The Critical Black Studies Series

Institute for Research in African American Studies

Edited by Manning Marable
Columbia University

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FOREWORD

ZAHEER ALI

On April 1, 2011, the field of African American history and the broader academic community lost one of its sharpest, critical, most prolific voices. Manning Marable unexpectedly passed away after succumbing to complications arising from his long battle with sarcoidosis. Just three days before the release of his *Malcolm X: A Life of Re-invention*—the culmination of a decades-long study of the life and times of Malcolm X—Marable's death left a void in the critical discussions he had hoped to provoke about the human rights activist. The Malcolm that emerges from Marable's study is complex, worthy of both praise and criticism, and Marable obliges in providing both. Marable's *Malcolm X* is thus an act of iconoclasm, and like any act of iconoclasm it has generated strong reactions—it has been the subject of heated debates in print, on radio and television, and in community meetings around the country. At the same time, it has also garnered rave reviews, achieved bestseller status, and even placed its author's face on the front page of the *New York Times* for the first time ever. It would be tempting therefore to view *Malcolm X: A Life of Re-invention* as Marable's defining work, the final testament to his academic life and legacy.

Oftentimes death punctuates with a period, however, where the deceased had only intended, in life, to place a comma. Marable was not one to rest on his laurels. On the eve of the release of *Malcolm X*, he envisioned several new book projects for the coming years and had already completed work on this anthology, *The New Black History: Revisiting the Second Reconstruction* features one of the last pieces he would write for publication, and as such represents another comma turned into a period. Interestingly enough, the articles that Marable and his coeditor Elizabeth Kai Hinton gathered in this collection reflect the same intellectual commitment to reexamination Marable set out to do with *Malcolm X*. "A biography maps the social architecture of an individual's life," Marable writes in *Malcolm X*. And if his biography of Malcolm sought to challenge conventional notions about Malcolm's individual life, then *The New Black History* continues in that vein by challenging conventional notions about the social architecture of the Black freedom movement. The last decade has seen a wave of new scholarship challenging the regional, temporal, and ideological orthodoxies that centered histories of the Black freedom movement narrowly around narratives of the South, the 1950s and '60s, integration, and nonviolence. As part
CHAPTER 13

SEPTIMA CLARK
ORGANIZING FOR POSITIVE FREEDOM

STEPHEN LAZAR

SEPTIMA CLARK'S LIFE AND WORK STANDS AS A REMARKABLE TESTAMENT TO THE POWER OF INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT. AFTER MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AND MALCOLM X, ONE WOULD BE HARD-PRESSED TO ARGUE THAT ANYONE ELSE DID MORE TO BUILD AND SUSTAIN THE STRUCTURAL FOUNDATION NECESSARY FOR THE SUCCESSFUL BATTLES OF THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN THE 1960S. WHILE CLARK'S ENTIRE LIFE OF EIGHTY-NINE YEARS ILLUSTRATES HER COMMITMENT TO FREEDOM AND EMPOWERMENT FOR ALL, IT WAS HER WORK IN CREATING, DEVELOPING, AND OVERSEEING THE CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAM (CEP) OF THE HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL, AND LATER THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP COUNCIL (SCLC), THAT WAS HER GREATEST AND MOST SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENT. THE CEP, WHICH ANDREW YOUNG CALLED THE BASIS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, \( \text{\textsuperscript{1}} \) GROW TO TEACH AS MANY AS FIFTY THOUSAND STUDENTS THROUGHOUT THE SOUTH AND BECOME THE LARGEST PROGRAM OF THE SCLC. IT ENABLED A LARGE PERCENTAGE OF ITS STUDENTS TO BECOME REGISTERED VOTERS, AND PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANTLY, LITERATE, WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY DEVELOPING THEIR TEACHERS INTO RESPECTED GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP IN THEIR HOME COMMUNITIES, CREATING A SIZEABLE PORTION OF THE LOCAL LEADERSHIP OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. THE SCHOOLS WERE A HUMANIZING FORCE AGAINST THE DEHUMANIZATION OF SEGREGATION, TRANSFORMING ITS STUDENTS INTO AGENTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE.

