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FANNIE LOU HAMER: MISSISSIPPI GRASSROOTS ORGANIZER

By SUSAN JOHNSON

BLACK POLITICS in the South is and has always been related to the racial climate; patterns of racial segregation, characteristic of southern politics, are indicative of white power. Discrimination deeply rooted in southern law and custom was enforced by legal and extra-legal violence. Traditionally, Mississippi, like most other southern states, excluded Blacks from positions of decision-making in all institutions, initiated the poll-tax bias in voting requirements, and used a variety of tactics to dissuade Blacks from participating in the electoral system. The lynching records in Mississippi, bulwark of white supremacy, demonstrated the powerlessness and the vulnerability of the Black community. Only within the last two years has the selection of Black leadership in Mississippi changed. Generally speaking, the white establishment chooses the Negro leaders, thus illustrating that the Black community is still dependent.

The ability of these leaders to effect the patterning of political behavior with their communities did not rest upon their control of institutional structures which in a major way affect social, political, and economic life; nor did it rest upon charismatic relationship with the Negro masses or upon the adoption of positions on race-related issues that articulated the deep sense of frustration and hostility which southern Negroes felt. Crucial for the maintenance of a position of leadership was a favorable relationship with influential whites.¹

Blacks had no other feasible alternative than to accept the Mississippi way of conducting their political affairs. Only in this manner could they gain the most within the system without having any political power. This is simply to say that the functioning of whites, the out-group, determined the direction of Blacks comprising the in-group.² Today, dramatic changes are taking place in Mississippi due to the dynamics of the indomitable Fannie Lou Hamer. As a race leader, Ms. Hamer is in a particularly vulnerable position. However, her activities are beneficial to the Black community of Ruleville and to the inhabitants of Sunflower County.

Ruleville is a small rural town situated in the Mississippi Delta. Its population is approximately 4,000, of which 2/3 are Black. These Blacks live along the dirt road in shanties and on plantations. The majority of the Blacks work as sharecroppers and some are employed by new industry coming

1. Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., *Negro Political Leadership in the South* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1966, p. 44.

2. *Id.*

to the South. During the last year, Blacks were paid a salary equivalent to that of whites; previously, they only received 66% of that earned by whites due to racist employment practices. Other Blacks work as domestics, handymen, or remain unemployed. In many cases, both laborers and non-laborers are subsidized by the federal government's food stamp program. Hunger and deprivation are very real to the inhabitants of Ruleville but they talk positively because "things are getting better." Of the twenty-five citizens whom I interviewed, all pointed out proudly the economic achievements of Fannie Lou Hamer.

As a nationwide fund-raiser, Ms. Hamer uses thousands of dollars in donations to improve the economic condition of the poor in Ruleville. During my brief stay in Ruleville, I noticed new housing developments, community and day care centers, and new schools standing in the middle of what were cotton fields and plantations. Broken ground surrounded these new establishments in preparation for additional buildings. Although white industrialists are coming to the area in small numbers, and economic growth is evident, the Black community is still dependent on whites. Regardless of the consequences, there is a growing political concern among Blacks who are desirous of self-determination.

AN EXAMPLE OF economic development is the founding of Freedom Farms Cooperative. Freedom Farms is a cooperative owned by the Black citizens of Ruleville. As a community coordinator, working under the auspices of the National Council of Negro Women, Ms. Hamer organized this recovery project to provide homes for low-income and those to whom she refers as the "no-income families." In conjunction with HUD and the racist southern housing authorities, several \$17,500 homes are being built. Once the initial land is purchased by the cooperative and HUD, local housing officials get construction underway. At the same time, training programs are established and the financial mechanics of lease ownership go into motion. The financial requirements are simple because the family whose income is \$3,000 per annum automatically qualifies. The stipulation is that the future owner agrees to apportion 20% of his income as lease-payment for the house with the difference in actual cost being subsidized by HUD.³

The process from ownership to purchase becomes quite involved with bureaucratic red tape and requires a period of several months. First, the tenant accumulates an equity account of funds that become the down payment. These funds are credited to his account for maintenance services on the home and surrounding areas. Second, the tenant receives \$11 per month for his services until his equity account holds \$200. At this point, the amount accrued is sufficient to make the transfer from leasee to owner.⁴

Freedom Farms rests on 50 acres of some of the richest land in the Delta. Negotiating to buy more land, Ms. Hamer says that she plans to use the additional acreage for vegetable production and a livestock program. Independent of long-range plans, Freedom Farms is a success. It is developing organizational skills and economic know-how in the Black community. By doing it themselves, Blacks learn about the complexities of community economics and organizational development.

