# Prefigurative Politics and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, by Mike Miller. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology.* November 3, 2014.

Current discussions about prefigurative politics bring back warm and reflective memories of my four years on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), or “snick” as the letters were turned into an acronym. In my recollection, we did not use the word “prefigurative” in those days—but the content of those discussions is echoed in current debates. We spoke of “the beloved community,” which was intended to describe and define both how we related to one another within the organization and what we sought to build “out there” in the world we sought to transform. By 1963, SNCC had evolved from its student movement origins into an organization of about 225 full-time field organizers and their support staff.

In local “black belt” communities of the Deep South, SNCC strengthened existing organizations, and also built new ones. It emphasized and fostered local leadership. SNCC rejected higher educational or economic status criteria for leadership, and consciously developed the capacities of people who had little formal education and who worked as day laborers, tenant farmers, sharecroppers and domestics. Stokely Carmichael led a brilliant workshop on language that lifted up these issues. (See [APPENDIX](http://berkeleyjournal.org/2014/11/prefigurative-politics-and-the-student-nonviolent-coordinating-committee/#anchor) below.)

SNCC created largely horizontal relations among its overwhelmingly black staff. The very nature of the work of an effective organizer, whether then or now, mitigates against hierarchal authority relations. “Field secretaries” engaged in conversations with community people that could not be pre-programmed. Unique biographies, local histories and personalities, and local power structures created contexts that required adaptability and autonomous action. While a hierarchical structure existed on paper, efforts to impose decisions from “on high” were routinely ignored or resisted.

SNCC field secretaries came from a wide variety of backgrounds—high school dropouts to Harvard graduates, seminarians and non-believers, southerners (the majority) and northerners. The Howard University group was close to Bayard Rustin, already a major black intellectual and organizer; Rev. James Lawson, a theology student at Vanderbilt and student of Mahatma Gandhi, was a deep influence on the Fiske group; Ella Baker, herself a veteran organizer, participated in early formative discussions on the character of SNCC and remained an influence on the organization; Martin Luther King’s influence was felt deeply by some of the theology students. Those so inclined were reading Camus and Sartre, and debating existentialism. Marx influenced others. Social Gospel theology had a strong presence in the organization. And many others were just angry at the injustices they experienced in their own lives and welcomed the opportunity to do something about them.

We were fairly naïve about the power held by the forces that were arrayed against us, particularly against the more radical small “d” democratic and economic justice aims of the organization. Locally, of course, the Dixiecrat power structure was then still deeply entrenched in the south. Equally important, with rare exception, the federal government—during both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations—ranged from suspicious to antagonistic in its views of SNCC. The national Democratic Party systematically sought to marginalize SNCC’s work after the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. None of SNCC’s more radical economic justice agenda became public policy.

In 1964, SNCC and the groups with which it worked in Mississippi, recruited about 1,000 mostly-white, northern elite college and university students and others—including lawyers, health professionals and teachers—to bring the country to Mississippi. “Freedom Summer”—what we called then the Mississippi Summer Project—made a major contribution to breaking down the walls of segregation in Mississippi and elsewhere in the south.

A focal action growing out of the Summer Project was the SNCC-supported Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) challenge to the seating of Dixiecrat racist “regulars” at the national Democratic Party convention. MFDP was a parallel political party; it presented itself as the true Democrats of Mississippi, open to the participation of both blacks and whites. As the convention drew near, it looked like MFDP’s challenge would win. That was before President Lyndon Johnson turned the heat up on various members of the Credentials Committee, whose vote would determine the outcome of the challenge. Counting on a Committee “minority report” to the convention floor, SNCC and MFDP believed that in the glare of national TV the racists would be unseated. SNCC was unprepared for MFDP’s defeat.

The presence of so many northerners and the convention defeat were important factors contributing to an unraveling of SNCC. The former because the influence of white, northern, formally-educated and self-confident summer volunteers sometimes eclipsed that of local black high-school drop-out organizers. The latter because we were so convinced that the righteousness of our cause would prevail that we neglected to plan for contingencies.

## The Unresolved Conflicts

Here are some of my observations and reflections on what happened in the 1965–1970 period when SNCC as a national organization fell into disarray and finally disappeared.

