**Bob Moses: Neither Victim Nor Executioner. By Mike Miller.**

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

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**Preface**

*Who is telling the story defines the historic “truth” and accuracy of the story. So there is a character called Bob Moses in many of the history books that discuss Mississippi’s civil rights movement of the 1960s. I read about him. I sympathize with him. Sometimes he seems like me, and then sometimes I am confused by him and want to understand him better.*

*Robert Parris Moses, 2001.*

In this important biography—carefully researched, well-written and subtly nuanced—readers are the beneficiaries of a look at us from abroad, a Toquevillian visit to U.S. shores by author Laura Visser-Maessen, professor of American Studies at Utrecht University. I met Laura, as did a number of other “Snick” people at the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) 2010 50th anniversary reunion at Shaw University in Raleigh—the site of its founding meeting. Her spirit, intelligence and persistence earned her the trust of her interviewees, including Bob Moses. This book reflects her character as well as his. I think he will like the Bob Moses he meets in these pages, and perhaps even gain additional clarity about himself.

In the preface, she reflects on the difficulty of intellectually capturing Moses. He was, by all accounts, the catalyst for what he calls “the Mississippi theater” of the civil rights movement. Yet he contradicted in his manner, speech and action most of the things associated with “leaders”, and sometimes with “organizers”.

As Visser-Maessen puts it in her preface, “…to understand Moses and evaluate his work accurately, his own interpretations of what he did, and how he choose to (re)present himself then and now are just as important as what he actually did.” She wants his actions to speak for themselves, and avoids mythologizing. Yet this is the conundrum in which Moses found himself: the more he insisted on being his modest, behind-the-scenes self, the more a myth grew around him. It finally contributed to his leaving “The Movement” (as we all capitalized it in those days). I was at the SNCC staff meeting where he said, and I paraphrase, “You can have Moses; I’m going to be Robert Parris”—taking his mother’s maiden name and soon thereafter leaving the organization.

Visser-Maessen introduces Moses by focusing on his role in Mississippi; she (as did he) accepts French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus’ notion that a person is what he does. She notes, “his intelligence, determination, audacity, resources, sense of direction, and self-effacing style [that] evolved into what became known as the Bob Moses Mystique.” Not only was Moses developing organizers and organization in Mississippi, but he also had to deal with the internal politics of SNCC, and draw together in a unified whole the contrasting, and sometimes conflicting, interests and needs of liberal and radical white northern students, northern white liberal and labor allies, the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, and the tensions between the four major national civil rights organizations: SNCC, Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and both the state conference and national office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

She looks at the complexity of what he did, and carefully wrestles with the distinction between a leader and an organizer. I think the distinction is more easily captured, in words if not on-the-ground action, than she indicates: an organizer’s core work and satisfaction is the development of others—teaching them to act powerfully in the world through what I call “people power” organizations. A leader’s core work and satisfaction is in moving an organization in the direction s/he thinks essential for the pursuit of her/his, and its, vision and goals. Leaders in people power organizations want to deliver for “their people”. 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. Dignity results when you do the latter. It trumps concrete benefits. Some leaders act as internal organizers within their organizations, but they are rare. Leaders and organizers may do the same or similar things—so Moses sometimes did what leaders are thought of as doing—but their action is in service of different roles and purposes.

**Growing Up**

Robert Moses was born in 1935, the depth of the Great Depression, in Harlem, 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 in his 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,” “the man on the street”, and taught him how to “read people” by listening and paying careful attention to them.

Visser-Maessen weaves together a multiplicity of diverse threads that shaped who Bob Moses would become: non-institutional Christianity, Quaker pacifism, world travels by means of Friends Service Committee (Quakers) programs, Ghandian nonviolence, reaction to the paternalism and often thinly disguised prejudice of predominantly white liberal private schools, colleges and individual he met in them, the political left, linguist Ludwig Wittgenstein, and, most of all, Camus’ existentialism. In the early 1960s, Moses met Bayard Rustin, Pete Seeger, Allard Lowenstein and other well-known figures who would later become allies in his Mississippi work. Moses was an excellent student, good athlete and campus leader and, at the same time, a reserved and quiet person.

In 1960, the sit-ins at segregated lunch counters erupted in the south; an estimated 70,000 black college students participated in them, with 3,000 arrested; they were headline news throughout the country. Moses eagerly watched them, and knew he wanted to join them. Through Bayard Rustin, then a Martin Luther King aide, he became a volunteer in the New York City Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) office. 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?” It was a difference in view that later characterized the relationship between SNCC and SCLC.

Pulling various strands of his youth together, Visser-Maessen sums them up in “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.”

**Going South**

For readers too young to have experienced it, describing the compelling draw of the black college student-led sit-ins and freedom rides is near-impossible. I was among those compelled, and was a SNCC field secretary from 1962 – end of 1966. When Bob Moses talks about that period now, he calls it an “earned insurgency”: the students conducted themselves in a non-violent and militant way that was attentive to both halting business-as-usual at lunch counter sites by direct action throughout the south, *and* reaching the broadest base of support possible in the country (many of them wore suits and ties as they sat-in). They thus combined two often-contradictory things: militant direct action and winning broad support.

