

“This Transformation of People’: An Interview with Bob Moses.” In *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968*, edited by Charles Payne and Steven F. Lawson, 170-187 (excerpts). New York: London, 2006.

p. 172: Moses: Mrs. Palmer . . . really came to represent what we were looking at trying to do in the community organizing because there was, . . . there’s a dimension to it, which is dealing with the transformation of people. Outside of the institutions, which are normally credentializing people and sort of giving the kind of support which allows them to feel, “Well, I can really play this role,” Mrs. Hamer always used to say, that she got that kind of support from the SNCC people, that, you know, you just keep telling them what you’re telling them. Just keep saying what you’re saying, right. That kind of support sort of plays the role of institutional support. Someone who comes out of either a major educational institution or a labor union movement kind of thing, or certain kind of church institutions get credentialized and part of what the institution does is make them feel like they have the ability and the right and the know-how to play certain roles. And I think part of what the organizing thrust in the movement and what Ella was talking about in terms of leadership is that kind of credentializing. That if you have a movement, then part of what is a sign that you do have such a movement is that people begin to emerge, to feel power and act in power and to actually play a very different role than they may have been playing and they do this because of the context of the movement; they haven’t been otherwise credentialized, going off to school, going to some other institution to do this stuff. It’s the force of the movement, the feel that the movement creates. I think in Mississippi, you saw a number of women emerge who did that. So, Mrs. Palmer was one. Mrs. Hamer, who became well known, was one. Annie Devine was another. Mrs. [Victoria] Gray, out of Hattiesburg was another. Mrs. [Winnie] Hudson. . . . Because it seems to me that Mississippi was really unique in turning up this group of women who played this major role in shaping the state. I don’t think there’s quite another experience like that. When you have people who, really all of them were not coming out of any sort of educational (172) background having been credentialized. . . . So, this, it’s an element about the organizing which is hard to sort of pin down. ‘Cause you think about organizing, people think more about the networking and the building of some kind of structures, working some kind of programs, setting out some particular goals that you’re going to accomplish as opposed to this setting up something which becomes a kind of field or force, some kind of culture through which people can actually emerge and do in fact emerge. (173) [...]

Part of what the movement did was just expose people to a lot. I mean it was exposing people to all different kinds of people who were coming in and out of Mississippi. Exposing people to people by taking them out of Mississippi, traveling and meeting people elsewhere. And the people that they’re meeting are all people who are somehow part of this movement culture. They share in certain values and [are] talking (173) about certain things. (174) [...]

[We spoke about the training provided by Septima Clark’s Citizenship Schools] . . . Our network was identifying people who were good candidates to go to that training. And, then that training, is part of this process which is going on where people are now meeting other people and exchanging all of these values and really becoming part of some larger movement. So, it

becomes something that's helpful, really supporting. Part of what allowed that to happen is just saying, 'Well, even though these organizations aren't talking to each other at the top, in Mississippi, this is all one thing.'

PAYNE: It's all the same people at the bottom.

MOSES: Right. It's all the same people. So this COFO set-up allows you now to take advantage of really what was the best parts of the movement culture. So you could send people over there and this became part of this movement culture (174) [...]

p. 176: SNCC . . . is mainly providing a movement culture for our people to grow up in and mature. That's SNCC's great role, right. That they're really driving the culture for our young people. So, we have a place as we get people attracted to what we're doing that they can grow up in. So, your tools are really your people. Those are your tools, but then the question is "How do you attract the tools that you need from among these people?" Well it isn't by getting people who are going to respond to the big speech. [...]

p. 182: MOSES: Ella . . . had a vision about leadership and she would run programs and was trying to create context for leadership and education for leadership. And, sort of, promoting this idea about grassroots leadership and then you saw it at work in how she fought for the space so that SNCC could emerge and SNCC leadership could emerge. On the other hand, Amzie was being a leader and also being an organizer. Amzie operated in two very distinct modes. In Cleveland he was the leader and as some movement people found out (laughter) you couldn't breach his leadership in Cleveland. You couldn't cross him and you couldn't try to move around him. In the state, however, he was an organizer and he functioned as an organizer and he worked behind the scenes and worked with other people and so Amzie provided, sort of, some flesh and bones to Ella's theory, into what she was living at this other level. You couldn't experience what Ella was talking about with her in a community. Amzie was operating in this community and you could see what she was talking about in this role of leadership and organizing. . . . Now Amzie orga- (182) nized the bus that took the group from Ruleville down to Indianola in '62 [to attempt to register]. He was our launching station. (183)

[...] Webb Owens and Amzie really had this analytical turn, and they're turning everything over and looking at it. So you get the ability to look at this stuff through all this prism of experience because it's the analytical turn of mind which has been honed by experience as opposed to by books and educational institutions. (183) [...]

p. 184: PAYNE: Bob, is there anything else about Amzie's Impact on you?

MOSES: Well, Amzie had the impact of providing me a home, so I knew that I could turn up any hour of the night, any day of the week. I didn't have to have any money and I was welcome as a son. I was his son in the movement, so I had a *family* connection. I think that's what sustained me. It was that you were moved into a set of movement families and accepted within these families as a part of their family so C.C. Bryant's family, Steptoe's family, Amzie Moore's family,

old man Saunders, Miss Pilcher. . . we had this network. Now, it was an amazing experience 'cause I had never before or since had that experience where you. . . . It's so much literally like you were throwing yourself on people and they have actually picked you up and are going to carry you. So you don't really need money. You don't really need transportation. It may take you a while to get where you need to go . . . but somebody's going to get you where you need to go. You don't really need insurance, because they are going to see that you get your medical needs taken care of and your dental needs taken care of and your food, they're going to see that you eat. And I've never been before or since, in that setting. It's a really liberating kind of experience because you move around and everywhere you move, there is someone there who really has a welcome ready for you. You can show up any time. It doesn't matter. So Amzie was the first of those. We had a lot of time, particularly in the beginning, before I (184) went to McComb, just to talk. He would really just talk and Amzie was walking history, so he knew all of this history, and all of these people, sort of the whole history of the Delta . . . I got a good grounding, in the sense that what you need, you need a map, someone who lays out what the terrain is and is not doing it abstractly, but is sort of laying out. He's doing for me what my father did in the personal arena where my father was always telling me about this person and that person and how to understand them, so Amzie is really analyzing and laying out this whole, sort of, cast of characters across the state and really bringing me in on who are the people who are the players and how to work with them and what to expect of this one, what's this one's orientation. (185) [...]

p. 186: You make a personal connection whenever you really want to do (186) something with somebody else. The first thing you have to do is make this personal connection. You've got to find out who it is you're really working with. You really have to be interested in that person, to work with them. That the working begins with that kind of relationship. It's this idea that you just don't work in the abstract. That part of the working with people is making this kind of personal communication the basis for the work, so that without that, you can't really, sort of, get off the ground. You saw that all across the South in your grassroots, rural people . . . Ella carried that style into this other level where she's actually doing this kind of organizing work and networking with people and has this wide range of contacts. She was, sort of, shepherding the SNCC kids through all these mazes and part of what she's doing in doing that, she's making part of the initial steps is always making these personal connections with all of them as they come through, and become part of this until it was time for here to leave. (187)