

Fourth Attempt

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Federal Programs

I feel very frustrated in my attempts to write a statement from the Federal programs office. This is the 4th attempt, and it is not what I want to say. But I don't know how to say it. I didn't want to write a propaganda piece, but that's what it's turned out to be, at least the first two parts. So since time is short, it will have to stay as that.

I. Organizing

We're having a very hard time forming local organizations in most places. We generally don't know how to organize. We don't really have much at this point on which to build an ongoing local organization.

An organization has to (1) deal with the immediated concerns of the people in it; (2) be broad enough to include people of many concerns; (3) have a radical enough program to make people take risks and spend time to get what they want; (4) be active, solving problems as well as discussing; (5) be open enough to allow broad involvement; that is, the top leaders must share ideas and decision making with the members. It probably has to be more than that, but that's a workable basis.

At this point, there has been little emphasis on the formation of this type of organization (a few counties excepted). The political program is one focal point; however, in most places it lacks the immediate involvement with the local situation that is needed. It has a great deal of potential, and should probably be the most important part of the COFO program: Politics is one of the major ways groups and individuals within the society operate smoothly together. (Or that as its purpose, however poorly the political system operates in reality.)

So...that is one reason why the Federal programs area exists. Federal money and consequent controls reach into almost every aspect of one's life: welfare, loans, school facilities and school lunch, many employment areas, health, farmer education, etc. Most of the people we are working with are directly concerned with some aspect of a Federal program, or several of them. Many times there is overt discrimination; other times there is simple mal-administration; very often the programs are very inadequate, either because of lack of Federal controls on the administration, or lack of sufficient money.

Staff are often asked to take complaints on something concerning a Federal program. Most often, staff doesn't have time, and doesn't know the channels to complain through. Which is actually good: The people have complaints; they need processing; therefore they must do it. This is one organizing in: a committee set up to handle complaints, being trained by staff and/or technical assistants.

Such a committee has the potential of being much more than a complaint-gatherer. There can be extensive and probing discussion of the programs--how they are formed, how they are administered, where they are inadequate, how they should be changed. All of this is learning what government is, how it works, what the vote means.

It is also a means of creating a county- or community-wide organization around issues the people are concerned about, direct action of some sort coming out of the thinking of the committee. This ties in very directly with the FDP, as programs that come out of the county or community organizations logically would be extended into the FDP platform. They would possibly be the issues on which the FDP candidates would run.

There can be another approach to organizing: Where there is unified feeling that something is needed--a coop, the ASCS election, etc.--the organization can be formed on this basis, with complaint-gathering-discussion-committees filling in. The Federal government and its agencies are called in by the community for technical assistance, money, etc., but not as the organizing base.

Secretary of Agriculture Freeman has agreed to have an advisory committee set up, with one Negro farmer from each county on the committee, and district representatives going to Washington. This one person in each county could be the basis for forming organizations, as to do his advisory job,

he has to represent the people in his county, some gathering their ideas, complaints, etc. This may mean forming committees to help him, which would be essentially complaint-gathering-discussion groups.

Organizations formed this way provide a base for local FDP activities, especially during elections: Any organization is a forum for the candidates. It creates a continuing base for the often sporadic needs of a political party.

But organization by itself is not enough, is not an end. One aspect of organization (a hopefully all-pervasive aspect) of organization and our total program is education.

II. Education

Education has many facets. I'll try to make some sense of some of them, as they relate to us, here.

One of our primary goals, as I see it, is somehow creating a society in which each person can act freely. Acting freely means in part each person understanding to the best of his ability the forces influencing his life, the forces that shape and direct him. It means that out of this understanding can come action: It does no good to know that your wages are low because the land-owner is making huge profits if you don't know how to go about getting a higher wage. So there has to be a structure through which people can act on their felt and understood needs.

How does Federal programs area tie in?

A nation has structures of many sorts: economic--corporations, cooperatives, privately owned; political--national, state, district, county, precinct; interest groups--labor unions, farmers unions, chambers of commerce, civil rights groups, pickle growers associations, etc.; educational institutions; religious groups...and so on.

The Federal government impinges on most of these structures, or institutions. It sets controls, gives or loans money, influences through government policy (we do have a national "party line") the entire thinking of the country--witness the "war on poverty" and how the President changed the thinking of the U.S. The political structure is perhaps the most important of all the institutions, existing as it does on all geographic and institutional levels.