The consensus-seeking spirit within the organization could not withstand the sharp ideological debate that came to the fore, particularly after the 1964 Democratic Party Convention defeat. Consensus requires willingness to give and take, to see merit in another’s point of view, to spend time carefully listening to differing opinions. While this consensual process might result in the group moving forward on a radical idea or theory, it is not likely to be the idea or theory that any one person or sub-group held at the beginning of the process. In SNCC, however, relatively elaborate ideological formulation became a rationalization for defeat. Formal and informal factions developed around various black nationalist understandings (e.g., cultural, pluralist, Marxist) of the world. “Camps” soon developed within the organization.

Money and resources also played a part in SNCC’s internal conflicts. The spirit of shared sacrifice that existed in the earlier period of the organization was lost in the face of shrinking funding. Field secretaries were sometimes unpaid; good automobiles, necessary for fieldwork and rapid escape from dangerous situations, were limited in number, and funds for needed repairs were often unavailable. Favoritism, or its appearance, arose. Was it favoritism or good decision making if, given the scarcity of mechanics, the car of a more effective field secretary was repaired and that of less effective one was not? And who decided who was effective? If one project had a mechanic and another didn’t, there was no favoritism involved, but it might have looked that way to someone already upset that his car was not working. Some local projects developed direct ties to support groups in the north, which gave them resources that others could not access. And there were, in fact, times when real favoritism took place.

The necessity of rapid response to a hostile environment mitigated against the lengthy discussions sometimes required by a full consensus decision-making process. In its engagement with politics, SNCC had to deal with timelines that were beyond its control. To create a delegation to the national Democratic Party Convention, for example, required compliance with convention credentialing requirements. Much of politics is action followed by reaction that, in turn, requires a response. This dynamic is often not friendly to lengthy discussions that don’t end until the group reaches full consensus.

Wide variance of political literacy among the participants in an organization requires patience and forbearance on the part of those more experienced and knowledgeable who must see themselves as teachers as well as activists if unity in action is to be maintained and common understanding achieved. Multiple counter-pressures began to descend upon SNCC, making this kind of patience increasingly challenging to practice: media and allies wanted quick answers to their questions; funding became more difficult; within the staff, impatience grew with federal government failures to protect the lives and right to vote of local people. In a phrase, the realities of national “power politics” became apparent, and SNCC lacked an adequate response.

Further, those who thought they had “the answer” became more and more impatient with those who disagreed with them. Ideological disputes sharpened and polarized within SNCC. Those more adept at organizational infighting froze out those who weren’t. Decisions came from “on high” as the executive committee or coordinating committee adopted policies and practices that went well beyond the administrative implementation of what emerged from full staff meetings. The sharpness of internal debate was magnified by probable infiltration into SNCC by agent provocateurs from the FBI’s counter-intelligence program, COINTELPRO.

While seemingly endless discussion may be acceptable in some circumstances, particularly among those whose full-time job is to build people-power organizations, it is rarely acceptable among people who have to balance their movement work with their paid jobs,family and other responsibilities. They don’t have the time. Furthermore, in the constituency with which SNCC was working, there were many people who were accustomed to deferring to authority. The transition from deference to assertion is not an easy one to accomplish. People often want to know what more formally educated leaders (or organizers) think, and make their judgments accordingly. To engage people with these experiences in a process of discernment, discussion, deliberation, debate and decision-making based on consensus or near-consensus takes time.

(I discovered in my subsequent work as an organizer that role-playing was a highly effective tool in accomplishing this. If someone wanted to know what I thought, and I couldn’t get them to say what they thought, I would tell them. But if they agreed too quickly with what I’d said, I’d ask them to defend the thought against someone who might criticize it. Then I played the critic. That at least forced discussion. In many cases, it took months before trusted and respected local leaders who lacked the “credential” of formal education would begin to speak up in decision-making meetings.)

Additionally, different understandings of the role of SNCC as an organization of organizers precluded consensus. Earlier, these differences had been glossed over. James Forman, SNCC’s executive director, saw SNCC at the center of a growing federation of grassroots groups that it organized and for which it provided political leadership. As his book The Making of Black Revolutionariesmakes clear, Forman viewed SNCC as a “vanguard” organization. Bob Moses, SNCC’s highly respected Mississippi Project Director, saw SNCC organizers as people who developed others and then got out of the way. Field secretaries were to accompany local people on their journey to liberation or, more specifically, as they built local and statewide organizations that they led and controlled. These are fundamentally incompatible views that, when deeply held by their adherents, no amount of time discussing them can resolve.

Similarly deep divisions developed over race. At the December 1966 national staff meeting, SNCC voted to become an all-black organization. Former sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer, who became a legendary Mississippi leader in this period, was at that meeting. She cried when the policy was adopted. “Mike,” she said to me, “I just don’t understand what’s happening with them.” Her response was emblematic of the growing gap between SNCC’s black power militancy and the views of many local people.