3. Ernest Tidyman, "Operation Womanpower for People", *Tuesday Magazine*, v. 5, no. 7, (March, 1970),

p. 9.

4. *Id.* at 10.

In Ruleville, the Black population outnumbers the white; however, the latter dominates city politics. The mayor of Ruleville is white and so are the members of the city council. This white leadership attempts to solve city problems by maintaining second-class citizenship status for Blacks. Under the direction of Fannie Lou Hamer, Blacks are challenging the legitimacy of this kind of leadership. Often they threaten the power structure with boycotts and other means of protest in order to make the system responsive to their needs. For example, in 1968, the taxpayers of Ruleville built a new public high school which integrated in compliance with the 1954 Supreme Court decision. Whites objected vigorously to school integration and sent their children to Sunflower Academy, a small brick structure located just outside the city limits. Sunflower Academy, a white private school, has neither adequate funds nor academic resources to sustain its separate existence. Because the new high school would be predominantly Black, the citizens of the Black community, under the leadership of Ms. Hamer, demanded a Black principal. After much negotiation, the white school board named a Black principal. He personally understands that he is serving the interest of the Black community, his political benefactor.

This appointment results from the political influence exerted by the Black community. Such history-making appointments are sweeping away old patterns of white leadership in the South. These trends in southern politics are essential to Black political empowerment. The political development in the Black community is an outward expression of Black solidarity and organizational growth. This was first evident during the Civil Rights Movement which ushered in an era of rising expectations among Blacks.

THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS is increasing and has become passively involved in the struggle for Black participation in all aspects of southern life. Being less dependent on whites for financial subsistence, the Black bourgeoisie can afford to be politically mobile. On the other hand, by accepting the constitutionality of democracy which meant attempting to register and vote, lower class Blacks actively sought the realities of political power. The dynamics of exposure to a better life raises the level of expectation among Blacks from all classes.

It should be clear of course, that Negro political power itself has contributed to the establishment of the conditions which have furthered it: changes in each area set the stage for further changes in the others — a snowball effect.⁵

At this point, the political setting in Ruleville, Mississippi, should be clear. Enduring the violence of the culture and the oppression of the environment, Fannie Lou Hamer rises as an influential politician in her own right and as a grassroots organizer by accident. Ms. Hamer is a woman of amazing strength who began her political career as a voter registrar and went on to found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. She speaks of the national crisis:

I don't want no equal rights any more. I'm fighting for human rights. I don't want to become the kind of person that would kill you because of your color . . . I don't believe in separatism. A house divided against itself cannot stand, and neither can a nation.⁶

Ms. Hamer entered politics because of her experience in "Freedom

5. Ladd, *op. cit.* at 26.

6. John Egerton, "Some Extraordinary Southerners", *The Sunday Star*, December 13, 1970.

Summer," a project launched by the Civil Rights Movement in 1962. The aim was to increase political awareness through voter registration. Robert Moses, whom Ms. Hamer describes as a "very fine man" from New York, was project director. Moses, a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard, was also one of the few people who had come to Mississippi and had not looked down on the uneducated masses of Black folk. Relating to these Black Mississippians on an equal basis, Moses encouraged many to get involved. After attending one of his workshops to learn the state constitution, Ms. Hamer became very much encouraged with the entire project and her participation in it. By the end of the summer, she and a few others travelled to the courthouse where they planned to register for the right to vote. On August 31, 1962, she entered the courthouse and found herself and others surrounded by armed guards. She depicts that incident:

I guess they knew we were coming because when we got there the people were walking around with rifles and dogs. I went into the registrar's office. His name was Cecil B. Campbell and as we walked into the door he asked us what did we want. I told him we are here to try and register. He told us we all had to leave except two. I remained inside with another young man named Ernest Davis. We were given the literacy test which was very hard especially if you could not read. It has things like write the date of this application. What's your full name? Whom are you employed by? Where is your place of residence in the district? This would give your address to the White Citizens' Council and the Klu Klux Klan. Next the registrar brought out a huge black book and pointed out sixteen sentences of the constitution which he told us to copy. We copied the section. Then he told us to write a reasonable interpretation of what each sentence meant. Quite naturally, I flunked the test.