CLARK'S WORK WITH THE PROGRAM FALLS WITHIN THE MODEL OF BLACK LEADERSHIP, WHICH CHARLES PAYNE IDENTIFIES AS THE ORGANIZING TRADITION IN "I'VE GOT THE LIGHT OF FREEDOM." THIS TRADITION EMPHASIZES THE LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT OF LEADERSHIP AND OTHER CAPABILITIES BY "ORDINARY MEN AND WOMEN." \( \text{\textsuperscript{2}} \) PAYNE ARGUES THAT THE TRADITION IS BEST EPISTEMOLOGIZED BY THE WORK OF CLARK AND ELLA BAKER. FOR PAYNE, THE ORGANIZING TRADITION HAS "A DIFFERENT SENSE OF WHAT FREEDOM MEANS." \( \text{\textsuperscript{3}} \) BY ANALYZING THE CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAM AND THE CONFLICTS CLARK HAD AT MYLES HORTON'S HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL, WHERE CLARK PREVAILED, AND IN THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP COUNCIL, WHERE CLARK'S ARGUMENTS FELL ON DEAF EARS, I WILL ILLUMINATE CLARK'S ROLE AS AN IMPORTANT PROPONENT OF THE ORGANIZING TRADITION AND
the positive freedom it desired. Furthermore, by contrasting the success of Clark's arguments at Highlander and the subsequent establishment of the Citizenship Education Program with Clark's inability to change the SCLC's institutional focus on Martin Luther King Jr. and its diminished influence after King's death, I will show the advantage of group-centered leadership to create sustainable structures for social change under the right conditions.

Before analyzing Clark's role, it is necessary to define exactly what the organizing tradition means. In terms of its connection to the black freedom struggle, Ella Baker expressed the main ideas of the tradition most clearly. Baker differentiated between "group-centered leadership" and a "leader-centered group." Within the black freedom struggle, there are numerous examples of the latter, the best being Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC. The SCLC revolved around King. This is not to say that King was the SCLC, but he was the group's face and voice. The organization of the SCLC can perhaps best be understood in military terms. King was the general. Individuals such as Ralph Abernathy, James Bevel, Hosea Williams, and Andrew Young served as his lieutenants. Below them were the sergeants—the local leaders of SCLC affiliates, such as Essau Jenkins. The SCLC's tactics consisted primarily of mass direct action protest, voter registration, and appeals to white people's consciousness.

Baker's conception of group-centered leadership, on the other hand, emphasized the size of individuals. Baker believed that "[a] strong people don't need strong leaders." The goal of group-centered leadership is to develop the capabilities of all individuals in a given community so that they may become self-sufficient and not have to rely on outside leaders, or even a sustained protest movement, to be free. Baker saw the need for "the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others." She attempted to create such a model in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC did not have a hierarchical arrangement. Rather, it was a coalition of student groups and field workers whose activities were somewhat coordinated by a central organizing committee. SNCC workers typically operated in cells or small groups, working toward a goal in a specific location. After the initial sit-ins, SNCC efforts typically consisted of attempts to organize communities so that they could bring about their own liberation. While SNCC, initially at least, had similar goals to the SCLC, its tactics were very different. Particularly in Mississippi, people such as Bob Moses and Sam Block sought to organize people, rather than lead them. This contrasted with the dominant black political leadership model of what Baker called "leader-centered groups," the model that grew out of the black church. Organizing communities and empowering individuals require a patience, commitment, and confidence that seem to have been more present in female leaders.

Clark's Citizenship Education Program clearly falls within the organizing tradition. The primary goal of the CEP was to teach and develop first-class citizens. The rights and responsibilities of the first-class citizen include "the right to vote for the candidate of his choice and the responsibility of exercising that right in each and every election," using voting power effectively to realize citizenship's opportunities, and working together with others to improve one's community. The concept and rhetoric of first-class citizenship could be found at all levels of the CEP—in teacher training sessions, in Citizenship Schools, and in correspondence between the teachers and program staff. As students began to recognize themselves as first-class citizens, they became more likely to join the ranks of the growing nonviolent army.