Moses arrived at SCLC’s Atlanta headquarters in July, 1960. He soon found that it wasn’t where the action was, though it was there that he met Ella Baker, the most unsung heroine (or hero) of the civil rights movement. She was SCLC executive secretary, though she was soon to leave the position because she didn’t believe in the organization’s strong emphasis on clergy leadership or its hierarchical structure, and was marginalized as a woman. But she was there at a key time: SCLC hoped the student sit-in movement would become its youth wing. Baker was skeptical, and suggested to its leaders that they could form their own organization; they did. In April, 1960 SNCC was born.

At first, Moses was viewed suspiciously by the SNCC students. He was different from them in many ways: older, northern, well traveled internationally, familiar with political ideologies of the left, and educated in northern elite schools including Harvard. Some of them thought he might be a communist. They watched him carefully. 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. They soon concluded that it was a waste of time to conduct investigations to see if new volunteers had hidden political agendas. Better to test them in action, see what they did and how they acted, and draw conclusions from that. Moses earned their trust.

At the time Moses arrived in Atlanta, SNCC was planning a future conference to broaden its base of student affiliates. There were few registrants from Deep South states. Moses said he’d take a trip to identify and invite people, and see what was happening in the field. Baker gave him a list of contacts—blacks who formed an informal network of people seeking to break racism’s iron grip on the region. By the time his trip was concluded, he had 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), and his contact person during the trip, was deeply impressed. So were others. Moses quiet, persistent, competent and thoughtful work was becoming known.

From Ella Baker, Moses got a more elaborated view of grassroots organizing. Her aphorism, “strong people don’t need strong leaders”, would become a SNCC theme. (I’ll return to its weakness later.) Among the strong people Moses met on his trip was Amzie Moore, a World War 2 veteran and black independent businessman in the Mississippi Delta who was looking for a way to break voter registration and voting barriers that resulted in almost no black voter participation in towns, counties, and the second congressional district where blacks were a majority of the population. Amzie took Moses in, and made him family—as did others he met in the state.

Moses was readily persuaded by Moore’s argument that voter registration, not public accommodation desegregation (or school integration), was the key to black freedom. They plotted and conceived a program in which SNCC would send a substantial force of full-time workers into the Delta to engage its black majority in politics. At the time, only a handful was registered, and fewer actually voted.

**The First Mississippi Project**

For strategic reasons that Visser-Maessen elaborates, Moore and Moses decided that the first voter registration project should be in southwest Mississippi, not the northwest Delta. She describes Moses careful work with already existing leaders in McComb, and their investment—money, time, meeting space, homes in which SNCC people lived, and their risks to life, limb, property and job—in the project. It is important to recognize that substantial project funding came from local people. She notes that locals contributed $5 - $10 (adjusted for inflation = $40 - $80 2016 dollars).

She makes an important distinction between segments of the thin black middle class: teachers and preachers who generally were fearful, and black entrepreneurs, independent farmers and retired railroad union men who often were not because they were more insulated from white sanctions. The latter were the “strong people” Ella Baker sought in her earlier work in the south, and whose names she had given to Moses when he first went to Mississippi.

Visser-Maessen also shows how direct action and voter registration turned out to be both mutually supportive and antagonistic. The Freedom Rides made a deep impact on Mississippi blacks. Kids on McComb’s streets would say, “That’s the Freedom Rider” when Moses walked by. (She might have told how the earlier strategic disagreement over the two approaches almost divided SNCC as an organization, and how the split was avoided when Ella Baker suggested there be two divisions, one for direct action, the other for voter registration.) And she shows the tension that the two approaches later caused when arrests and violence associated with direct action finally led to shutting the project down.

Moses left McComb in the hands of newly-arriving SNCC workers who wanted to combine direct action and voter registration; he moved on to nearby rural Amite County. Visser-Maessen attributes the ease with which the transition took place to “the efficiency of SNCC’s lack of organizational structure…[that] allowed them to move flexibly along local demands rather than rigidly holding onto their own programs.” I think this view of SNCC misses what the organization was becoming—something Visser-Maessen later describes. There was an emerging structure, but it was one designed to facilitate what field organizers had to adapt to in local circumstances, and what they intended to build there—as any organization of organizers must.

Jailed on a phony charge, Moses made use of his contact with John Doar, a key attorney in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, by calling him collect from the McComb jail. 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, “we would have rotted in jail.”

But the FBI, though also an agency of the Justice Department, was everything but an ally. Its head, J. Edgar Hoover, viewed what was going on in the south as Communist-inspired. He had built the FBI into an almost-independent agency. It was feared by U.S. presidents who knew that Hoover kept files on them and their supporters. His local agents, often recruited in the south, were more often allies of the local racist power structure than independent investigators whose job was to determine facts and, in certain circumstances, arrest violators of constitutional rights.

During this period Moses dealt with 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 was] an inside question [to which] I don’t know if there is any answer at all.” Visser-Maessen tells us how important it was for local people to see nonviolence in action, and that violence against SNCC workers would not drive them from local communities.

It was in Amite County that Moses had to deal with death that was the consequence of The Movement’s work, in this case his. First, Herbert Lee, a courageous Amite County farmer and NAACP activist, was shot in cold blood by a white neighbor and childhood friend, who was also a local politician. Then Lewis 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. Visser-Maessen gives a sensitive account of how this affected Moses, and puts it in the larger context of the deep influence Albert Camus’ formulation, “neither victim nor executioner”, had on Moses’ thinking:

The deaths, student direct action, subsequent expulsion from school and adult upset about the interruption in their education, local student and SNCC worker jailings, and a drop-off in willingness to try to register to vote put a chill on action in southwest Mississippi. Discussions with Amzie Moore and others led SNCC to move to the Delta, and focus its work there.