Returning to Ruleville that same evening, Ms. Hamer and other occupants on the bus were stopped by state troopers. They ordered the driver to go to Indianola, a nearby city, where the Black driver was arrested for driving a bus which resembled a school bus. Unable to pay the \$100 fine, the passengers, most of whom were sharecroppers, pooled \$30 which proved to be acceptable. Later, when Ms. Hamer arrived in Ruleville, her husband and oldest daughter* reported:

. . . how the landowner was raising hell because I had gone and tried to register. I had to think about why he didn't want me to register. I had cooked for this man. I had cared for his children. I had baked his cakes and sent them to him while he was in the army. Then he came to the house and told me if I didn't go back and withdraw my registration I had to leave the plantation. I was forced to leave the plantation that night.

Ten days later, white assassins fired sixteen shots into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Tucker who had given the Hamers a place to stay. Immediately after the shooting, Mr. and Mrs. Hamer fled to Tallahatchie County where they resided for two months. During this time, Blacks were murdered throughout Mississippi. Two whites had been killed in Jackson because of James Meredith's presence at Ole Miss. In Ms. Hamer's own words, "things were really happening." On December 3, 1962, she returned to Ruleville vowing never to leave there again. Her new place of residence, 626 East LaFayette Street, is the one she maintained until she and her family moved into their new residence provided by Freedom Farms. After a series of tests, Ms. Hamer returned to the registrar's office and within the next year she became the first Black woman registered to vote in Sunflower County.

*The oldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Hamer died in a Memphis hospital in 1966. The white hospital in Ruleville refused to admit her because of her mother's political activities. The drive from Ruleville to Memphis, approximately two hours, was too long, given her condition.

LITTLE DID MS. HAMER know that she would pay for this act with a beating. On June 9, 1964, when voter registration advocates were travelling to Ruleville on Trailways Bus, they stopped at a bus terminal in order to purchase something to eat. Before anyone knew what was happening, they were attacked from all directions by white state troopers. Whether they protested or not, they were arrested for disorderly conduct. Thrown into the county jail, Ms. Hamer remembers:

I was placed in a cell with a young woman, Miss Simpson. I began to hear this awful sound, a horrible sound like somebody screaming. I heard somebody say, "Can't you say yes sir nigger? Can't you say yes sir bitch?" and I recognized Mrs. Ponder's voice saying, "Yes, I can say yes sir." Finally I heard more screams for a long time and a young lady passed my cell. She was 15 years old. Her name was June Johnson and blood was streaming down her face from her head. Her clothes were ripped off and her mouth was swollen. Then I saw Mrs. Ponder and she didn't even recognize me.

After locking Mrs. Ponder in a dungeon-like room three men came to my cell. One of the men was named John L. Basenger because I read the steel plate on his pocket. He asked me my name and later checked it out. He could easily find out that I had been doing voter registration in Ruleville. When he came back he said, "You're from Ruleville and bitch we're going to make you wish you were dead."

I was led out of that cell into another one where there were two Black male prisoners. The first highway patrolman gave the first prisoner a black jack leather club loaded with metal. The first prisoner said, "You don't want me to beat this woman with this?" The state patrolman said, "You damned right and if you don't, well, you know what we'll do for you." This first prisoner beat me until, God, it was miserable. My body got harder and harder. I had my hands behind me trying to protect my back. He beat me until he was exhausted. At this point, I could not bend my fingers because they were navy blue.

The memory of that brutality lingers and, typical of Mississippi justice, the same white policeman who was responsible for Ms. Hamer's beating served on the jury at her trial. Andrew Young of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference supplied bail for the prisoners. They had been charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. By this time, Medgar Evers, NAACP Field Secretary in Jackson, had been murdered. It was this kind of fascism which made Ms. Hamer aware of the significance of political organization. She entered politics then to attain the necessary leverage to achieve particular goals for herself and the national Black community.

AS A POLITICAL participant, she was involved with the formation of the Freedom Democratic Party, which was founded after civil rights groups, NAACP, Urban League, SNCC, and CORE met in April of 1964. These organizations wished to coordinate their common efforts toward one goal. In the beginning, this combined association referred to itself as the COFO. Its chief aims were to increase Black voter registration, to organize some reasonable facsimile of a political party and to establish freedom schools.