The CEP also institutionalized grassroots leadership development. In many ways, it combined the strengths of a national top-down organizational structure and the power of local leaders. The CEP built bridges between local leaders in different parts of the South and the national leadership. SCLC Citizenship School teacher training sessions at the Dorchester Center in Liberty County, Georgia, enabled future teachers to interact directly with and be inspired by national leaders such as Septima Clark, Andrew Young, and Martin Luther King Jr. The new Citizenship School teachers left empowered to assume the mantle of leadership in their home communities, where they in turn inspired and developed the leadership capabilities of their students and others in the community.

Many of those directly involved with the CEP's development were well documented within movement literature: Septima Clark, Ella Baker, Andrew Young, Hosea Williams, Fannie Lou Hamer, James Bevel, Diane Nash, Victoria Gray, and Myles Horton. Others, such as Bernice Robinson, Essau Jenkins, Dorothy Cotton, Annell Pondes, and Benjamin Mack, are less well known. The story of the Citizenship Education Program is the story of these people coming together to build what was probably the most effective program of the civil rights movement. Their activities place them within the organizing tradition. For Clark, freedom is a "much bigger than a hamburger," as Ella Baker once said. The CEP aimed to empower the natural leaders in the community, those Andrew Young called the "PhD minds" with "third grade educations." Through training sessions at Highlander or Dorchester, these people in turn empowered their peers through Citizenship Schools. Just as Baker described, the CEP created a grassroots organizer cadre whose primary responsibility was the development of others. While on the surface the goal of the CEP was to teach literacy for voter registration, the underlying goal was personal and communal liberation. Septima Clark was keenly aware of this when she wrote "Literacy is Liberation." In the context of the Jim Crow South, learning to read and write was both a revolutionary and transformative experience that aimed at liberating individuals from their historical situation.

In the CEP, we begin to see the different kind of freedom assumed by the organizing tradition. For the individuals who built the CEP and SNCC, freedom was not simply freedom from the oppressive regime of Jim Crow and the accompanying white terrorism. This was the freedom for which the SCLC, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Urban League fought. Rather, people such as Septima Clark and Ella Baker fought to help individuals achieve a freedom—the freedom to write, read, learn, organize, create new institutions, and be the author of one's own life. The differences in the two conceptions of freedom parallel philosopher Isaiah Berlin's distinction between two kinds of liberty. In his seminal essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin differentiates between negative and positive liberty.
He defines the extent of one's negative liberty or freedom as the answer to the question, "What is the area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?" The extent of one's positive liberty or freedom is the answer to the question, "What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?" In other words, negative freedom corresponds to a lack of interference in one's life, and positive freedom corresponds to authorship over one's life.

Both traditions within the black freedom struggle obviously wanted both positive and negative freedom. The differences between the two were on their emphasis and focus. The organizing tradition in general, and the CEP in particular, sought to help individuals become the authors of their own lives. The CEP's goals of literacy education and voter registration, both aimed at positive freedom. Its liberating pedagogy aimed to give students the necessary skills to achieve the goals they desired, and the emphasis on voter registration assumed that once blacks gained the vote they would have a say in the political decisions that affected their lives. Voter registration, within the organizing tradition, needs to be understood as a tactic, not a strategy. The SCLC, the NAACP, and the Urban League also encouraged voter registration to various degrees. However, their push for it was coded in terms of achieving political power to achieve certain ends. The CEP's emphasis was not on the achievement of a specific set of goals, but rather on the development of the capabilities of individuals, through which those individuals could change the various conditions of their lives and communities.

The development was a long and tenuous process that Clark led from its infancy. The program's initial gesticulation occurred in conjunction with the Highlander Folk School's efforts to institute a leadership development program. Clark arrived at Highlander prepared to begin the process of affecting social change. She was already an established leader through work in North Carolina, serving as a public school teacher and a leader in the local NAACP.