**A Movement Unfolds**

The period 1961 – Fall, 1963 was filled with ups and down. White retribution sometimes inhibited The Movement. Other times it angered local blacks, and they took action they wouldn’t have imagined themselves taking the day before, with surprising numbers of them turning out to register or demonstrate. Incidents in Mississippi triggered national responses, putting The Movement in the limelight. When government surplus food distribution to low-income people was cut-off by local authorities, northern Friends of SNCC organized massive food collection efforts and drove large moving vans to Mississippi to deliver the results. Comedian Dick Gregory, singers Harry Belafonte, Theo Bikel, Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger all came to Greenwood, SNCC’s new state headquarters.

An assassination attempt aimed at Moses almost killed Jimmy Travis; Moses was unscathed (adding to his myth). The “crawl space” provided by the ’57 Civil Rights Act also got narrower, both because the Justice Department Civil Rights Division lacked attorneys sufficient in number to take cases, and the Kennedy Administration lacked the political will to use it.

While paying close attention to the local scene, Moses was also engaged nationally: meeting with media, magazine editors, politicians, Justice Department officials, foundation executives, religious leaders, adult literacy experts, medical professionals and others to bring a national focus and resources to Mississippi.

SNCC also crossed the literacy issue bridge. Until this time, passing a literacy test was assumed by most black and white civil rights advocates to be a proper requirement for voting. Objections were made to the content and administration of the test, but not to the idea of having one. SNCC called for its elimination. Moses now argued, “The country 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.”

There’s lots more: the March on Washington, Medgar Evers’ assassination, Moses driving a bus (he had no experience, and lacked a proper license) filled with Mississippians to Birmingham for the funeral of the four girls who died in a church bombing. Visser-Maessen captures it, and the intensity that accompanied it. Her writing brought back to me vivid memories of my 1963 summer in Greenwood.

During all of this, Moses assessed what worked and what didn’t, and shifted strategy and tactics accordingly. At the center of it all: “…for Moses, any approach reshaping the Mississippi’s movement’s scope still had to be based in grassroots leadership. The national had to work for the local rather than using the local to reach national goals; any outside appeal should be rooted in the needs of Mississippi blacks, not those of national organizations, the media, or politicians. For Moses, this implied that Mississippi SNCC should expand, not abandon, its slow organizing approach. In fact, he believed in the latter’s value even more. Without it…*no mass-based political thrust could be successful; blacks would be unwilling to respond*” (emphasis added).

**Moses’ Character**

From her and other’s interviews with Moses, observations from close SNCC associates, his speeches and writing, and more, Visser-Maessen characterizes “singular attributes Moses brought to the struggle—his intelligence, audacity, (northern) resources, sense of direction and ability to mediate between the local and the national and between local blacks and local authorities, measured speech, and self-effacing style—ensured that his approach thrived unparalleled.” Elsewhere she continues to paint his character: courage, quiet, calm, attentive to people and details, always interested in drawing others out, deeply committed to liberating the energy and potential of all people, uninterested in self-promotion and more. Despite himself, there arose the Bob Moses “mystique”. I was on SNCC’s staff in those days and saw it.

She also sees a contradiction between some of his decisive actions, which she identifies with leadership, and what she understands as the role of the organizer: being in the background, challenging others to act, mediating conflicts among people and more behind-the-scenes “facilitating” roles. The contradiction is more apparent than real. Later in the book, she better articulates this question: “Organizing and leadership were thus not mutually exclusive domains but rather intrinsically linked complementary stages in producing social change.”

In my judgment, Moses’ overriding commitments were two: build SNCC as an organization of organizers—particularly including young African-Americans from Mississippi and the rest of the Deep South, and build black people power vehicles in the state: local (city, town and county) voter leagues and other groups; the statewide umbrella Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) that brought together on a united strategy the state conference of NAACP branches, CORE, SCLC and SNCC; and COFO’s political expression, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Combined these would be the vehicles to free African-Americans, from the poorest to the most middle-class, from the tyranny of Mississippi racism.

While Moses did things that are typically associated with “leadership” (like speaking with reporters or going on national speaking tours to raise funds), these were done in the service of his two principal objectives, not to promote himself as a Movement spokesperson or leader. The typical line drawn between what organizers and leaders do isn’t solid; it has to be a dotted line that leaves space for crossing over in circumstances that warrant it.

**Contradictions**

By Fall 1963, it was evident that without something different happening Mississippi black lives would continue not to matter—not to the local power structure or to the federal government or to the national news media or to white America. That fact set in motion a number of decisions, the most important of which was to bring the country to Mississippi. The first foray in this direction was the Freedom Vote, a parallel election held in protected spaces in the black community: churches, barbershops and beauty salons, restaurants and elsewhere. Some 83, 000 African-Americans cast ballots, clearly demonstrating their interest in being first-class citizens. Dozens of white student volunteers from Yale and Stanford, recruited primarily by liberal political operative Allard Lowenstein who had earlier held positions at each school, 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 too.