Thus the COFO was largely an umbrella organization in which pre-existing civil rights groups continued much of what they had been doing . . . it chiefly stressed politics and welfare measures within the Negro community.⁷

The organizers realized that their plans were extremely ambitious and in spite of continuous setbacks, they launched a campaign with the assistance

7. Harry Halloway, *The Politics of the Southern Negro*, (New York: Random House), 1969, p. 47.

of out-of-state students and northern financial aid. The Freedom Democratic Party, as it was later called, would challenge the segregated state democratic party whenever possible. Abiding by the rules and procedures for state political parties, FDP members challenged the legitimacy of the segregationists to represent both Blacks and whites.

The rationale for their claim to be the Democratic Party of Mississippi, as later spelled out in a brief to the national convention, argued that the Mississippi Democrats were not real Democrats, for they asserted their independence of the national party, attacked its leaders and platform, at times bolted the party, were manifestly pro-Goldwater in 1964, and vilified and excluded Negroes.⁸

Unable to register with the Secretary of State, the Freedom Democratic Party candidates ran in the state primary. Each campaign stressed the desire to alleviate poverty, to pursue additional federal economic legislation, and to insure the state's citizens their constitutional rights. All of the candidates were eventually defeated. Seeking a congressional seat, Fannie Lou Hamer discovered for the first time political apathy among whites. The customs and values of most white Mississippians reflected a passive response to the political culture; whereas, Blacks were disregarding their parochial culture, which taught that politics was solely the business of white folks.

On August 6, 1968, under the chairmanship of Aaron Henry, the FDP selected its delegates to the national convention by a two-thirds vote among its membership. Throughout the entire process, all were careful to act in accordance with Mississippi's regulations. In preparing the brief to be presented before the Democratic Nominating Convention, the FDP members received outside advice from Joseph L. Rauh, Jr. of the Americans for Democratic Action, Senator Wayne Morse, and Representatives Edith Green, Don Edwards, Augustus Hawkins and others. Acting as mediator in the challenge, Hubert Humphrey offered a compromise that was unacceptable to both delegations. In the compromise, *two* Freedom Democratic Party delegates were allowed to sit with the segregated delegation. The refusal of the FDP members epitomized the pride and militancy of men and women, Black and white, who had worked in the fields and grasslands of Mississippi. They had overcome great odds to get where they were and now to settle for only two seats would be giving up the struggle.⁹

THE NATIONAL ACCLAIM that Ms. Hamer received for her role as one of the leading organizers of the FDP made her an overnight celebrity. While demonstrating characteristics of great political leadership, Ms. Hamer never denied her indigenous background. The charismatic nature of her personality exudes warmth and compassion. Often she remarks, "I do not hate white folks. I guess I just love people." Standing some five feet two inches tall, Ms. Hamer walks with a noticeable limp as a result of an accidental gun shot wound suffered years ago. Somewhat buxom and vigorously full of gaiety, she walked to the podium at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, informing the students, "Equality is something I wouldn't even use to dust off my shoes." Moments after the laughter ceased, she spoke about the significance of the struggle for human rights. Developing an immediate rapport with the audience, composed mainly of Black students and Black professors, she exhibited political

8. *Id.* at 47-48.

9. *Id.* at 48-49.

sophistication. All of these personal qualities have endeared Ms. Hamer to her brothers and sisters in Ruleville. Some admire her courage, others envy her strength and success. Such ambivalence has had political consequences in Ruleville and through Sunflower County by producing irresolvable conflict which fragments the Black leadership.

Formerly the white establishment totally controlled the Black community. This relationship between the out-group and the in-group may be compared to a relationship between a father and a son. The out-group determined policy which was binding on both parties. Whites succeeded in this type of arrangement because they had their respective Black flunkies. Crucial to the study of Fannie Lou Hamer is the slow disappearance of the subordinate status of the Black in-group. That the revolutionary nature of her leadership threatens the paternalistic relationship between whites and Blacks can hardly be overemphasized. To a limited extent, by being responsive to the needs of the Black community, she shifts authority from the out-group to a potentially powerful in-group. Such a phenomenon indicates a pattern of rotating transference of political power to Blacks. In other words, Blacks do have temporary political power. If whites intimidate them with violent or economic reprisals, which is generally the case, they will surrender that power immediately. Yet, in other instances, they regain power by participating in acts of protest such as boycotts and demonstrations. Such power is temporary because it is not institutionalized in the Black community nor in any Black organization. As a result, Fannie Lou Hamer's leadership becomes splintered and fragmented because of the community's inchoate development as a viable political entity.