In the summer of 1954, Clark brought a group of Charleston area residents to Highlander for a workshop on reforming the United Nations. Included in the group were Clark's niece, Bernice Robinson, a beautician, and Esau Jenkins, a former student of Clark's on Johns Island, South Carolina, and a leader in the black community there. At one point in the workshop, Jenkins was asked his thoughts on the United Nations. He responded that he had not been concerned with the United Nations because he had his own problems in his community: the black residents of Johns Island were largely illiterate and therefore could not register to vote. Johnson had taught a small handful of blacks to read on the bus he drove from Johns Island to Charleston but wanted to develop a way to reach more people. Horton recognized that here was a crisis situation around which he could develop leadership.

Horton had been trying unsuccessfully for a year to develop leadership in Tennessee communities. After Horton and other Highlander staff members spent some time on Johns Island, Horton recognized the possibility of building a successful program. Because people on Johns Island were notoriously skeptical of outsiders, Horton hired Clark to oversee Jenkins' efforts on the island.
Clark was highly critical of Young for the lack of attention he gave to the CEP. In December 1963, Clark wrote to King, giving a state-by-state assessment of the program. With the exception of the program in South Carolina, southeast Georgia, and parts of Mississippi, she saw few results. She attributed this to a lack of supervision and follow-up. As the "only one doing field visitation," Clark also expressed that the other staff working with her in the CEP felt "that the work is not dramatic enough to warrant their time. Direct action is not glamorous and packed with emotion that most young people prefer demonstrations over genuine education... It seems as if Citizenship Education is all mine, except when it comes time to pick up the checks." Clark noted that Young was often absent from Dorchester sessions and even when he was there, he was too tired to work with students. Because of his absence, Clark frequently found that reimbursement checks for teachers were sent out months late. Clark also criticized Cowles like Bob Moses and Jim Foreman for coming into places like Greenwood, Mississippi and taking over without involving the people.

The following July, Clark wrote Young directly to criticize him for the lack of attention he gave to the CEP. She wrote that he was not doing the responsibilities his job description (which Young wrote) demanded. Clark was particularly bothered by the "unfair treatment of the people for whom the grant was proposed," noting that in May she found unpaid vouchers for teacher expenses going back to January. She continues, "The people for whom we get the money are those in the most neglected areas and to whom $30 is a great blessing. If we fail to do what the great battle for rights is in vain." Clark chastised Young for his desire to give raises to "men with families" while not considering the financial obligations that she and others had to larger family structures.

While Young offered explanations to some of Clark's specific concerns in his response, he also acknowledged that everything she wrote was "quite true." He wrote that the previous year had been "the most confused and complicated year of my life." There were many days when he thought he might be on the verge of cracking up. He emphasizes that his responsibility is "to serve the people, not the Foundation or the sponsoring organizations." Clark was unable to influence Young, who left the CEP in 1965 to work with King full time. Clark was also critical of King throughout her tenure with the SCLC. In 1963, Clark wrote to King emphasizing the need to focus on employment for blacks, not just registration and civil rights. While it is unclear the effect this suggestion had on King, he did move toward placing greater emphasis on economic opportunity after 1965. Clark's strongest critique of King and the SCLC was their inability to develop leadership in others. Clark recalled that when local leaders would ask King to come to their city to lead marches, she would respond, "You're there. You going to ask the leader to come everywhere? Can't you do the leading in these places?" Clark wrote King on at least two occasions to ask him to develop others. In one letter, she asked King not to lead all the marches so that others may take a more prominent role. King read that letter before the staff as if it were a joke.

Clark made a similar argument in a letter to King in 1967. She opened the letter by sharing the thoughts of Esau Jenkins, who by this time not only was...
developing leaders in his community but also served on the SCLC’s executive board. “The men around Dr. King [act] like little children,” Clark quotes Jenkins saying. “They must become well-developed creative thinking men and use their creativity to operate in crucial situations or community crises or be able to help with organizing the community so that minute men are at hand when needed.”

Clark appealed to King on a practical level. She wrote that she saw him as agitated, tired, and stressed, and that he needed someone else to share the burdens of running the SCLC. “You are human,” Clark wrote, “you must have time for rest, relaxation and research. You must get someone to share the great responsibilities of a national organizing with you. That person must have the power to act with your support.” Unfortunately, King never implemented Clark’s suggestions on a large scale. After King’s assassination, the SCLC never again came close to achieving the influence and power it had under King. It is not coincidental that two years later, in 1970, the Citizenship Education Program lost its funding. Septima Clark retired that same year. Despite being well into her seventies, Clark remained active in Charleston as a member of the Old Bethel AME Church, and she became the first black woman elected to the Charleston County Board of Education in the 1980s.