The Freedom Vote’s success prompted bolder plans for what now is remembered as Mississippi Freedom Summer. More than 800 mostly white (about 10% were mostly African-American and other minorities), northern students, primarily from middle-class and elite families who were attending top universities were recruited to participate in various programs in the black community. (In addition, health professionals, building tradesmen, lawyers and others came to put their particular skills to work for The Movement.)

Early in the project, Andy Goodman, one of the student volunteers, local black CORE worker Ben Cheney and CORE project director Mickey Schwerner, were murdered in a conspiratorial act that included 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, dig up suspicious sites and do whatever it took to find them. Mississippi’s Governor claimed they were in hiding, and it was all a trick to gain sympathy for Communist agitators. Bodies of earlier lynched blacks were found before the three finally were discovered. Some mainstream media and politicians accused SNCC of provoking violence for its own nefarious ends.

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 seating of the white “regulars” as the state’s official Democratic Party at the August, 1964 Democratic Party Convention. In a bitter struggle that unveiled President Lyndon Johnson’s determination not to have an insurgent party part of his Democratic Party, MFDP lost.

These events took place as if in a cyclone. The reader would get lost without guidance through the twisted paths. Visser-Maessen provides that. She also explores the substantive issues that emerged on the journey. They are complex. She does a good job here as well, though I have minor disagreements with her on some formulations and conclusions. It is those that I would like to explore here because they are as important today as they were then. The country will neither end its racism, classism, sexism or any other of its isms if today’s organizers cannot satisfactorily resolve these questions and build the people power organizations required to tame the present oligarchy that rules, and to frontally address the “isms”.

SNCC was determined to drag Mississippi into the mid-20th century United States so that at least its racism wouldn’t be qualitatively different from that of the rest of the country. But neither Bob Moses nor SNCC could overcome the contradictions they faced. Here are some of those that emerge for me in reading this book.

Contradiction #1: despite the slow, patient work done by COFO staff and the evident interest in voting shown by the Freedom Vote, a national presence was required to restrain the violence and persecution that kept voter registration at very low levels.

On the other hand: bringing northern, more formally educated, typically more self-confident, sometimes more organizationally skilled, whites to the state inhibited the development of the black local staff that Moses and others had patiently recruited. “Local people” welcomed the northerners, but local full-time staff often resented them—as, indeed, they often had a right to because the northerners got most of the attention even though they were only to be there for the summer.

Contradiction #2: the tight timeline and administrative detail imposed upon MFDP in order to comply with Democratic Party Convention credentialing requirements mitigated against the slower, more organic, development of local leadership and local organizational structures.

There was little room in the pre-convention process for “time outs” to reflect upon and absorb lessons learned during the campaign itself.

Contradiction #3: “Programs” (freedom schools, community centers, voter registration and others) were necessary to give the northern volunteers meaningful work to do, and to give local people an opportunity to interact with them.

On the other hand: the presence of the volunteers threatened the roles and status of locally recruited black field secretaries whose full time work was essential to build deeply rooted local organizations. Such organizations were essential to keep The Movement on its stated trajectory of going beyond narrowly defined “civil rights” to include job creation and training, quality education for all and an end violence, intimidation and coercion, both governmental (police and voter registrar), and non-governmental (Ku Klux Klan, White Citizens Council, landlords, employers, creditors, cotton gin owners and others) against blacks who were seeking their freedom.

Contradiction #4: Moses was determined to measure people and organizations by what they did, and to reject the chilling impact on free speech and association of remnants of the 1950s Senator Joseph McCarthy red-scare period—which were alive and well in some liberal circles. Thus he had no litmus test for volunteers, and refused to reject the assistance of the National Lawyer’s Guild (NLG), which provided some excellent legal work.

This position, however, threatened to jeopardize involvement by the much more resource-rich NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Lawyer’s Committee for Constitutional Rights and the American Civil Liberties Union. And it led Allard Lowenstein, who epitomized what was then called “cold war liberalism” into red-baiting SNCC. I know: I experienced it in the Bay Area Friends of SNCC office where I was recruiting Freedom Summer volunteers.

Contradiction #5: Moses deeply felt that any hint of violence on the part of COFO staff or summer volunteers would, at a tactical level, be counterproductive because it would be met by greater violence from racists in the state.

On the other hand, many local Movement leaders insisted on self-defense in their homes, and some of them carried guns in their cars. Moses accepted that as one of the facts of life in his environment. Philosophically nonviolent people weren’t so accepting.

Contradiction #6: Two theories of what constituted democracy were at play, particularly in the period leading up to the 1964 Democratic Party Convention. “Competing elite” theorists believed that while everyday people knew when the shoe pinched, and thus could choose from among leaders who should represent them to alleviate the squeeze, mass participation was dangerous and the source of demagogues. Professional leaders, both politicians and heads of civil society organizations, these theorists believed, were the safest repositories of democracy.

On the other hand, “participatory democrats” believed that the essence of democracy was the continuing participation of citizens in self-government, and that leaders should be closely connected with, and responsive and accountable to, constituents rather than insulated from their views and feelings. In this view, the most secure repository for democracy was the people themselves.

Compounding this tension was an obscure footnote to American history that Visser-Maessen only briefly identifies. During the mid-1930s – immediate post World War 2 1940s period, the Communist International’s Popular Front period produced a broad base of support for the American Communist Party-influenced left. Though itself operating from the very different assumption of being a “vanguard party”, it worked within the milieu of participatory democrats, and had influence among them.