Through understanding the government and how it functions--the pressures on it, the complexities of it, we understand at least some of the forces working on us.¹

The organizations formed during the next few years will, or should, if they are strong and effective, create a channel for education, through which people come to better understand the things that shape their lives--at the very least the political and economic things; hopefully a more profound understanding of the total society. The organizations will also create a channel for action, action based on ideas coming from the people in the organizations, action they have decided to take.

For instance: A committee is formed to take complaints concerning welfare. The people on this committee have to learn the channels through which one goes to process complaints--learns about the bureaucracy, the rules of this game. If the bureaucracy hangs them up, they have to (only generally people don't) ask "What's wrong?" And perhaps create an alternative thing, or reform the bureaucracy. Even if things go smoothly, very soon one realizes, it would seem, that \$55 a month is not a living income, and one is lucky if he gets that. Even if one plays by the rules, he can't make it. So then has to come--if the people do feel \$55 is not enough and do want a change--some sort of creative thinking. How does one get more income?

¹ In all our political and economic ideas, I think it is very very important to not lose sight of the fact that these things are not ends, organization is not an end. The "complete person", the "free" person is the end, and no organization can create that. It can simply help lead to the removal of some of the hinderances of being free--fear, lack of money, etc.

I won't carry the example beyond this point, now. (See next section). It can be seen that, if some sort of radical change is desired in our society (I think it safe to assume we do), unless we are to develop a COFO ideology (which I hope we do not), some method has to be set up for the people of Mississippi to develop their program.

It cannot, or rather should not, be one-sided--to concentrate on the political without the economic and social, and vice versa, and to concentrate only on these group concerns without the individual (the love, the art and poetry and music, the human interaction) is to lose the meaning of what we are all about.

So the use of Federal programs is as a tool--one of several: The FDP, VE, Freedom Schools, Community Centers, human interaction (we tend to forget the last one.)

All of these preceding statements, tho hopefully being valid in themselves and relating to our immediate programs, imply and need to be put in a long-range perspective. For one thing, I think we need to keep a long-range view in order to work thro the day-to-day hangups and frustrations of the projects without destroying ourselves as we have been. For another, we need to have some idea of where we want to go in order to set priorities and give meaning to the day to day work. So I offer the following personal statement for thought.

III. A Statement of Values

This can be no more than a superficial synopsis of what I envision, of course. Many writers and people I have spoken with have influenced my thinking, as well as my experiences and own thinking. Let me note in passing Lewis Mumford's last chapter of Technics and Civilization, and The Triple Revolution as two significant pieces.

I feel that the most important thing--as stated earlier--is the individual human being and his relationship with himself--how fulfilled he is, how thoroughly he can tie together the various parts of his life and relate his experiences to himself, which I believe leads naturally to creativity and easy interaction with other people and his total environment. All other things are means toward achieving this.

These means are important, however. A person has great difficulty being "whole" if he is constantly having to worry about his next meal, or having to lie to others to stay alive. He cannot interact freely with other people if other people will not accept (will even hate him) for the color of his skin, his ideas, the way he dresses, or his accent. He cannot express his creativity if he is punished for it, or is constantly having to worry simply about physical survival, or cannot get the tools needed.

That is why the need for economic, political, educational, social reorganization. I see a society around us that is very ill in many ways: People are alienated from each other by prejudices of many sorts, mistrust of other people. Male-female relationships are too often based on identity needs and not on recognition of each other as creative human beings. There are great inequalities in opportunity, creating jealousies and fears and hatreds. People feel frustrated in trying to fit their needs and abilities into our society and become bitter or alienated from the society and from themselves (or they join the movement, or a movement).

People are without jobs, homes, medical care, education, and yet myths of "pulling up by the bootstraps", prejudice, and plain blindness prevent this from being stopped. We are caught in a paternalistic society, run by opinion polls, the mass media, the big corporations, the military. All of which control the government. (This is a bit of an exaggeration--there are some independent thinkers who do have influence in our country, the other nations of the world influence us, there are healthy people. But the attitudes of the intellectuals is generally paternalistic toward "deprived" peoples.)

This is a partial view of the society we are trying to change. As I see it, the only way some of these ills can be changed is by some rather drastic structural changes. The institutional changes will not necessarily improve man's relationship to himself and other people, but it will help.

As long as the economy of our country is pretty much controlled by a relative - ly few men who control the major industries--in which even the highly paid executive and the people who live off stock dividends have little or no decision-making power--we cannot have free interaction with the economic processes which involve us--jobs, wages, hours, insurance, gas efficiency on cars, including the mass media which is supported by advertisers, which create unneeded wants and artificial fears and shape many many of our attitudes. The Farm Bureau--which speaks for farmers as the most powerful lobby in the U.S.--constantly pushes for policy which makes it impossible for the small farmer to exist and which gives the middleman large profits. So...somehow the economic institutions need to be democratized. Let's leave that there--not explore what that means before this becomes a book.