Given the amazing potential of the CEP and the organizing tradition, there is a tendency to bemoan the tradition’s decline after 1965. Payne, for one, concludes ‘I’ve Got the Light of Freedom’ with a lament for the loss of the organizing tradition.22 He writes, “The Organizing Tradition as a political and intellectual legacy of Black activists has been effectively lost, pushed away from the table by more top-down models.”23 Payne may very well be empirically correct. However, he does not seem to recognize one of the basic characteristics of organizing or group-centered leadership. Whereas in a leader-centered model, the leader is always potentially capable of mobilization on a large scale if she or he has the right personality, the organizing model relies on a very particular set of circumstances under which social change is possible.

In The Long Haul, Myles Horton differentiates between what he calls movement and organizational periods.24 Organizational periods are about building networks and connections between people with similar ideas and goals. These networks can only be built using the strategies and tactics present in the organizing tradition. However, organizational periods are not about causing social change. They are about preparing for the times when social change is possible, which are the periods Horton identifies as movements. During movement periods, the networks built during organizational periods can be put to work to create social change.

Horton worked at Highlander for nearly sixty years. As an institution, Highlander epitomizes the ideals of the organizing tradition or group-centered leadership as well as any institution in the United States. However, in those sixty years, there were only two periods that Horton described as movements—the labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s, and the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and 1960s.25 The expectation of consistent results from the organizing tradition is unrealistic. However, when the right circumstances exist, institutions built through group-centered leadership can have revolutionary and long-lasting effects. Because of the groundwork laid at Highlander in the early 1950s where individuals such as Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, and Essau Jenkins participated in workshops, Horton had created a network that was ready to take advantage of the growing movement leading to the creation of the Citizenship Education Program.

The genius of Septima Clark was her recognition and development of the power of education not only to enhance the power of their constituents but also to create a community of activists. The philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote,

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and deny the same token save it from that ruin which except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.26

For Arendt, education was the act of welcoming individuals to take part in the public sphere she so valued.27 Clark harnessed the power of education to empower Citizenship School students to enter a world that was trying to keep them out. She did not have a clear conception in mind of the world the students would create, beyond a commitment to democracy and equality. Clark trusted the students to undertake something new and unforeseen. Through community organizing, she aimed to help students achieve a positive freedom.

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NOTES

3. Ibid.
5. Quoted in Payne, Got the Light, 93.
6. Ibid.
7. It is tempting then to argue that the programs modeled on group-centered leadership (or the model of bridge leadership articulated by Belinda Robnett) that were most often initiated by women occurred because either there is something in black women's experiences that predisposes them to such work or that women assumed control of such programs because it was the only leadership avenue open to them. However, to do so belittles the strength of the convictions of women like Clark (and Baker and Hamer). Clark did not build the Citizenship Education Program because it was one of the few avenues of action open to her as a woman (although this is empirically true). Clark developed the Citizenship Schools because she believed them to be the best possible means with which to create a sustainable institution capable of effecting social change. Influenced by Myles Horton, she believed that the only way to liberate the oppressed was to help the oppressed liberate themselves. Clark created her vision; she did not create a compromise.

11. Septima P. Clark, "Literacy and Liberation," Freedomways, 4, 1 (1964); emphasis added.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Also in attendance was Rosa Parks, who, a few months later, would refuse to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. Parks would later sight her attendance at this Highlander Workshop as part of her inspiration for her action.
23. Ibid., 899.
25. Ibid., 225.
26. Young, An Easy Burden, 278.
27. Andrew Young to Wesley Hotchkiss and Truman Douglas, 10 June, 1964, 136 (13). SCLC.
28. Andrew Young, memo to Septima Clark, Dorothy Cotton, and Martin Luther King Jr., re: Citizenship Education Program, 17 December 1963, 29 (1) MLK.