

THE SIXTIES SPEAK TO THE EIGHTIES



A Conference on Activism and Social Change

**THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT:
LESSONS FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION**
Remarks by Kathie Sarachild

Mahar Auditorium

Saturday, October 22, 1983

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Sponsors: Afro American Studies Department, Social Thought and Political Economy Program, Women's Studies Program,
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Below is the complete program and list of speakers for the "Sixties Speak to the Eighties" Conference on Activism and Social Change held at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, October 22, 1983.

9:30 Welcome and Introduction

Welcome — Chancellor Joseph Duffey, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Introduction — Sara Lennox, Social Thought and Political Economy Program, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

10:00 The Roots of the Sixties

Anne Braden, journalist active in Southern civil rights, civil liberties, labor, and peace movements for thirty-five years

James Farmer, founder and former national director of CORE

Moderator: Arlene Avakian, Women's Studies Program, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

11:30 SNCC and the Resurgence of Activism

Jim Forman, executive secretary and international affairs director of SNCC and currently chairperson of the Unemployed and Poverty Action Council

Martha Prescod Norman, SNCC field worker and fundraiser

Moderator: John Bracey, Afro-American Studies Department, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

2:00 Civil Rights and Beyond

Thelma Griffith-Johnson, founding member, Harlem Parents' Committee, and currently director of affirmative action, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Wally Roberts, Freedom School coordinator in Mississippi Summer Project, 1964, and currently editor of the *Citizen Advocate*, Massachusetts Fair Share

Kathie Sarachild, field organizer, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and founding and current member of Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement

Martin J. Sklar, founder, Wisconsin Socialist Club; founding editor, *Studies on the Left*; founding associate, *Socialist Revolution*; a founding editor, *In These Times*

Sue Thrasher, founding member, Southern Students Organizing Committee; founding editor, *Southern Exposure*; and currently staffperson, Highlander Center

Moderator: Johnnetta Cole, Distinguished Visiting Professor, Hunter College, Associate Provost and Anthropology Department, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

4:00 General Discussion: Audience and Panelists

8:00 SNCC Freedom Singers

Betty Mae Fikes
Rutha Mae Harris

Charles Neblett
Cordell Reagon

Moderator: Horace Boyer, Music Department,
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

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THE SIXTIES SPEAK TO THE EIGHTIES
A Conference on Activism and Social Change

Session on Civil Rights and Beyond

Kathie Sarachild
October 22, 1983

I really want to thank the organizers for pulling together this conference, for putting together some old soldiers and some fresh troops, so to speak. It's a great source of encouragement and strength and I think it's going to be a real contribution and I am excited and grateful to be able to participate.

I have some notes written out that I want to read from, but--for the people who are maybe getting a little antsy--like the questioner this morning who was worried about all the emphasis on the Civil Rights Movement, on history, and wanted to get on to talking about what to do now--I just want to say a little bit about the organization I am involved with now that may help you relate better to the kind of material I've prepared, because you'll find it, too, is mostly historical, and mostly about the Civil Rights Movement.

The organization is Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement and, in the late Sixties when we began, in addition to having the experience of launching consciousness-raising as a program we also came out of some of the early public actions and militant disruptions of the Women's Liberation Movement.

So, it's not that we are not into action and do not expect to continue to be into action, and the organization has gone through several membership changes, structural changes. But anyway, despite that history of action in the past and despite plans for future action, in recent years we made the decision that we were going to start calling the organization a "think-tank"--a women's liberation think-tank and, particularly, a grass roots women's liberation think-tank. We did this to dramatize the need we felt the movement had now for getting its bearings, for touching base, for reviewing its history, for analyzing its experience, its successes and mistakes, and the experience of all

radical struggles in order to learn how to go forward, to get ideas for going forward. In other words, we decided that the most important thing to do right now, certainly for us, is essentially the very thing this conference is doing.

A whole lot of thinking and conclusions and lessons lie behind those two apparent contradictions, "grass roots" and "think-tank"; some of which, I hope, will emerge from my prepared remarks. But unfortunately, it's not going to emerge in the form of "recipes." It's not that I feel as if I don't have some recipes. I actually do feel that there are some recipes as a result of all this; but the material won't come out in quite that form. Maybe in the discussion and further on it will.

