercise their right to vote, even when there are no formal obstacles to their doing so. This is true despite the fact that the poor and the ignorant have more reason to seek political remedies for their troubles than do the middle classes. Since Negroes are, on the average, both poorer and less educated than whites, the number of non-voting Negroes will almost certainly be higher than the

number of non-voting whites, even in the unlikely event that intimidation and obstruction stop. Not even vigorous federal action is likely to raise the proportion of Negroes in the Mississippi elections much above 25 per cent. The prospects of Negro voting are no better in other Southern states, often worse. There are only a handful of Black Belt counties in which Negroes can hope to be a majority of the electorate.

Thus, only paranoid white supremacists and megalomaniac black nationalists can believe in a Negro "take-over" of political power. Realists must begin to calculate the impact of a black minority on what will remain predominantly white politics. For the civil rights movement this poses a real problem. So long as Negroes had no power, they could unite in seeking it. Now that they are acquiring some, but remain far short of majority power, they will have to face the divisive question of how best to use their limited resources. Plainly they must seek white allies if they want to get any benefits from their franchise. But how? And who? On these questions, Negro leaders are already divided.

A wide-ranging debate in both the North and the South is taking place about the question of "coalition." The question is whether Negroes should create their own independent political, economic and social organizations, moving into coalition with white groups only on specific issues and for limited periods of time, or whether they should integrate themselves into predominantly white organizations such as labor unions, farm groups, reform clubs, and the Democratic party, with whom they may feel some identity of interest.

The Negroes' long-term aim may be to make America color-blind and to compete as individuals within an integrated society, but until they can compete more successfully than they now do, and win more acceptance than they now have, they will also need color-conscious organizations to bargain for them, to protect their collective interests, and to try to affect the terms on which individual competition takes place. For Negroes merely to join white organizations--e. g. labor unions--will mean that they must pay the price of being powerless newcomers, and in many cases expendable--the last hired and the first fired. Negroes, especially Southern Negroes, suffer the double handicap of being black and being out, and they must have independent organizations if they are ever to force their way in and secure their place. At the same time, Negroes can and should seek membership in integrated groups which can serve their individual interests. Collectively, they should also ally their own organizations with such groups, while retraining their organizations' freedom of maneuver and power to pull out if their collective interests are not respected.

Regardless of how Southern Negroes go about creating a coalition, there is a question of who they should trust as potential allies. Should they cultivate their short-term interests, which seems to suggest alliance with the "responsible" white middle classes and business interests against the rednecks and the redneck mentality, or should they work for a more remote goal, the creation of what the New Left has tagged "an interracial movement of the poor"? Just as in the post-Reconstruction South, the "responsible" white leaders of industry, commerce and agriculture can be expected to seek the support of Negro voters as soon as they register in appreciable numbers. Once more they will promise protection against violent racism and starvation, while doing nothing to resolve the Negroes' basic economic and social problems. Such a coalition, dominated by the "moderate" leaders of the entrenched vested interests, would in all probability be accompanied in due course by the development of networks of patronage, bossism and corruption among poor Southern Negroes comparable to those found in Northern ghettos, both black and white.

This is essentially what happened last time substantial numbers of Negroes voted in the Deep South during the 1870's and 1880's. At that time the proportion of Negroes in most parts of the South was higher than it is today, and the proportion of Negro voters was higher than it is likely to be in the 20th century. Nevertheless, Negroes were not able to exercise effective political power. Confronted with a choice between "responsible" whites who supported the economic status quo and "extremist" whites who wanted radical economic change, most Negro leaders supported the "responsible" elements and persuaded their followers to do likewise. They did this for the good and sufficient reason that the poor whites were for the most part "extremists" on the race issue as well as the economic issue. With the help of Negro voters who saw them as their only protection against starvation and violence, the white bourbons stayed in power most of the time. As a result, by the 1890's most economic radicals came to see the Negro vote as a major obstacle to reform, and many supported disenfranchisement.

The alternative today would be for poor Southern Negroes to reject the leadership of the middle classes, black or white, and the tokenism which usually accompanies it. Instead, they would try to recreate the old Populist dream of a coalition between poor Negroes and poor whites. This dream has haunted Southern politics for a long time. For those who want a radical redistribution of wealth and power, it seems the only hope. Yet it plainly cannot be created overnight, even if Negroes increase to 20 or 25 per cent of the electorate. If the Negroes want to build toward such a coalition, they will have to be willing to defer the token benefits which come from backing the winner in state and local politics. Their willingness to remain for a time in the political wilderness will in turn depend on their ability to create independent organizations capable of supplying some of

their vital social and economic needs.

Can this be done? It can if enough people want it done, including not only Southern Negroes but Northern whites. What the Southern Negro needs is an organization which can provide him with short-term benefits comparable to those offered by Negro moderates who work with the white establishment, while at the same time working towards a more radical long-term solution. Such an organization would be a para-government, providing the same kinds of services that a government normally provides to those with the political power to win elections.

