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Even in the rich field of scholarship on the civil rights movement, Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* shines – a superb study of the severest test for that movement, Mississippi. It also does something that other studies fail to do: it advances the historical scholarship on social movements in general by applying a powerfully analytic inquiry to a local, grassroots struggle. The result is a spellbinding narrative whose protagonists are not Martin Luther King, Jr. or other national figures, but local activists. This ambitious study seeks to explain the sources and processes of bottom-up, grassroots organizing. It combines sophisticated scholarship with a gripping story, told with spiritual and moral as well as emotional power.

Payne’s book stands virtually alone in the field because historians have been underdeveloped in analyzing and theorizing social movements and social movement leadership. *Light of Freedom* lights a path for historians to follow. Payne is not by disciplinary training an historian but a sociologist. Yet he writes in a manner more characteristic of historians, allowing his theoretical assumptions and axes of analysis to spring, seemingly “naturally,” from within a narrative. Its generalizations and arguments are embedded in, and flow from, nuanced, detailed understandings of the particular place, time, and actors. As a result the book does not intimidate a general audience as so many other scholarly studies do. It is, moreover, a wonderful book to teach because it offers the students a sophisticated analysis along with the challenge of discovering it within a narrative.

Payne’s book is a close examination of the civil rights movement in Mississippi, particularly the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “snick”). The story is based on decades of interviews and research and, like many such microcosmic works, reaches far beyond Mississippi and back several decades in order to explain how this movement came about. That this militant movement arose takes some heavy-duty explaining, because African Americans in Mississippi faced an apartheid, terrorist state and suffered devastating reprisals for challenges to the system. Sociological theorists have taken up this explanatory challenge with hypotheses that delineate the structural factors that condition social movements and their shape. These conditions include, for example, political opportunities, that is, contradictions and weak points within dominant political structures; and the resources, including “human resources,” that advocates can mobilize.
Payne, by contrast, focuses on human agency and culture. He does not disregard the structural conditions that allowed the civil rights movement to happen, such as the decline of demand for plantation labor, but considers less-often-studied sources. Using what were once called “free-will” rather than determinist assumptions, Payne is interested in different questions. He wants to know why people step into risky activism, and structural theories will never explain this because, no matter how ample the political opportunity, some will lead, some will act, some will remain inactive. One of Payne’s most important themes is that good leaders (and good followers too) devote care, thought, practice, and skill to constructing their political projects; that they have often imbibed a culture of social responsibility; that they have often been apprenticed, mentored by older leaders; that their leadership rests on a great deal of knowledge and expertise.

Payne writes, “I once heard a journalist who had covered the movement remark that two decades after its height the civil rights movement had inspired no great works of art – no great novels or films, no great plays. He rather missed the point. The movement was its own work of art” (p. 256). A social movement is not just an emanation of beauty, or of justice, or of rage, but a product of art, even artifice – that is, of craft, skill, strategy, hard work, and discipline. Social movement leaders are often master artists (note that we have no feminine or ungendered word for mastery in that sense). In the political arts, a social movement may also be as close as human beings will ever get to full democracy, which would have to mean not just a liberal democracy – choosing between alternatives defined by others, but a republican democracy – participating in shaping alternatives.

Charles Payne begins his study by distinguishing between mobilizing and organizing. In his usage, mobilizing is what Martin Luther King, Jr. and other great orators, often ministers, did in social movements: they used words, music, charisma, passion, and courage to motivate; projected their own self-confidence to inspire others to think that justice was possible. Mobilization, in Payne’s sense, was vital to grassroots social movements because it allowed those normally excluded from or indifferent to politics to demonstrate their political power, and it allowed individuals to gain strength from feeling part of a larger community of the just. Mobilization not only exerted power on leaders, but also served to inspire, encourage, and rededicate those who need social change. Not only through demonstrating and rallying but also through creating drama, stimulating media coverage, and threatening disruption, mobilizations forced concessions from the powerful. These mobilizations have worked even when they were not victorious. The 1965 Selma, Alabama, demonstration where protestors were brutally beaten on the Pettus bridge was arguably as influential as the 1963 march on Washington. In Selma the mobilizers of the march turned the fact that they were driven back by force – defeated, in other words – into a moral, spiritual, and media victory.