SECRETS OF THE SIXTIES

The secret of what made the rare and wonderful moment of the Sixties isn't necessarily the secret of what will make the next wonderful revolutionary progressive period. There will, of course, be all kinds of different factors. But I have to say I'm left from my experience of the Sixties with the powerful feeling that there were certain things about the movements of the Sixties--and particularly the Civil Rights Movement--that will always be characteristic of, that will always be earmarks of, the most vital revolutionary movements and moments. And the secrets of the Sixties of this kind, the kind we can learn from again and again, were found first, and can still be found foremost, I believe, in the Civil Rights Movement. This is not commonly realized or understood, and I wish I had time to relate example after example of why I believe this is true, and how I believe it relates to future political work. Instead, like other people already, I'm just going to be touching on a few things, mostly from impressions and from pondering on personal experience, that I hope will be food for some thought and further connections you can all make.

I want to say, too, that there are lessons about mistakes that can be found in the Civil Rights Movement, mistakes that were repeated by later movements. But I'm not going to go into them. Right now, I'm going to talk mostly about the positive things.

I think it's also important to remember, before veering into nostalgia, that this rare and wonderful revolutionary moment of the Sixties occurred amidst a period characterized by political murders and lynchings, assassination of leader after leader, and a terrible, criminal war in Vietnam--and that these two aspects of the Sixties were related to each other, and that many of the conditions which led to them still exist. I want to concentrate

in the few minutes I have on some of the powerfully positive effects; but it's important to remember this contradictory reality. All my mother could think of when I was far off in Klu Klux Klan, nightrider Mississippi were the murders and threats of murders. And I know when I first went South I had no inkling that danger wasn't going to be the main point and that instead I was about to embark on the wonderful positive experience that would teach me a basic understanding I had never had before and would change me in some permanent and fundamental ways. The murders, of course, were a reaction to the liberation struggle--the resistance--which was beautiful.

I have a very strong personal sense of what I learned from the Civil Rights Movement, in which I participated as a rank and file activist follower, not a leader--and of the lessons I brought from it to the Women's Liberation Movement, in which I participated as a leader, as one of a small band of women who consciously sat down to try to figure out how to launch certain issues, bring them to national, even world attention, and begin to organize to solve them. The effect of the Civil Rights Movement on all the movements that arose in the Sixties is so profound that it is hard to know where to begin.

The southern Civil Rights Movement, particularly SNCC (the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) sparked and taught almost everything in the cultural, and to some extent political, revolution of the Sixties--from the world-wide popularity of blue jeans, when SNCC organizers began wearing overalls to relate more easily to the local rural black folk, through the Anti-war and Women's Liberation Movements, to the "Hippies." It's hard to convey and deal with the nature of the debt. But the reality, the evidence of my own experience, is that the Civil Rights Movement was the most powerful fuel I have yet received for a radical political commitment. I say this even though a brand of feminist consciousness and reading had been an important part of my life--of my energy and enthusiasm--before the Civil Rights Movement, and even though I now remain fundamentally committed to the Women's Liberation Movement in whatever forms it may take in the future in order to succeed.

I shouldn't really have to say "even though," because the lessons from the Black Movement, the lessons I learned at the time and the lessons that are coming to me now years later, as I look back and understand them better, all confirm the conclusion that there is no fundamental contradiction, conflict of interest, or whatever you want to call it, between genuine liberation movements, between movements toward greater human equality and justice. And the bottom line is that in any liberation movement the women in it, sooner or later, are going to have to, and will want to, demand women's liberation, equality.

TENSIONS BETWEEN THE MOVEMENTS

But there is a certain tension between the movements sometimes. And one of the most important reasons for this, no doubt, is that in our country, powerful ruling groups of male Euro-Americans (originally, wealthy, Anglo-, Euro-Americans), have succeeded in playing different oppressed groups off against each other, by giving or forcing on them terrible "choices," leading to terrible setbacks on all fronts. One of the most dramatic examples of this, of course, was the bitter pill to swallow--when the word 'male' was inserted into the U.S. Constitution for the first time, with the Fourteenth Amendment after the Civil War, as a compromise to win Negro male suffrage. Charles Sumner, the radical Republican senator, lamented at the time that he covered nineteen pages of foolscap in his effort to formulate the Fourteenth Amendment to omit the word 'male' and at the same time secure the ballot for the Negro. He failed, and after that it took 65 more years for women to get the vote, while in the South black men as well as women ended up losing it--in practice, if not in theory.