A deeply-anti-Communist left, led by American former Trotskyist Max Shachtman, operated in the milieu of competing elite theorists. Unlike Trotsky, however, the “Shachtmanites” viewed the Soviet Union, and therefore the international Communist movement, as representing a new form of oppression—the totalitarian bureaucratic state. They considered themselves “third-camp socialists”—a plague on both your houses. As the 1950s and 1960s unfolded, some of them leaned toward the capitalist camp and ultimately (though later) joined the “neo-conservatives”. While small in number, their ideas and often talented organizers and leaders included or influenced Bayard Rustin, A Philip Randolph, Walter Reuther, Michael Harrington, the United Auto Workers (UAW), AFL-CIO and Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). The issues surrounding the MFDP challenge magnified the influence of both these historic groups.

Bob Moses brought the two together in the roughly-six month period prior to the Democratic Party Convention—one among many near-miracles he pulled off.

Those were heady times for activists and organizers whose politics were left of center. Large numbers of people beyond the Deep South civil rights movement were in an insurgent mode: anti-urban renewal and anti-freeway battles across the country were creating new community organizations in white working class, Latino and African-American neighborhoods, exemplified by Saul Alinsky’s work in Chicago; the anti-Vietnam war movement was growing on college campuses and among middle-class white liberals; the Ralph Nader-led consumer movement was unfolding; the same was true of the environmentalist, women’s, gay and disabled movements. There was more. However, it was not these voices that were for the most part seated at the Democratic Party Convention. MFDP might have been a beacon to these insurgent groups of what might be, but at this point in time it was alone among them as a national spokesman.

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 elite democracy theory liberal-labor-civil rights organizations), if your and their interests diverge, the latter 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 allies, they capitulated. It did not matter that their long-term interests would best be served by driving the racists out of the Democratic Party, and by breaking the Dixiecrat stranglehold on Congress.

Contradiction #7: While he occasionally allowed himself to be swept up in the enthusiasm of the moment and hope for an MFDP victory, for the most part Moses doubted the Convention would seat the new party. In his mind, however, that didn’t matter: “[G]etting seated was less important than establishing their party ‘as a permanent institution that could carry on the fight for MFDP legitimacy, black rights, and fuller black enfranchisement in Mississippi’.”

These, however, are the sophisticated considerations of a determined organizer or veteran organizational leader. That is not who comprised the MFDP delegation. The delegates believed they would win because morality was on their side. Morality alone is not the currency of politics. Many went home distressed, angry and even embittered.

**The Consequences of Defeat**

Typically, major defeats lead to deepening 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 post traumatic stress disorder”. High school friend of Moses and noted African-American psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, a careful student of racism’s impact on black mental health, was astounded at the price paid by Mississippi civil rights workers because of their continuous exposure to danger.

The energy that was devoted to organizing and politics took new forms, many of them some kind of dropping out. The Hippies were a white northern expression of this. As their guru Timothy Leary put it in 1966, “Turn on, tune in, drop out.” In SNCC, militant rhetoric and slogans, African-influenced personal styling (dress and hair), and distancing from whites increasingly characterized the organization. Counter-cultural politics substituted for 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.

Seeking to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat is a pattern common to American history. Various third party efforts dot the country’s history. When planks of their platforms were adopted by major party rivals, and sometimes implemented by incumbent majority politicians, these parties claimed victory despite the fact that their broader transformational goals had been coopted and turned into narrower specific policy victories. A. Philip Randolph spoke of “the crisis of victory” after passage of the Voting Rights Act. Such a claim was made when Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal adopted some of the Socialist Party’s platform. But Socialist Norman Thomas would have none of it: He said, “Mr. Roosevelt did not carry out the Socialist platform, unless he carried it out on a stretcher.”

Some SNCC, MFDP and COFO people fell into the trap of premature claims of victory. In their minds, for example, the Headstart (national early childhood education program) funded Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) was thought of as freedom schools with a big budget. Locally-elected poverty program boards were turned into examples of grassroots democracy. At the time, Saul Alinsky described the poverty program’s paid citizen participation as “political pornography”. Its most politically astute proponents understood it as a mechanism to coopt a social movement.

**The Question of Ideology**

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 idea: “As Staughton Lynd [a principal designer of the Freedom School curriculum], *correctly* [emphasis added] observed, ‘The penalty for non-ideological thinking is an undercurrent of despair’.” “Ruby Doris Robinson, Charles Sherrod and others were ‘ready to die’ [but needed] a program worth dying for!” Vissar-Maessen reports, “The need to distinguish between reform and revolution became an often-repeated charge in SNCC meetings. ‘Our orientation must always be towards eliminating causes…’ Such proclamations of revolutionary purposes were eventually translated into Black Power, SNCC’s first systematic definition of society’s wrongs and its programmatic solutions.”

Some of Moses’ conclusions responded to these voices of frustration, but weren’t sufficient for them: SNCC/COFO/MFDP weren’t ready for an assault on the national Democratic Party; SNCC now had to ‘scope back’ to what it was “good at and…become an ‘organization of organizers’”…“Returning to slow, long-range organizing could also end intra-organizational rivalry. Adopting ‘a different timetable gives you a different context’.” Vissar-Maessen pessimistically notes, “But as Moses had already observed in December 1963, SNCC workers lacked both patience and expertise.” They were not yet an organization of organizers, though they might have become one. Moses got the latter right, but his realization of a necessary corollary came too late to avoid disastrous consequences for SNCC: the challenge to the center of Democratic Party power in the form of a rival delegation was premature.