I see no reason why, with our resources, we can't have free medical care, free food for the basic essentials, free housing--a minimum annual income. With automation and mechanization people don't need to kill themselves psychologically at dull, meaningless jobs. Now our educational system does not fit us for leisure, for creative use of time--but it can. I don't believe that man must live to labor; I do have faith that a person can direct his life without economic controls (tho I sometimes wonder, seeing how we operate).

I'm also concerned with the spread of the city, which tends to be life-denying in its impersonality, perhaps inescapably so. I see a real value in a rural or semi-rural community, both in the interpersonal relationships possible and in the value of being close to nature, and the kind of meaning the natural cycles give to life.

Here in the South I see the possibility of creating a society healthily adjusted to industrialization, far more than in the North. the South does not have the city to contend with--has the economic, political, and social problems, but not the physical ones. It also lacks much of the bitterness and cynicism and mistrust of the North.

I am concerned with the awareness of the natural resources, of other life besides man. I believe other life has intrinsic value, add value for us. Let's leave that there, too.

On the political structure--I feel that perhaps our political system is basically sound, in need of some reforms. I've begun to think about the assumptions on which it is based--that people can be grouped by geographic areas to be represented--, and think perhaps of a system of representation by area of concern--job, perhaps, or some such thing. Because somehow interest groups have to have representation. In a society as large as ours, as diverse as ours, a small number of men cannot speak for everyone. A person can rarely speak alone and be heard, for very practical reasons. Therefore it is necessary to join together in groups to act for one's own interests. As it stands now, those with the most money have the most power, so that the majority of the people have relatively little say, or say only by threatening the "power-elite", or by concessions from them. I've thought of pressure groups having a semi-voting arrangement, or some such thing, on the basis of the number of people they represent, but the minorities would still be basically voiceless. No solutions there.

Many reforms are needed to make the government run smoothly structured the way it is now: Federal programs need to be completely revamped, integrated with each other, cleaned up. They just grew, and like an unpruned apple tree, there's a lot of dead and unnecessary stuff in there. Congress needs the same, especially for regulations concerning committees. State government is too often inefficient, state constitutions too detailed and complicated and amendmended to death, so no one can understand them (as are US Dept. of Agriculture bills)). Too many positions are patronage. There are too few means of detecting graft, Etcetera:

All of this has been very U.S.-oriented. We can't forget the rest of the world and what it means to us. It means many things, and one is that we cannot attain the "good society" as long as there are the poor nations, as long as we are battling one another. Not only is it psychologically impossible, but it requires huge arms expenditures (the continued importance of the military), economic competition, etc. As long as England owns Delta Pines plantation in Bolivar County, as long as United Fruit owns much of Central and South America we cannot have economic democracy in either place, in the U.S. or Latin America.

That's an outline, a beginning. Too much is crammed into a small space, but that too will have to stand as is. This idea statement does not mean I believe any the less in local organization and policy coming from there. I do not think COFO should adopt a platform, formulate an ideology. I think we should work in all areas of social life, but without a program as much as possible, the policy made by the local people. If that means something different from the above, fine, or anyway, ok. Let's see what happens.

A Post Script:

One reason this paper has had such a hard time jelling is that I'm somewhat preoccupied with what is happening with COFO staff and projects. I'm upset about the intra-staff relations. I'm upset about lack of coordination and pettiness among projects. I see little sign that most staff (myself included) know how to listen to other people, or organize, or simply function when having to work closely with others. I see little vision and much pettiness. Which may be an exaggeration due to my current state of fatigue. I hope so. I doubt it. With a few exceptions. I see us learning, but slowly, far too slowly. There are so many organizational hang-ups, so many interpersonal hang-ups--How can we do our job when we play games at it and refuse to see the seriousness and commitment needed? How can we create a liveable society if we can't live one? How can we teach people to organize when we can't organize ourselves? We need, it seems to me, to be increasingly self-critical, to discuss problems between projects, to be open about mistakes, to be, essentially, honest. We are a Freedom movement, which means making somehow a free society. And are we free if we feel the need to lie and hide things, if we bicker and fight, if we build walls against each other? Can we create a free society if we do not live, as much as we are able, the society we envision? I doubt it.