Maybe it could be said there was some final justice to this trade-off when sex discrimination in employment was largely outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, just before the actual organized stirrings of a new feminist activism began and a year before the right to vote was re-won for black Americans in the South. Although the insertion of 'sex' into the 1964 Civil Rights Act was originally a prank, a move by Southern segregationist congressmen to derail the Act, it was a divide-and-conquer tactic that could no longer succeed. It backfired, in fact. Jim Forman has told me that there was intense discussion among Civil Rights forces to support the idea of barring sex discrimination even before the "trick" amendment provided an impetus. And now, in these times of backlash, the continued existence of the Civil Rights Act will be more secure because both race and sex are covered by it.

I had considered myself a radical before going South. I came from a left-leaning middle- to lower-middle class family in which I had grown up in the silent Fifties loving Pete Seeger and Paul Robeson renditions of folk songs and freedom songs, and hoping, though never really dreaming, that I'd see the day when folk singing and sandals and long hair--not to mention Afros--not to mention marching and picketing and going to jail on civil rights and anti-war issues would become wide-spread phenomena throughout the country; and when hundreds of students at Harvard, where I went to college in the early Sixties would, by the end of the Sixties, risk getting thrown out of school on political issues. Of course, it was at the very beginning of the Sixties that the first mass risk-taking of college students began, with the black college students who started the daring sit-in movement

against racial segregation in the South and started SNCC.

Although I had considered myself a radical before going South, within days of my joining my first Civil Rights Movement project, the Mississippi Summer Voter Registration project of '64, and meeting SNCC organizers at the orientation session in Oxford, Ohio, I realized there had been something terribly wrong with my radicalism up 'til then; and the lessons I learned about this, and the new ones that I kept learning as the Civil Rights Movement developed further into Black Power, were crucial to, and made possible, the later work in the Women's Liberation Movement. (I think this is true, personally, in terms of the kind of "radical" feminist work I have been associated with, and continue to think of myself as doing; but the influence of the Civil Rights Movement was also there at a general level, for all who participated in the early days of the resurgence of feminism. The National Organization for Women, after all, is called N.O.W. after **Freedom Now**, the Civil Rights slogan.)

The first thing I was astonished at was that I had just met the most interesting, exciting group of people I had ever encountered. The most interesting and exciting ones, of a pretty exciting bunch, were black men and women; and my surprise at discovering how exciting these black organizers were, and how deep and broad was the spirit and the work of the movement they were organizing, made me recognize a terrible blindness in myself and acknowledge for the first time that, radical though I thought I was, I had been a racist.

AVANT-GUARDISM

I also rather quickly realized that I'd been kind of a pedantic snob and had been suffering from what I now call "avant-guardism," a problem I feel still affects in various ways most of the predominately white left in this country, particularly the peace movement and the socialist branch of the labor movement, though to some extent the feminist movement--I do think that the feminist movement has been much more down-to-earth than the white left, in general. This is a problem related to, although a little different from, the class issue. And what I mean by "avant-guardism" is just as bad as "vanguardism"--although I want to make clear that I believe there is such a wonderful and necessary thing as a true vanguard, an authentic avant-guard, and that SNCC, for its time, was it.

What I meant then, what I realized, was that smartie though I thought I was, I had somehow been missing the point, missing the radical essence and fantastic importance of the Civil Rights Movement. I had been thinking of the Civil Rights Movement as too "simple" (somebody else, I guess it was James Farmer, made that point), as merely--I remember telling myself secretly--a little catching up exercise in American history. I mean, the

Civil Rights Movement was just working on implementing the "Declaration of Independence." Why, I was ready, I wanted to go beyond the "Declaration of Independence." Of course later I would realize that same attitude was holding other people back from working in the feminist movement, which, after all, was just trying to implement the "Declaration of Independence" also. Civil Rights and women's liberation were passe' to a lot of people even before they were won.

Still, the fantastic courage and sheer audacity of the Civil Rights Movement had a powerful attraction for me, and I think it was the audacity of the Mississippi Summer Project which got me to volunteer, even though I thought the issue was a little passe'. (I'm still embarrassed when I think about the lighthearted distance with which I treated a system which people were suffering from and resisting like that.) And I think that the first lesson I dimly realized at the time, when I got taken with how exciting the SNCC people were, and have only recently realized more fully, is that courage is as important as consciousness, that courage is a form of consciousness even.

All the SNCC staff people at that Oxford orientation session were talking about courage, warning people about what had already happened, preparing people for what might be coming. And sure enough, three people were lynched within the week, including one of the new volunteers. Lynched, I should remind you, by the police, by the Sheriff, like the death squads in Central America. I should say their names, Mickey Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Cheney.

