

Social movements show many different kinds of organizational types. Some are more structured and centralized, while others are more organic and decentralized. It is debated continuously which approach is most successful, and what their shortcomings are. There are many that would argue that centralized organizations with hierarchical leadership create a strong foundation that brings stability and longevity to social movements. However, I argue that such forms of organization are fundamentally flawed because of inherent traits that create contention within the very populations they try to help. These contentious institutional arrangements were exhibited in the leadership of the SCLC; they included a patriarchal hierarchy with a tendency of sexism and classism, and ultimate problem of identifying too much with the culture of the oppressors, leading many activists who felt disadvantaged to seriously question the effectiveness of these organizations approaches.

By the early 1960's the majority of the struggle for civil rights had become highly institutionalized through such organizations as the NAACP and with the ever-influential Southern Christian Leadership Conference headed by the charismatic Martin Luther King (Tarrow 2011:127). The SCLC leadership was comprised heavily of male African-American ministers. This hierarchy based within a male centric power structure created problems for other agents of social change, such as Ella Baker and Septima Clark. It became apparent that within this patriarchal hierarchy "women within SCLC circles were expected to neither ask nor answer questions" and even the wives of the organization's leaders were meant to act as "chandeliers" but would "say nothing" (Payne 2007:76). As males and as figures of authority within their respective communities, these ministers held a certain level of power, self-imposed importance, and hidden knowledge that women were not thought to

**Comment [Anthony 1]:** I already know where the paper is going, what is going to be discussed...

**Comment [Anthony 2]:** One example...

**Comment [Anthony 3]:** So I know that this paper will not be about centralized organizations

**Comment [Anthony 4]:** Interesting... a movements own organization can create problems for itself... this makes me want to continue reading...

**Comment [Anthony 5]:** ok... this is the thesis... hierarchy is related to sexism and classism, I will expect this to appear in the paper...

**Comment [Anthony 6]:** And the movement will end up oppressing, and potentially cause movement breakdown...

**Comment [Anthony P7]:** This intro is a little long, but still ok. Stick to an intro paragraph of half page max – esp for two page papers

**Comment [Anthony P8]:** Citation

**Comment [Anthony 9]:** Notice that this organization was mentioned in the intro, so it is not a surprise here.

**Comment [Anthony 10]:** And hierarchy, mentioned in the intro, comes back here for further development... signposting, no surprises in the body of paper

**Comment [Anthony 11]:** And patriarchy, also introduced earlier, is further described here... so far so good...

**Comment [Anthony 12]:** Citation

possess. This led to severe frustrations faced by women activists who worked closely with the SCLC. These frustrations, whenever voiced, often fell on deaf ears and were at times points of amusement for the leadership within the SCLC. Mrs. Clark believed she was just a “figurehead” and that her words were disregarded and ignored (Payne 2007:77). Their time supporting the organization was invaluable but their opinions were not needed. This is just one example of the contention that existed within the civil rights movement and the reason why groups like SNCC were so appealing to the strong women activists.

Class antagonism was another issue that plagued the SCLC. There was a distinct sense of leaders within the organization thinking they had dominion over its members. Abernathy would arrive late to his services to “flaunt his mastery over the common people” (Payne 2007:76) and many of the preachers bathed in the hypocrisy of talking about human equality and then would use staff as personal servants (Payne 2007:92). This dichotomy between the message and the failure of the SCLC’s leadership to practice what they preached created evermore doubt in the minds of more progressive activists.

Ella Baker once said that there was a common “danger in [their] culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement” (Payne 2007:93). Within the SCLC, there is little doubt that both male and class privilege influenced the internal allusions of grandeur many of these leaders held in comparison to their lower class and/or female counterparts. However, there is also another nuance to what I perceive as the failings of the structured organization and centralized leadership of the SCLC, and that is how the organizations goals identified

**Comment [Anthony 13]:** Nice transition... and notice how this ties back into the thesis... I am expecting at this point more discussion of what classism means...

**Comment [Anthony 14]:** Again, nice use of text as evidence...

**Comment [Anthony 15]:** Could have discussed more this idea of class... but I get the idea that it involves mastery and domination of one group over another...

with a middle-class culture (of white hegemonic origin) and pursued recognition from the very system that was resisting the social changes tooth and nail.

**Comment [Anthony 16]:** ok...

The SCLC's leadership was "overly concerned with recognition from whites" and was also too oriented "to a middle-class agenda" (Payne 2007:87), which would perhaps explain much of the class blindness that existed within the leadership of the SCLC. Activists like Baker and Clark developed strong reservations because of these transgressions that surely alienated many activists and diluted the effectiveness of the movement in the long-term. Because many of these organizations became so institutionalized and worked so closely with the power structure they were working to change, the movement itself "was soon constrained by the rules of the game of ordinary politics" and many organizations relied on funding from the government. (Tarrow 2011:127). This institutionalized relationship made more confrontational actions risky and ill advised. In the sense, the aspirations of groups like the SCLC may have done more to pacify resistance than to truly make the systemic changes that were needed possible.

**Comment [Anthony 17]:** I would have began the paragraph differently... but I get the idea. And this is good to continue with the class issue...

Although the SCLC was a successful organization to a point, it is debatable whether or not greater advancements might have been made had the leadership been more accepting of the women's power in the movement. The SCLC's leaders inability to understand the importance of class in the context of the African-American struggle as a whole was also a huge pitfall. The organizations incessant need to hold fast to a much more traditional power structure and institutionalized model removed many potential activists from being more effectively involved in creating greater social change. These institutionalized organizations became too heavily dependent and concerned with the system they were fighting to change. Had there been more

**Comment [Anthony 18]:** Interesting...

solidarity between centralized and decentralized organizations, it is hard to fathom what the civil rights movement might have been.

#### References

Payne, Charles M. 2007. *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Tarrow, Sidney G. 2011. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.