Post MFDP’s defeat, Visser-Maessen tells us, “Moses thought that to regain consensus in SNCC and the Mississippi movement, COFO should have been resurrected on a common issue that benefited the entire black community in the way that voter registration had done—like his educational projects or the new poverty programs—and SNCC could then exist in its service. These projects would have functioned in the same way the freedom schools, community centers and voter registration had served as organizing tools.”

I think there is a weakness to this approach. Whatever the issue might have been, it could not approach what voter registration and political participation were. Under that rubric, it was possible to persuade local black people that everything—from substituting asphalt for dirt roads and getting street lights on your block to quality education to jobs for cotton workers displaced by mechanical pickers—depended on getting the right to vote.

In 2018, the SNCC Legacy Project noted: “On a CBS national broadcast,[Mattie Bivins Dennis](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=001376fJvy-DweCdtbnQZ97loO3ovYr1voQHg8DPYgZ2NcbEalOQO0w_AtaWNm1fckBkLEKEH26x3lzYRXPWxRdHA_24ESheITH2eLMsl_kti3rb-T7NNQgnbP8jkFt4NvQpaqtHR5IaJ8ZWOg-HB_KKASXjYbmi4midAlJ5u0KZfsRk4E5NrEEgw==&c=ORtQdFxC21D97YKLoDoD-w0On1ugey88i7XTc8BRoNiFmjLV7kBKuQ==&ch=bsf01xSRRbGGWzmOPuiF7Lqw4Nak0RTExat5f3Svq2cdtkmtOTEFEA==" \t "_blank) told the country what registering to vote in her hometown, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, was really like. ‘I was thinking as I walked along the dirt road in front of my house about the dust which would be on my shoes and the scars from the rocks. And that if we had enough registered voters–Negro registered voters, this wouldn’t be a problem at all. Because the streets would be paved.’ It was September 26, 1962, and only 12 of the 7,500 voting-aged Blacks in Forrest County, Mississippi were actually registered to vote.”

Further, there were small victories along the way: registrars beginning to register people; the Justice Department getting people out of jail; northern caravans delivering food and clothing when local people were cut off welfare; the presence of celebrities who came to show their support for The Movement.

Whatever specific issue might be most important at a given point in time to a disenfranchised citizen could reasonably be connected to the right to vote, the powerlessness that resulted from its absence, and the need for people power. A new political party could be the multi-issue organization that expressed all the frustrated interests of local people. Further, a logical extension of this argument could have been the discussion of economic organization—unions, consumer- and worker-owned cooperatives, credit unions, land reform, small business loans for black entrepreneurs and more—to address economic powerlessness and the poverty that followed from it, and, finally, political programs to break concentrated economic power.

The problem with organizing “around” other “programs” is that the local people who become involved in them, the leadership that emerges from them, and the organizers who work with them, all tend to focus on the particulars of that program, and the larger goal of building an organization that can free people to effectively act on their values and interests *whatever the specifics might be*, and build the power necessary to overcome obstacles to that freedom *whatever they might be* fades into the background, only capable of resurrection in moments of crisis. The idea of building a *multi-issue organization* that uses issues to build power, and uses increasing power to attack issues that are more recalcitrant because they represent greater concentrated power, fades for *program* organizers. As organizers like to say: “power before program”.

This discussion—building multi-issue, multi-constituency people power organizations that have a blurred vision of “the good society”, and that are organized around small “d” democratic values and the full range of interests of people who are marginalized, discriminated against, exploited (fill in your word if one of those doesn’t include its meaning) in order to challenge and transform a system of concentrated power that violates democratic ideals—is an ideological one. But it’s not ideological in the usual sense because it leaves specifics to future discussions whose timing is based on the assumption that it’s fruitless to argue about those things you are powerless to change. Elaborations of what the good society might look like, in this view, should accompany the development of the power to meaningfully struggle for them. It is a “we build the road while walking” understanding of “ideology”. In my view, such an “ideology” is what is required of an organization of organizers—nothing less and nothing more.

Such an answer wasn’t sufficient to the people asking the “what’s our ideology” question. They wanted elaboration NOW.

Visser-Maessen’s sympathy toward the ideology discussion is undeserved, including “…the reality that SNCC needed specialized [policy] workers…” I don’t think so. Community leaders with no college training can themselves become highly knowledgeable on policy matters if they think gaining the expertise will lead to concrete betterment of their community. They find friendly expertise in public policy think tanks, universities and colleges, and nonprofit advocacy groups to advise them.

Organizers have to teach people how to discern among policy alternatives, to monitor and evaluate their implementation, and retain the independent power of their democratic organization to correct for errors they identify. The people power organizations they build make it possible for them to get these corrections adopted and implemented. That broadly-based, independent, low-budget community organization in Mississippi might have been the MFDP had SNCC continued to be its organizer. SNCC’s quest for ideology precluded that possibility because the debate increasingly isolated SNCC from local leaders and members.