COURAGE, CONSCIOUSNESS, ORGANIZATION, SPIRIT

Not only did the SNCC people talk about courage, but they also seemed to me terribly well organized. I still remember being impressed with the maps of Mississippi and information packets and reading lists they handed out, the role playing sessions in which we practiced dealing with problems that might come up, the elaborate system of telephone WATTS lines in which we could communicate and receive information, give and get help when problems arose. This good organization had a nice steadying effect--when it worked--but as other people have also said, it was the spirit of SNCC that was so wonderful and to which I made a life-long commitment.

I think, though, the lesson I took most directly with me to the Women's Liberation Movement and which was the most important, at least in the beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement, had to do with the grass-roots nature of the Civil Rights Movement. Actually the very idea of a Women's Liberation Movement grew out of this grass-roots nature of the civil rights movement. Just using my own experiences as one example, I first heard the phrase "women's liberation" in March of 1965 when I was returning to the

little rural town of Batesville, Mississippi, where I had worked the summer before. Chris Williams, one of the white civil rights workers who had stayed all winter and had been one of the few guys around who had been good at helping with the housework the summer before, and who knew I was into feminist issues (though we didn't call them feminist issues then), was anxious to tell me that "women's liberation" was one of the latest big topics in SNCC. It was going around staff meetings, there'd been a workshop, speeches. He mentioned Ruby Doris Robinson, Casey Hayden, Mary King, that Donna Moses, the wife of Robert Moses, SNCC project director in Mississippi whom we all looked to as a leader, had gone back to her maiden name. The very phrase "women's liberation" in that context of a dynamic grass-roots movement in the wilds of Mississippi ignited the feminist part of my brain in new ways and I remember the feeling of being thrilled with the sense of new possibilities.

IMPORTANT CHANGE

It was in the period after I had returned to Batesville, in the months after I had been elated by the phrase "women's liberation," that I think the most important change occurred in me because of the Civil Rights Movement; and the change that, though not directly related to women's liberation, had the most to do with my particular kind of work in the feminist movement. I think in those months--to use a Maoist phrase--I changed my class stand. For a while there, I was the only "outside agitator" civil rights worker in town. None of the "super-SNCCs," as we used to call them, the exciting SNCC leaders, were around. And I remember being terrified at first that it would all be very boring and lonely. I was worried that there wouldn't be anything to talk about with the local farm people with whom I was staying, the local black activists. If we couldn't talk about books, movies, heavy politics, what was there?

Well, what can I say? It wasn't any trouble. There turned out to be an endless supply of everyday happenings--some of them very political--to analyze with the local folk in the pithy, down-to-earth language of the area which I'll point out, is Faulkner Country. (As one friend said, who noticed the same thing, he now knows Faulkner's novels must have come straight from his maid.)

It was after this that my "reference group," so to speak, totally changed. It had begun to change when I had met the SNCC leaders. But the change was completed during that stay in Batesville. I remember, before I went to Mississippi, that different local American accents--from black American to Boston to New York--had irritated, almost disgusted me. After Mississippi, I loved different accents. I loved the color of them, and the slightly different views of things you got from

each. My reference group had changed, in the sense that the people whose approval I wanted to win were no longer the Harvard intellectuals (though anybody's approval is nice to have, of course!) My test of success for my life had become partly what the SNCC leaders, male and female, thought, or would ultimately think, of what I was doing, and, a large part, what the American working people--male and female, Euro-, Afro- and Native American--thought of what I was doing, or would ultimately think of it. I don't mean this to be very grandiose, but really very simple and also really difficult. And it's a process I think many other people have gone through, too, because I think the Civil Rights Movement radicalized many people in this way. But it had a very important connection to women's liberation because it threw a whole new light on the masses of women, the very masses that the so-called advanced women were supposedly trying to run a mile-a-minute to avoid identification with. It--and other lessons of the Black Liberation Movement that related directly to feminism--made me realize that we all weren't so different. Well, of course, it made some of us realize that before others. This was important in teaching me what I think was one of the most important strategic assumptions of the new feminist movement, and that was our concentration on reaching women themselves. We saw that it was necessary to put the major part of our energy and resources into reaching women, even when they seemed harder to reach at first, than say, liberal men. (And we also borrowed some ideas about liberal men from the Black Movement's ideas about liberal whites.) We saw that the ultimate success of our liberation movement, our own liberation, depended on our reaching the masses of women--or else women would continue to be played off against each other. And it was partly out of this impulse, and out of finding ways to achieve these goals, that the ideas about consciousness-raising came.