In the Deep South, Negroes have traditionally been too poor, too ignorant, too leaderless and too terrified to make anything but the most tentative efforts at para-government. Their churches have of necessity been extremely other-worldly in their orientation, and their non-religious organizations have been almost nonexistent. Recently, however, there have been signs of change. Excluded from participation in the white government, Negroes have begun to create parallel structures of their own. In Mississippi, the young radicals of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee have begun to develop their own governing institutions. Not only that, but unlike community action agencies in the North, SNCC efforts have moved quickly towards democratic control.

The first tentative efforts at politics were made in 1963. These began with "freedom registration" and the "mock election" in which Aaron Henry ran for governor. This was followed by the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party, which claimed to be the "legitimate" Mississippi arm of the national Democratic party. Then came the challenge of the credentials of the white delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, and in 1965 the challenge of the Mississippi Congressional delegation. The summer of 1964 also saw the creation of freedom schools to supplement the regular public schools and compete with them ideologically (though not academically or logistically). This was followed in 1965 by the establishment of the Child Development Group of Mississippi to run Operation Headstart programs. While CDGM was funded and controlled by the Poverty Program in Washington, it turned over many local pre-school programs to the "movement." The "official" Headstart program, run by the white school boards, got less money and fewer pupils, despite efforts at intimidation. The past year has also seen the establishment of several community centers to provide health and recreation opportunities which white-controlled state and local governments fail to provide. In all of these efforts there is an effort to make the beneficiaries of a program active participants in both policy-making and administration.

These precedents suggest that the "radical" faction in the civil rights movement has an alternative to making a deal with the presently entrenched white establishment as well as to prematurely committing themselves to white liberal interest organizations, like the unions. This is not to say that para-government should or would preclude poor Negroes joining unions, or middle-class Negroes talking to their white counterparts. Through private government organizations, paralleling the white state and local structures, Negroes can hope to get financial support from outside, including the Federal government. At the same time, they can use these para-governments to force the established white government to accommodate Negroes politically.

This course is vastly different from the "moderate" approach presently developing in the Deep South, which is for particular Negro leaders to make deals with an unchanging white elite, paying other Negroes off not with equality but with more patronage and in some cases with limited power over specifically "Negro" areas of concern. These deals can be reversed at any moment the establishment pleases.

The SNCC approach would try to force constitutional reorganization aimed at political equality rather than dependence status. This would require the fortification of para-governmental organizations and practices with resource from outside. If white-controlled schools will not provide Negroes with adequate education, the SNCC approach suggests that local Negroes should establish "private" schools, either to supplement the public schools or compete with them. If white-controlled health and welfare programs will not help Negroes, they must set up their own programs, controlled by themselves. If state and federal agencies controlled by Southern whites will not provide loans and technical advice to Negro farmers and small businessmen, then local Negroes must create their own agencies to do so. If white Southern Congressional delegations will not fight for the interests of Southern Negroes in Congress, then rival Negro delegations must be sent to Washington--and kept there--to look after and publicize the needs of Southern Negroes, and to pressure the Federal government in their behalf. Some of these things are already being done, particularly in Mississippi. The need, however, is for a massive, systematic effort in every state and community where the established, white-controlled governmental agencies will not do what needs to be done.

In arguing for Negro para-governmental institutions, we are arguing for a radical strategy of institutional change toward equality, participation and welfare--in the social democratic tradition. Racism has corrupted Southern government to a point where it cannot possibly incorporate people into equality; it has lost its viability and expansive potential, and is no longer legitimate or creative. Political equality in the South requires a new

beginning, a reconstruction and renewal of American political institutions which amounts to reconstitution. Negroes must take the lead in such a renewal.

We believe that America must start afresh, renewing all of its institutions, in order to bring people together in political equality, and rediscover a form of government which can represent and serve everyone. This necessitates building from the bottom up. It means organizing outside the established political institutions for the moment, until a new political force based on local corporate unity and community participation can be established to negotiate with those political institutions. It means moving toward a new governing form, expansive enough to contain more equals and local enough to enable all equals to participate. To do this, it must begin in a "private" context, free to experiment. Only later should these para-governmental forms project themselves into the constitution of state and local governments.

The essential elements of the "coalition" which Southern Negroes must eventually seek are two. First, an independent organizational base which will enable them to bargain with their potential political allies from a position of strength. Second, a new vision of what their coalition should work toward, a vision which goes beyond the welfare state and equality of opportunity, looking towards a political and social reconstruction in which everyone can "make it" simply because he is human. Para-governmental institutions can be the political base for the first of these activities and the experimental context for seeking the second. Without them, the best we can hope is that another generation of struggle will bring the Deep South to the dubious utopia of Maryland or Kentucky.

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