While gender tensions were largely underground, and while women played important roles throughout SNCC, there were smoldering conflicts in this area. These are more familiar, so I won’t spend time on them here.

Finally, it should be noted that SNCC lacked a formal screening, recruitment, education and training process that would exclude from the specific role of “organizer” those people who lacked an orientation or capacity for the work.

## An Unsatisfactory Conclusion To An Unsatisfactory Situation

We who are engaged in movements for radical social transformation have to live in tension between the world as it is and the world as we would like it to be. Whether in the isolated zones of Chiapas under Zapatista control, or in urban America, there is tension between real consensus, horizontalism and other aspects of egalitarianism and demands for strategic and tactical in-the-moment (which may be longer than a moment) action.

It seems to me the choices we face are these:

One option is to isolate ourselves in relatively self-contained communities that seek to build “the new world” within them—various kinds of cooperatives and communes that do not engage “the powers”, support groups, and similar formations. Within these groups, we can use all the tools to be gained from new forms of democratic participation, psychotherapeutic (e.g., co-counseling) groups, and other formations to address the obstacles to egalitarianism and democratic participation. There are two major problems with this approach. It ignores systemic injustices that are all around us, that impact everyday people’s lives. For example, a worker-owned cooperative might create meaningful, well-paying and benefit-rich jobs. It doesn’t address un- and under-employment, nor the general decline of good jobs in the economy as a whole. Furthermore, enclaves of justice are likely to face power structure disruption (infiltration), repression and cooptation—all efforts to undermine them.

A second option is to engage in the kind of politics that came to characterize most of Occupy—protest actions that gain media attention, create or increase public awareness, but that lack the capacity to endure for the long march through institutional power that is required for transformational change.

This is not a new approach, though Occupy did new things in the development of prefigurative formations. Various groups in recent times have mobilized massive numbers of people to protest systemic injustice and imperial foreign policy. People like Fran Piven and Gene Sharp have elaborated on and defended this form of action. In Egypt, we witnessed this form of mobilizing cause the end of the Mubarek government. But its weakness was in its strength: it lacked the enduring power to enforce and consolidate its victory. It lacked the depth of institutional power—i.e., of organization—to bring the country to another halt when the military decided to seize power.

A third option is to accept the tensions that arise when people with vastly different levels of education, experience and available time participate in what might be called “mass-based” activity that confronts systemic injustices and the power structure that supports them in more than symbolic ways or episodic mobilizations. We can accept the fact that the culture of invidious distinction—“king of the mountain” and other aspects of individual egoism that often plague organizational life—will be present. In this context, we can at once negotiate specific wins here and there while building power for greater challenges to the status quo. As we engage with the world the way it is, and the world the way it is that is within us, we can use tools of reflection, evaluation, criticism, collective leadership, near- rather than full-consensus (i.e., not 100%) to address the problems lifted up by the call for prefigurative politics.

In this last approach, the dangers externally—that is in terms of effectiveness in the world—are cooptation or isolation. Internally, the dangers are creeping authoritarianism, bureaucracy and other aspects of the dominant culture that we carry with us and bring into our own work.

We are familiar with the isolation of the left-led unions during the anti-communist hysteria of the post-World War II era, and the cooptation of the rest of the industrial union movement. Cooptation and relative timidity seem to be the fate thus far of the Alinsky-tradition with its emphasis on concrete victories and on organizing “moderates”, though I think its commitment to continuing evaluation and reflection on its own actions may hold within it the capacity for self-correction. SNCC, as I have outlined in these thoughts, was unable to master these concerns and, I think as a result, was unable to sustain its existence.

I do not believe we will have a transformative politics in this country or the world if we cannot find ways to engage millions of people in participatory forms of organization that go beyond showing up at a demonstration. And I do not believe that we will reach that critical mass if we insist on strict and formulaic consensual, horizontal and other egalitarian relational requirements. Such insistence is guaranteed to keep social movements the province of a narrow strata of activists who will not be able to build the power to achieve the transformation they claim as their goal.

On the other hand, failure to pay attention to these ideals will guarantee that we replicate “in here”—i.e., in our own practices—some of the very things we seek to change in the world “out there.” That is the tension. We need to learn how to navigate it.