Payne uses organizing to mean, not building organizations, but transforming popular consciousness so as to make individuals active, not passive, members of a democratic order. Organizing in Payne’s definition thus involves not just different tactics but actually a different vision of what freedom and democracy can mean. He shows how the best civil rights organizers aimed to self-destruct as leaders – that is, to make people need them less, to build leadership in others. Organizing works through developmental politics, in which the immediate objective, the demands, may
matter less than bringing people to see themselves as having the right and the capacity to have a say in the community or polity. Ella Baker said, “SNCC demonstrated the possibility of taking uninitiated people and working with them to the point that they began to understand where their interest really was and the relationship to their own capacity to do something about it.” This is not just empowerment, as the concept is used in pop psychology. It is intellectual and political because it requires understanding one’s place in the social world and being able to evaluate realistically how to exert influence. On the other hand, it does have a significant psychological dimension: master organizers like Ella Baker also understood and practiced an insight that in the late twentieth century was more often associated with psychotherapy—that people have to discover the most profound things for themselves.

In organizing, as opposed to mobilizing, personal transformation became a part of political empowerment. Charles Payne examines this process closely, and evaluates it as a process rather than measuring it by the achievement of specific goals. He does not trivialize the movement’s goals, but suggests that self-transformation was a condition of achieving them. His analysis implies that organizing worked primarily through face-to-face contact. When social movements are risky, or challenge hegemonic presumptions, the printed word or even a public lecture was unlikely to bring a new person to a meeting or a picket line populated by strangers—only personal connections would do so.

In this analysis Payne disrupts a conventional public/private distinction, in which social movements are categorized on the public side. In perhaps the greatest historical tradition of examining social movements, that of Marxism, the private has usually been associated with quietism, conservatism, cowardice. Payne’s refusal to accept this public/private distinction is an intellectual move consonant with the new women’s history, and his emphasis on Ella Baker along with Robert Moses as consummate leaders reinforces that association. He shows that civil rights activists were often continuing family traditions, building on kinship and personal friendships, judging people’s character as well as their ideas and words.

Previous work on SNCC has emphasized its defiance of and break from the conservatism of an older generation of southern black leaders. Payne, by contrast, emphasizes generational continuity. He shows how the SNCC youngsters who moved into Mississippi began by searching out old activists and succeeded by depending on them. He shows how the most effective young activists found ways to include and value the contributions of even the most timid and conventional rather than deride them for their lack of militance.

Yet this focus on human agency does not morph into an idealist or starry-eyed sensibility. On the contrary, within the analyses of strategies and tactics, Payne focuses persistently on the balance of power. This is illustrated by his forthright and subtle discussion of violence. The movement gained substantially from its commitment to nonviolence, but too many observers and scholars of the movement took that to be an absolutist, religious commitment, and for many it was not. Payne shows us the black men who sat up on their porches at night with a shotgun or a rifle to watch for marauding white racists who believed they could shoot blacks with impunity. One said, “I wasn’t breaking with nonviolence, I was just defending myself.” This defensive posture was of course multilayered: it was simultaneously an insistence on upholding a “manly” obligation to protect women and children, a declaration of
willingness to sacrifice one’s own life, and a tactical determination to raise the cost to the terrorists of intimidating blacks. Its message was, you can shoot me but which of you will die first? Payne interprets white violence equally subtly. The fact that racist vigilantes in the 1960s turned to attacks at night was a sign, he points out, of their increasing timidity, of the “lessening return from racist violence” (p. 40).

In his class analysis Payne reunifies structure and agency with his characteristic complexity. Civil rights in Mississippi was not primarily a middle-class black movement, he shows, but it did gain disproportionate contributions from those who were not entirely economically dependent on whites. Yet he avoids determinism. He refuses, for example, to attribute the disproportionately great contributions of women activists to their alleged insulation from economic reprisals, but examines how they strategically politicized their personal and church experience and connections.

In his introduction to the book, Payne insists that courage was the least of the organizers’ gifts. A puzzling comment at first, since we know how extraordinary was the courage of those who faced beatings, water hoses, dogs, and sheer terror. Payne’s comment is the essence of the book’s contribution, however: its insistence that social movements are not mere emanations of desperation, faith, or blind passion, but one of the great human creative, intellectual, and political achievements. They deserve much more serious analysis by historians than they have received, and for anyone wanting to do this, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom is a good place to begin.

REFERENCE