

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT OF THE 1960s  
*Sowing the roots of movements to come*

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The impact of the civil rights movement of the 1960s has been felt far beyond the struggle for racial justice and equality for American Negroes. Many of the principles, strategies, and tactics developed by the civil rights organizations during their early years – such as non-violence, civil disobedience, sit-ins, peaceful marches, and an inclusive grassroots democratic membership – were the inspiration and source of concrete actions for future social movements of the Sixties and beyond. Women, students of the Free Speech Movement, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and other ethnic groups all drew upon what they witnessed in the civil rights movements as they, too, began to challenge many of America’s established political, social, economic, and cultural institutions and beliefs.

The growing strength of these competing identities in achieving social justice has also come in for criticism, however, as some claim that the newfound respect within these different groups has chipped away at a sense of a national American identity. This is true to some extent, and what has followed is that Americans of all identities are struggling with the difficult task of determining a new meaning for what it means to be American. Reformulating what it means to be American in this new “multicultural” world is not only difficult for those on the “outside” of these different groups, but it is also difficult within each group as people struggle to be a part of American society while still paying respect to the traditions of their heritage, no matter if they were born in America or came here later in life. And, between different ethnic groups, there are also tensions that exist as people with different ways of life work to live together. But, although many Americans grapple with the confusion that has developed from the growth of various gender/ethnic/racial-based identity groups, it would be far worse to withhold respect and understanding for them or deny that they exist.

Whenever any group struggles against barriers or injustices, both the oppressed and the oppressor have to deal with the reality that it is incredibly hard for those who do not feel the sting of barriers or injustice against themselves to accept that these issues even exist for others, let alone need to be changed. As Martin Luther King wrote in his “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” “we know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed,”<sup>1</sup> and that applies whether the oppressor is

white, male, wealthy, or whatever it is that gives them power over another. On the other hand, it is hard to change the attitudes that have been ingrained in the oppressed since birth as well. In the South, many older Negroes had only known a world of fear and insubordination, and many accepted that this was just the way it was and always would be. King writes of the complacency in many Negroes who, “as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self-respect and a sense of ‘somebodiness’ that they have adjusted to segregation,” or the few middle-class Negroes who have profited in some way from segregation and have become insensitive to the problems of the masses.<sup>2</sup>

This same sense of resignation must be overcome among others who struggle against oppression, too. Ella Baker and other women knew that as a woman in a patriarchal organization like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Baker would always be the “outsider within,” welcome to a certain extent but never asked to lead publicly. Mexican American migrant farm workers felt grateful when they could find work and fearful they would lose their jobs if they questioned the large farmers. Eventually women and other ethnic groups would begin to stand up for themselves and for their political, social, and economic rights. But their battles for social justice owe a great debt of inspiration to the struggles of black men and women, young and old, as they decided to publicly demand that they be treated with respect as Americans and as human beings, no matter what the consequences might be for their actions.

As others around the nation saw the Negroes of the 1950s and early 1960s civil rights movement courageously standing up against long-established racial injustice and segregation by adopting Gandhian principles of non-violence and civil disobedience, they began to be encouraged to stand up against other injustices as well, in spite of often unrelenting opposition. Many of the people who first took notice of this potential for change worked directly within the civil rights movements themselves. Often these were students who were raised during the 1950s and believed they had a duty to be responsible and give back some of what they had been given. As Clayborne Carson notes, Tom Hayden wrote the first draft of *The Port Huron Statement* shortly after he attended a 1961 meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) staff in Mississippi, combining “an infatuation with SNCC’s revolutionary élan with a belief that all activists should move beyond civil rights reforms and join in a movement for broad social change.”<sup>3</sup> *The Port Huron Statement* – argued, discussed, debated, and approved by the

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) – would become known as the “manifesto” for the growing New Left movement.