FANNIE LOU HAMER has had a tremendous impact in the Black political arena of Ruleville. The transitional nature of her leadership can hardly be documented in structural terms. The ever-changing expectations and realizations of the Black community also make it difficult to pinpoint any specific strategy or define trends in political participation. People in rural towns like Ruleville, unlike those in southern urban centers who are sophisticated politically, have less access to all forms of communication.

Negroes throughout the rural South are far more vulnerable to economic sanctions and to threats on life and liberty. Rural Negro populations are more widely dispersed and hence harder to organize. They are poorer. And, in general, they have been drained of their most talented and best educated members, and hence do not have human resources comparable to those of urban populations. Once registered, Negroes in rural areas have a much more difficult task making their vote count.¹⁰

Fannie Lou Hamer hopes that someday Black votes in Ruleville will be as significant as they are in Atlanta, Georgia, where the Black electorate is quite prominent. With sufficient voting power, Blacks receive adequate patronage by requiring the mayor to represent their special interests. Since he owes his victory to the Black electorate, he has no other alternative than to respond to their needs. Unlike the setting in rural towns, the ghetto provides the urban Blacks with anonymity which serves as a buffer against white sanctions, a buffer unavailable to the rural towns.¹¹ Ms. Hamer realizes that

10. Ladd, *op. cit.* at 32.

11. *Id.* at 6-7.

to merely increase the Black electorate without a viable community organization may be an exercise in futility. Emphasizing electoral activity to the exclusion of other issues may be abortive.

FANNIE LOU HAMER's example dramatizes the socio-political functioning of the American political system. She is where she is and gets what she gets because of a deep understanding of the political process and an unwillingness to quit. In her own words, she explains:

I've seen what happens when people try. I'm not a person that easily gets disgusted. If you slap me down, I'm coming back and I'll keep coming back. I'll come back because I believe that I'm going to win. That's why I keep coming back to Mississippi because I know if I keep dealing with politics, keep organizing, keep getting people to register throughout the state this young breed in Mississippi is going to see a new day.

She gains strength by loving people and caring what happens to them. At this point, I understood why she was the first to avidly reject the compromise offered to the FDP at the National Democratic Convention in 1964. She believes that she inherited this kind of independence from her mother and her mother's mother before her.

FANNIE LOU HAMER's participation in politics has been a violent experience. Having greatness thrust upon her as a result of her involvement in voter registration, she has become a charismatic grassroots organizer. Sharing the singular sense of independence which characterizes many Black women, she strives to create a community organization aiming at the development of Black political leadership. Although rather shaky, her leadership carries a marginal degree of influence in Ruleville and throughout the state of Mississippi. Her accomplishments in the face of overwhelming obstacles are almost miraculous. The organization of Freedom Farms and other programs for economic development in Ruleville are living testimonies to Ms. Hamer's effectiveness. With self-determination slowly replacing the once terminal sickness of subservience, Ms. Hamer is optimistic about her political future. It is difficult to describe the nature of Black politics in Ruleville. However, everything that can be said relates to the indomitable Fannie Lou Hamer and her struggle to implement Black political leadership. Traditionally, Black women in the South have played a major role in Black politics. "They see politics as a real vehicle for change. And just don't be surprised if one day you pick up the newspaper and read, 'Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer elected state senator from Sunflower County'."

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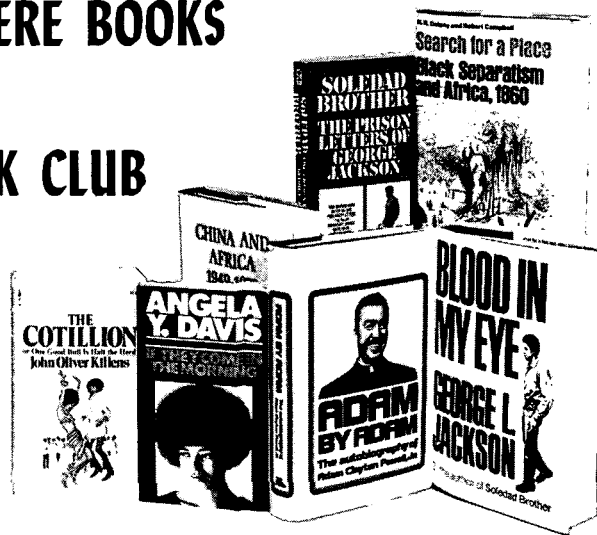
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