Mike Miller attended UC 1954-58 and 1960-62. He was the founding chairman of SLATE, a campus political party that was a precursor to the Free Speech Movement. He was a field secretary for SNCC, mostly in the San Francisco Bay Area from 1962-end of 1966. In 1972, he founded and became executive director of [ORGANIZE Training Center](http://organizetrainingcenter.org/), which has been his base of operations ever since. He is the author of A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and Power in San Francisco, Community Organizing: A Brief Introduction, and numerous articles on organizing; co-author of The People Fight Back: Building A Tenant Union; and co-editor of the forthcoming People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky (Vanderbilt University Press).

**Appendix: Waveland:  Work-Study Institute, February-March, 1965.**

*Notes by Jane Stembridge\* about a class held by Stokely Carmichael. (Jane Stembridge is a white southerner who was SNCC’s first full-time staff person. She administered the Atlanta office in 1960.)*

The most important class was "Stokely's speech class."  He put these sentences on the blackboard, with a line between, like this:

I digs wine                                       \\\\\\\\\         I enjoy drinking cocktails

The peoples wants freedom            \\\\\\\\\         The people want freedom

I wants to reddish to vote                 \\\\\\\\\         I want to register to vote

Stokely:     What do you think about these sentences?  Such as—“The peoples wants

freedom.

Zelma:       It doesn't sound right.

Stokely:     What do you mean?

Zelma:       "Peoples" isn't right.

Stokely:     Does it mean anything?

Milton:      People means everybody.  Peoples means everybody in the world.

Alma:         Both sentences are right as long as you understand them.

Henry:       They're both okay, but in speech class you have to use correct English.

                              (Stokely writes "correct English" in corner of blackboard.)

Zelma:       I was taught at least to use the sentences on the right side.

Stokely:     Does anybody you know use the sentences on the left?

Class:        Yes.

Stokely:     Are they wrong?

Zelma:       In terms of English, they are wrong.

Stokely:     Who decides what is correct English and what is incorrect English?

Milton:      People made rules.  People in England, I guess…

Stokely:     Does Mr. Turnbow [Hartman Turnbow, courageous local leader from Mileston

in Holmes County] speak like on the left side?

Class:        Yes.

Stokely:     Could Mr. Turnbow go to Harvard and speak like that?  "I wants to reddish to vote."

Class:        Yes.

Stokely:     Would he be embarrassed?

Class:        Yes...No...Disagreement again.

Zelma:       He wouldn't be, but I would.  It doesn't sound right.

Stokely:     Suppose someone from Harvard came to Holmes County and said, "I want to

register to vote." Would he be embarrassed?

Zelma:       No.

Stokely:     Is it embarrassing at Harvard but not in Holmes County?  The way you speak?

Milton:      The people at Harvard should help teach us correct English.

Alma:         Why should we change if we understand what we mean?

Shirley:      It is embarrassing.

…

Stokely:     If most people speak like the left, why are they trying to change these people?

Gladys:      If you don't talk right, society rejects you.  It embarrasses other people if you don't talk right.

Hank:        But Mississippi society, ours, isn't embarrassed by it.

Shirley:      But the middle class wouldn't class us with them.

Hank:        They won't accept "reddish."  What is reddish?  It's Negro dialect and it's something you eat.

Stokely:     Will society reject you if you don't speak like on the right side of the board?  Gladys said society would reject you.

Gladys:      You might as well face it, man:  What we gotta do is go out and become middle class.  If you can't speak good English, you don't have a car, a job or anything.

Stokely:     If society rejects you because you don't speak good English, should you learn to speak good English?

Class:        No!

Alma:         I'm tired of doing what society say.  Let society say "reddish" for a while.  People ought to just accept each other.

Zelma:       I think we should be speaking just like we always have.

Alma:         If I change for society, I wouldn't be free anyway.

Ernestine:  I'd like to learn correct English for my own sake.

Shirley:      I would too.

Alma:         If the majority speaks like on the left, then a minority must rule society.  Why do we have to change to be accepted by the minority group?

Stokely:     Let's think about two questions for next time: What is society? Who makes the rules for society?

[Jane Stembridge concluded]: The class lasted a little more than an hour.  It moved very quickly.  It was very good:  That is, people learned, I think they learned because:  1.  People learn from someone they trust, who trusts them.  This trust includes Stokely's self-trust and trust, or seriousness about the subject matter.  2.  People learn more, and more quickly from induction rather than deduction.  3.  People learn when they themselves can make the connection between ideas; can move from here to here to there to there.  4.  People learn when learning situations emphasize and develop one single idea which is very important to them personally.  5.  People learn when they can see what they are talking about.  He used the board.

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