The struggle for women’s rights in some ways also grew directly out of the civil rights movement. Casey Hayden and Mary King were two dedicated, white female volunteers working closely within SNCC in its early years when they saw not only the racial injustice they were fighting against, but that “there seem to be many parallels that can be drawn between treatment of Negroes and treatment of women in our society as a whole.”<sup>4</sup> In 1965, they put those views forth in a paper entitled “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo.” The document, which was intended to spark an internal debate within SNCC about the role of women in the civil rights organization and in society as a whole, has become accepted as one of the first statements for women’s rights. Just as white Americans did not want to accept that black Americans were being treated unfairly, the men, black and white, in SNCC, didn’t want to acknowledge the concerns of women. In examining men’s reactions to conversations about women’s roles, Hayden and King wrote, “A very few men seem to feel, when they hear conversations involving these problems, that they have a right to be present and participate in them, since they are so deeply involved. At the same time, very few men can respond non-defensively, since the whole idea is either beyond their comprehension or threatens and exposes them.”<sup>5</sup> Later, when asked about the proper position of women in SNCC, “[Stokely] Carmichael jokingly responded, ‘prone.’”<sup>6</sup> Yet despite the somewhat unexpected, yet expected, reaction from males in the civil rights movement, the struggle to gain social, economic, and political rights and powers for women did find inspiration in the American Negroes’ fight against long-standing institutionalized injustices. Hayden and King acknowledge this debt as they conclude, “we’ve learned a great deal in the movement and perhaps this is one area where a determined attempt to apply ideas we’ve learned there can produce some new alternatives.”<sup>7</sup>

Many of the principles, strategies and tactics used by the civil rights protests were later embraced by other movements – the civil disobedience of the Free Speech Movement (FSM), the marches and teach-ins against the Vietnam war, the rallies and boycotts by Mexican Americans and others migrant farm workers for fair wages. The FSM began on the Berkeley campus at the University of California when the administration began to clamp down on dissent by banning what was actually a relatively small, but disparate group of people from handing out literature on various causes while on campus. Berkeley students had earlier been involved in protesting

HUAC's suppression of political beliefs as well as working with the civil rights movement to secure jobs for Negroes in San Francisco hotels. Another small group of campus radicals formed a group called Slate, whose members were actively involved in school elections. When the administration took down and banned all tables in Spraul Plaza from handing out their literature, their hardline stance (like the heavy-handed law enforcement efforts in southern civil rights movements) managed to unite many students who would never have thought to join together before the administration's actions. At this point, the young, affluent, privileged students began to feel oppressed themselves, and began to apply some of the civil disobedience and passive resistance tactics of the civil rights movement as they took over the administration building in protest and were dragged out by police without fighting back. When the faculty eventually sided with the students and the administration agreed there would be no restriction on free speech on campus except within the restrictions of the courts, the students felt an intense sense of victory.<sup>8</sup> And, although the *Daily Cal* at Berkeley "ran an article that declared the Free Speech Movement 'for all practical purposes dissolved,'" the escalating war in Vietnam gave the students a new cause. "We've got a war to stop," became the rallying cry.<sup>10</sup>

As protests against the war grew, many of the tactics used by the civil rights movement came into play as students began to debate the merits of the war and conduct rallies and marches against the war. As Lytle notes, however, dissent against the war didn't begin at Berkeley. Instead, it grew out of "old pacifist groups, leftists, and the emerging New Left."<sup>11</sup> As anti-war sentiment grew, "to preempt rivalry on the left and to address growing opposition to the war, SDS decided to organize an antiwar rally in Washington for April 17, 1964"<sup>12</sup> drawing upon the success of the civil rights' March on Washington in 1963. Before the march, however, the faculty at the University of Michigan, who were becoming increasingly uneasy with the bombing in Vietnam, gave birth to the "teach-in," as they suggested that the school cancel classes and hold a day long symposium based on the model of the civil rights freedom schools in Mississippi. Despite administration protests, the faculty took a moderate stance in putting together the "seminars, lectures, informal discussions, and a protest rally to focus attention on the war, its consequences, and ways to stop it," and by doing so, "attracted many who would never before thought of themselves as political activists."<sup>13</sup> The growing anti-war movement found the peaceful moderation that the early civil rights workers had followed was extremely effective in bringing a wide variety of people into their cause.

Perhaps one of the most effective weapons to come out of the civil rights movement was the use of economic boycotts to bring attention to a cause that might otherwise be ignored, as the Mexican American migrant farm workers also discovered. Mexican and Asian Americans worked in terrible conditions for virtually nothing on farms in the American west and southwest and also faced incredible discrimination in their daily lives. They, like the Negroes, were outside of the power system, despite their numbers within the region. In addition to racial/ethnic discrimination, Mexican-American and Asian-Americans also faced barriers of language, fears of deportation, as well as the difficulties caused by not having permanent residences. Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and other organizers of the strike against large farmers in California saw in the civil rights movement the possibility of people organizing to make their own situations better by using peaceful economic means.