**“Strong People Don’t Need Strong Leaders” But Weaker People Need Strong Organizations, and Strong Organizations Require Strong Leaders**

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 nature of their work required taking initiatives in countless circumstances that arose in their daily routines. The self-employed business persons’ market was the black community—which insulated them from the 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; when their survival was at stake, they sometimes came out with guns blazing—as did Hartman Turnbow when the Holmes County Klan tried to burn him and his family out of their home.

These characteristics, I suggest, made them different from organization men. Perhaps they were impatient with people who were fearful, hesitant, cautious and more dependent—which most blacks in the Deep South were, both because of their objective circumstances (particularly their work and source of income) and because of the fear their political circumstances engendered. Many of these everyday people were in local churches, led by black pastors.

I think Visser-Maessen makes a mistake when she characterizes black churches simply as hierarchical. They are that, but they are also democratic in the sense that in most historically black denominations members democratically constitute internal decision-making bodies, one of which screens clergy candidates and either hires them or recommends them to the congregation for it to hire. Further, most of them raised money internally that paid, or partially paid, the salary of their pastor. They are complex mini-polities. As a black minister with whom I worked once said to me, “When the white man divided up power, he gave the black man the church.” SNCC’s experience working with them was mixed, and there was a bias against the black church as well—in part because it was Martin Luther King’s base. Visser-Maessen picks up the SNCC bias in her characterization of the black church.

Her book ends (1966/67) as it was becoming safe for black people to engage in politics. By 1968, the black church, black teachers and other cautious black people and their cautious organizations were entering politics. Ella Baker’s and Bob Moses’ “strong people” were not able to withstand this new moderate presence because their base in the black community didn’t go deeply 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.

SNCC organizers, and the strong people they identified and worked with, were the frontiersmen and women who made it safe for the settlers to follow. SNCC/MFDP, and their more radical program that addressed fundamental economic needs of the vast majority of the state’s black population, lost the political battle within the black community over who would lead. Their more horizontal, less-hierarchical, organization, and leaders who were less-tutored in politics, and often less literate, were similarly marginalized. Their story is, in my view, a tragedy of African-American politics: no post-1930s constituency has been more loyal to the national Democratic Party; no constituency has been less rewarded for its loyalty.

Today a mostly-moderate black church and the African-American politicians it has supported over the years, are the primary voices of the black community. These “moderate” Democratic Party voices lack a program adequate to address the black community’s major problems. The recent Democratic primary, in which blacks overwhelmingly supported Hillary Clinton, is emblematic. New generations of black (and other) organizers have much to learn from SNCC, and will have to move beyond its weaknesses if they are to create the people power needed to effectively pursue policies that will address the black community’s problems.

**The Decline and Fall of SNCC**

Vissar-Maessen goes into great detail accounting for the steady unraveling of SNCC as an organization that followed the 1964 Democratic Party Convention, and escalated in 1965 and 1966. Here she quotes historian Howard Zinn, author of the first book about the organization, and devoted SNCC ally, “SNCC workers were caught in a vicious circle that leaves ‘decisions to a few people at the top, or to individuals in the field acting on their own, in other words, both too much localism and too much dictation’.”

The long simmering differences between Moses and SNCC Executive Secretary Jim Forman on organizational and leadership questions, and on the requirement of greater ideological clarity, crystallized in these debates. Forman had always favored an organizational structure in which SNCC was both an organization of organizers and a *leadership organization* with its own programmatic thrust. Local groups, whether already existing or organized by SNCC, would become affiliates and participate democratically in the development of SNCC and its program. To use a spatial metaphor, SNCC would be in front of the people it organized rather than alongside them acting as an *organization of organizers* guided by the goal of developing people power organizations led by locally developed leaders who would develop their own program based on their interests and democratic values.

Forman’s was not a self-aggrandizing position at all; there was no question about his integrity in this regard. But his experience and ideas were different. He now attributed most of SNCC’s problems to the lack of a centralized and disciplined structure, and attributed to Moses the problems of localism and structurelessness. To many SNCC people, some alternative seemed required. Quoting Moses, Visser-Maessen explains why Forman was wrong: “Do we build a SNCC machine or do we organize people?...SNCC had a network [and] basis for a structure. But we didn’t have a theory about the structure we had. And so it got thrown overboard…”

The more SNCC tried to reclaim its glory days past by centralization, discipline and ideology, the more the organization spiraled downward. Though the former didn’t cause the latter, it contributed to it. They moved it along on its trajectory of decline and fall.

Fund-raising sharply declined. Talented staff left the field. Local people distanced themselves from a SNCC they no longer understood, and whose rhetoric they found alienating. Class, formal education, north-south and racial divisions sharpened.

Only a long time-out for healing, reflection, analysis, re-focusing on organizing, and consensus building might have saved the day. Moses sought that, but to no avail. I attended the December, 1966 staff meeting where whites were voted out of the organization. Only a handful actually remained. Fannie Lou Hamer cried when the motion passed. “Mike, I don’t understand them anymore,” she said to me. I left the meeting on my way to direct Saul Alinsky’s Kansas City, MO black community organizing project, deeply saddened by what I left behind.