POSITIVE TOOLS FROM CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT LEADERSHIP

I think you can see from this that the Women's Liberation Movement came more out of the positive leadership of the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements than from negative experiences with male chauvinism, though, of course, it was a little of both. In my case, anyway, I know that Stokely Carmichael's suggestion to the whites in SNCC that they go fight their own oppressors sparked my radical understanding of the potential of a Women's Liberation Movement more than his quip about the proper position of a woman in SNCC being "prone" pushed me into it. For one thing, although his remark made a particularly colorful quote, I had run into male chauvinism in radical men many times before. It was nothing new. What was new in the Civil Rights Movement were the positive organizing ideas and concepts. What was new was the idea of doing something about it, in a grass roots movement--along with some tools for beginning.

There's a lot more that could be said in their details.

I've had to pick and choose. And there's the whole question of the future. What are the clear-cut strategic issues for which groups, and if there are any clear-cut strategic issues for all groups, how to make them clear to people, to ourselves (I believe, for instance, that a lot of the lessons of the Black and Women's Liberation Movements can be applied by the Anti-nuclear Movement and by the Labor Movement, which needs a rebirth.)

We have the problem of working out and connecting and possibly synthesizing all the burning issues that are now competing for time. Hopefully, an essential core solution will soon emerge that will be able to connect all the diverse forces into a single powerful movement. Right now, it looks impossible. But to me, the overall, biggest, most powerful lesson of the Sixties is that big changes can occur, do occur. So we shouldn't be discouraged by what momentarily looks impossible. Often the big changes occur in very short periods of time, in bursts--in surging moments of activity when currents come together. The more lessons we've learned from the last surge--or maybe I should say fusion--the more progress, I think, humanity will make in the next one.

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

The following are suggested for more on the lessons for women's liberation organizing from Civil Rights Movement experience (listed chronologically, in order of publication):

The Making of Black Revolutionaries by James Forman, first published in 1972 by The Macmillan Company, New York and republished in 1985 with a new preface by Open Hand Publishing Company, Seattle, Washington. Available in paperback for \$12.95 from the Unemployment and Poverty Action Council, P.O. Box 21097, Washington, D.C. 20009

Autobiography of SNCC's longtime executive secretary, this is a pioneering, firsthand account and vivid analysis of SNCC organizing, capturing the incandescent courage and fresh, creative methods of SNCC's work and the terrible dilemmas faced when SNCC began to disintegrate at the height of its historic impact.

Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation In The Civil Rights Movement And The New Left, by Sara Evans, 1979, Alfred A. Knopf, New York

An exciting overview, which pioneered in tracking down some of the long lost but legendary documents and events in the period when feminism began to emerge from the SNCC Civil Rights Movement experience. The book corrects some widespread myths from this period, showing, for instance, that the first and anonymous 1964 position paper on the position of women in SNCC was authored by Mary King and Casey Hayden, and not, as one previous women's liberation legend had it, the SNCC leader who died at age 25, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson. Written by a veteran of both movements, the book does a good job of capturing the spirit of both civil rights work in the deep South and early women's liberation organizing.

Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement by Mary King, 1987, William Morrow and Company, New York

A moving firsthand source by one of the young white Southern women on SNCC staff who, with Casey Hayden, in 1964 and 1965 wrote the two early papers on the position of women in the Movement that enormously influenced the women's liberation organizing that was begun by other women a few years later. Casey Hayden contributes a preface which, along with the book itself, passes on some more of the unique and wonderful qualities of the SNCC staffers and the overall values and context out of which the work of these women developed.

Freedom Summer by Doug McAdam, 1988, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York

Focusing on the Freedom Summer voter registration campaign of 1964 organized by SNCC, this is the first work to highlight, document specifically, and trace the particular relationship between Freedom Summer volunteers and the first women's liberation organizers of the late Sixties, as seen and embodied by those women who were both.

"We Shall Not Be Moved" The Life And Times of The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Audio tapes of the historic April 1988 SNCC reunion and conference at Trinity College, Hartford, Conn. Includes a panel on "SNCC and the Stirrings of Feminism" with Casey Hayden, Mary King, Joyce Ladner, Jean Wheeler Smith and SNCC staff and Freedom Summer volunteers participating from the audience. Entire conference on ten 90 minute and three 60 minute audio cassettes, available for \$30.00 to individuals and movement groups and \$50.00 to institutions, from the Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives, 255 Ft. Washington Ave. #33, New York, N.Y. 10032.