Chavez, like Martin Luther King, was influenced by the Gandhian principles of civil disobedience and non-violence and applied these principles to the migrant farm workers struggles as well. As the strike wore on for years, the strikers remained committed to the principles of non-violence, even when faced with resistance and violence from local law enforcement. In 1968, after the strike had been going on for three years, Chavez went on a fast to bring national attention to the cause. Robert F. Kennedy was there to lend support when Chavez finally broke his fast, and in 1969 Chavez was honored as *Time* “Man of the Year.” The national attention eventually led the farm owners to capitulate and accept the farmworkers union, giving them better wages as well.<sup>14</sup>

In some ways, Chavez was a contradiction. He was a working class visionary, but he also believed in very traditional family roles. Women were to stay at home while the men went to work and made the decisions. Chicana author Sandra Cisneros addresses these somewhat stifling expectations for women within the Mexican American community indirectly through the vignettes in her compelling short book, *The House on Mango Street*. Cisneros’ narrator, Esperanza, speaks of her hard-working father; of her mother, who is a smart cookie but who quit school because she didn’t have nice clothes; of the girls around her who are torn between being sexy to please the men in the neighborhood, but who are shut up inside their houses after they are married. Esperanza tells us that her great-grandmother “had once been a wild horse of a woman until her great-grandfather threw a sack over her head as if she were a chandelier. [...] And the story is she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many

women sit their sadness on an elbow.” Esperanza makes up her mind that, “I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window.”<sup>15</sup>

As different groups throughout society have made strides in achieving political and social freedom, these differing cultural expectations make some people uncomfortable with accepting differing identities throughout America. The new self respect and pride in their heritage and traditions by some of these groups has brought about confusion among others who don’t share or aren’t familiar with their customs, and some claim these competing identity groups have chipped away at sense of a national American identity. This is a criticism without an easy answer, and part of the problem arises in determining exactly what a “national American identity” is and who gets to define it. The civil rights movement and movements that grew out of their struggles have made all Americans aware of the both the similarities and differences among us. We all want to, and must be allowed to, share in the American dream – social and economic freedom, respect, a chance to better ourselves, and to be heard in the political process. As different groups have begun to ask for these rights, they have also looked to their heritage as a way to define themselves and give themselves a sense of pride in their struggles. Not only is America dealing with the ramifications of the competing identities that began to arise out of the Sixties, new immigrants come to America each day and bring with them even more languages, customs, traditions which has made the sense of competing identity groups even stronger.

As a result, the effects of the growth of various ethnic/racial based identity groups that developed in the late 1960s are both good and bad. The growth was extremely welcome and necessary in the sense of awakening the consciousness of all Americans to the value of different cultures and heritages, making us aware of respecting and appreciating the many different traditions that people bring to America and that make it the vibrant country it is. On the other hand, if taken so far that these groups refuse to participate with other groups in American society – or if other groups refuse to interact with them – it can mean that we will lose the overriding sense of being one country in which we all share and take pride in. We have to appreciate and respect the unique and varied differences among our various traditions, while making sure that these differences don’t pull us apart. This is yet another dialogue that needs to be opened throughout America, as we think about how to accept and respect differences while still feeling and respecting our common bonds.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait* (1963), New York: The New American Library a division of Penguin Putnam, 2000, 75.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995, 176.

<sup>4</sup> Casey Hayden and Mary King. "Sex and Caste: A kind of Memo." 1965. Reprinted in *Keep on Walkin', Keep on Talkin'*, 48..

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, 148.

<sup>7</sup> Hayden, 150.

<sup>8</sup> *Berkley in the Sixties*. Notes from film viewed in class. 4 Nov 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Lytle, *The Uncivil War: America in the Vietnam Era*. Manuscript, to be published 2004, 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Berkley.

<sup>11</sup> Lytle, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>14</sup> *Struggle in the Field*. Notes from film viewed in class. 2 Dec 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*. First Vintage Contemporaries Edition. New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1991, 10-11.

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16 December 2003

A&S 513: Methods of Inquiry  
Decade of Dissent: the 1960s  
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