**Life After The Movement**

In a sensitive and moving Epilogue, Visser-Maessen brings readers up to date on her subject’s post-Mississippi civil rights movement life: brief moving about in the south; introspection and conversation with Amzie Moore; an FBI-inspired draft notice to get him out of the peace movement; underground disappearance in Canada to avoid the draft, and below-the-surface life there; divorce and subsequent marriage to Janet Jemmott with whom he now has four grown children, one of whom, Maisha, now actively carries on his work; emigration to Tanzania, seven years there that Moses called “a blessing”, connection with the country’s president Julius Nyere who helped Moses and Jemmott secure positions in the Ministry of Education; a new interest and career teaching mathematics; return to the U.S. when President Jimmy Carter offered amnesty to Vietnam war draft-dodgers; graduate study at Harvard that mixed philosophy and mathematics; a MacArthur “genius” grant and other major recognition for his work—including a Mississippi legislature adopted “Bob Moses Day”; Moses as a “family man”; return to organizing in a new form—the Algebra Project (AP), which teaches algebra to lowest quartile students who otherwise would be tracked out of the opportunity to attend college, and does so in a way that continues Moses’ emphasis on bottom-up participatory democracy—what he calls the “demand side” of education reform.

The Algebra Project demonstrated its claim that lowest quartile students could master math sufficiently to pass college entrance exams. It was beginning to make inroads in school districts across the country when President George Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” program entered the scene. The Bush Administration approach required “teaching to the test” and little else. The political power behind it marginalized AP. The two pedagogies were 180 degrees apart. The one with clout prevailed. When Bob and I spoke about this some three years ago, I proposed that he needed Alinsky-tradition community organizing clout pushing AP in local school districts. He responded by asking me to “make it happen” in the Bay Area—classic Bob Moses organizing. It may be happening in the Gamaliel Foundation organizing network’s North Bay Organizing Project (NBOP) in Sonoma County; it’s too early to tell. That organization is working to get AP adopted in local public school districts and two-year community colleges where it can help students in skilled building trades pre-apprenticeship programs. Moses similarly works with organizer Ernesto Cortez and the Alinsky-founded Industrial Areas Foundation in Los Angeles and Texas.

In addition to its on-the-ground benefits for students, I see the effort as an opportunity to bring together the strengths of the Ella Baker and Saul Alinsky organizing traditions. None of us is now “making the revolution”; much remains to be learned.

**The Devil Is In The Details**

*Robert Parris Moses* presents and fairly discusses different points of view on all the issues SNCC faced. Visser-Maessen has done extensive homework with her own interviews and those of others, examination of memos, minutes, internal organizational newsletters, speeches and other documents, news clipping files, careful reading of secondary sources—often from obscure sources—and thoughtful reflection on what all of it means. She uses Bob Moses’ story as the vehicle to both tell his story and to present the larger picture of which he was a part. The result is a treasure.

Looking through her eyes at the details of the Mississippi freedom movement, and the intricate relations between and among those building it, their allies, their adversaries and the ideas and interests of each is like reading the reports of a good detective—including some blind alleys. Some of her details aren’t quite right, but they should not detract from the book’s importance.

Some examples: characterizing Myles Horton as “old left” misses the distinctiveness of his citizenship and labor education work. In SCLC, “in reality, King’s word was final” misses the point that he typically waited to hear the voices of others, and then formulated what he thought was consensus or at least a compromise acceptable to all. Jane Stembridge was SNCC’s “only paid member” confuses full-time paid staff with volunteer members. The problem is repeated when Medgar Evers is characterized as a Mississippi NAACP “activist”; he was its full-time state-wide organizer or “field secretary”—a term SNCC used as well. Delta planters ruled through a “race-based class system”. I think this is what is generally understood as a caste system, but was left a little puzzled about her meaning. Calling the conflict between SNCC and SCLC a “turf battle” only partially states major substantive disagreements on strategy, the difference between “mobilizing” and “organizing” (which she elsewhere discusses), and serious differences over the role of local people in decision-making.

**Conclusion**

Congratulations to the University of North Carolina Press for bringing us this fine book. It is one among a number of excellent studies it has published on the south and race, as well as on other important issues.

*Robert Parris Moses* brought back a flood of memories of my time on the SNCC staff, and my experiences then with Moses and the rest of the remarkable young people who comprised that organization. But you don’t need these experiences to appreciate the book. It will bring the tumult, vitality, hope that turned into despair, and intellectual debates of those times back to you if you were active then, and re-create them for you if you weren’t. Buy this book! Read it! Think about its lessons because they are as important to our country today as they were then. And ponder this, from Matthew Desmond’s recent book, *Evicted*, as you read *Robert Parris Moses: A Life in Civil Rights and Leadership at the Grassroots*: “No moral code or ethical principle, no piece of scripture or holy teaching, can be summoned to defend what we have allowed our country to become.”

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*He authored book chapters in collections edited by Harry Boyte, Wilson Carey McWilliams, Masimo Teodori, Julian Zamora, and Chester Hartman and Gregory squires, and numerous organizational working papers or lectures on community and labor organizing, including for the Self-Development of Peoples program of the United Presbyterian Church, Aspen Institute, Poverty & Race Research Action Council, Gamaliel Foundation, University Students Cooperative Association, and Council on Foundations.*

*He has written three books on community organizing, and co-edited one:*

*\**People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky*; Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller; Vanderbilt University Press, 2015.*

*\**Community Organizing: A Brief Introduction*; (Euclid Avenue Press, 2012)*

*\**A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and power in San Francisco. *(Heyday Press, 2009);*

*\**The People Fight Back: Building a Tenant Union*, with Tony Fazio, Spence Limbocker and Karen Thomas (Organize Training Center, 1975).*

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