

Lecture on Multiculturalism 2002

Robert Parris: Civil Rights, Human Rights, and Multiculturalism

The 8th Annual Lecture on Multiculturalism

Monday, February 4, 2002 at 7:30 PM
Edwards Auditorium



Robert Parris (Bob) Moses, Civil Rights Activist and Founder of the Algebra Project, Monday February 4, 2001 at 7:30 pm in Edwards Auditorium. Moses will address the topic

"Civil Rights, Human Rights, and Multiculturalism."

Born on January 23, 1935, Moses earned a B.A. degree from Hamilton (NY) College and M.A. degree in philosophy from Harvard University in 1957. While teaching mathematics at Horace Mann Middle School in New York City, he visited Hampton in 1960, where he was inspired by black students participating in a sit-in campaign in nearby Newport News, VA. Upon returning to New York City, he participated in a march organized by veteran civil rights activist Bayard Rustin. At the suggestion of Rustin, Moses traveled to Atlanta to volunteer with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the summer of 1960. Subsequent discussions with SCLC staff member Jane Stembbridge prompted him to conduct a field trip to Mississippi to recruit students for the fall conference critical to the birth of a new youth-oriented organization- The Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The legendary activist Ella Baker, the one time executive secretary of SCLC, mentored Moses and the other founders of SNCC. The strategy of SNCC stressed grassroots initiatives, cultivation of local leadership, and decentralized decision-making, departing from the methods of more traditional civil-rights organizations.

At the invitation of local NAACP activist Amzie Moore, Moses returned to Mississippi in the summer of 1961, leaving teaching to commit to full-time work in the struggle for civil rights. As a Field Secretary for SNCC and Director of its Mississippi Project, he emphasized voter registration as a means for empowering low-income blacks in Mississippi. By 1962, he had helped to found the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to promote collaboration between the various civil rights organizations. It has been suggested that his two major contributions were his role in mobilizing the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964 and in nurturing the development of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Through the Freedom Summer Project, Moses, other SNCC activists, and local supporters brought hundreds of college students

to Mississippi to register voters and conduct alternative schools. Through the MFDP, local citizens and their supporters challenged the Mississippi Democratic Party regulars at the 1964 Democratic Party National Convention in Atlanta City, NJ, sending a message to the state and the nation that blacks valued the vote and were determined to exercise the rights and freedom associated with full citizenship.

Stressing the moral authority of their cause, the MFDP ultimately rejected the compromises extended to them by President Lyndon B. Johnson and the Democratic Party leaders. In their efforts to impose the compromises, Democratic Party leaders and some MFDP allies contradicted the bedrock principles for which SNCC fought in favor of a media-driven, personality-centered, top-down approach to decision-making. The success of both the Freedom Summer Project and the MFDP campaign was to be found in the sense of affirmation experienced by black leaders in Mississippi and their allies; and in the massive media recognition and public support brought to their cause. However, a sense of betrayal by Democratic Party leaders spread through the SNCC and MFDP rank-and-file. Further conflicted by the belief that his own dominant presence within the movement was undermining the independence of local leaders, Moses resigned and left Mississippi in late 1964.

After a period as a draft resister against the Vietnam War, and as a math teacher in Tanzania in East Africa, Moses began the second phase of his remarkable domestic civil rights career. The recipient of a prestigious Mac Arthur Fellowship in 1982, he utilized the grant to lay the foundation for the [Algebra Project](#), a national program employing constructivist methods to reinforce mathematical literacy as a means of enhancing college preparation and participation. In his view, proficiency in algebra was the key to participating in the evolving information society of the 21st century, and to first-class citizenship. In many instances, African Americans continue to be steered away from the mathematics classes that lead to college, math, science, and engineering careers; to high-level employment; and to civic participation.

By its tenth year, the Algebra Project was reaching more than 9,000 youth across the nation, winning accolades from the National Science Foundation. In 1992, Moses and his former SNCC colleague, David J. Dennis, Sr. initiated the Delta Algebra Project of Mississippi, eventually expanding the program to Louisiana, Arkansas, and Kentucky.

Moses, along with former SNCC colleague, Charles E. Cobb Jr., recently authored [Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights](#). His accomplishments are chronicled in numerous books, articles, and films. Among these accounts are two seminal histories of the civil rights era, [Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963](#) (Simon and Schuster, 1989), and [Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965](#) (Simon and Schuster, 1997); a historical novel, [The Children Bob Moses Led](#) (Milkweed, 1995); a biography, [And Gently We Shall Lead Them: Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi](#) (New York University, 1995); a dramatic film, [Freedom Song](#) (Turner Network Television, 2000); and two documentary films, [Freedom On My Mind](#) (California Newsreel, 1994) and [Eyes On the Prize: Mississippi: Is this America? 1962- 1964](#) (Blackside, 1986). In addition to the MacArthur grant, his many awards include a [Heinz Award](#) in the category of the human condition; an Essence Magazine Award; and a Margaret Chase Smith Award.

Related Links

(URI and the URI Multicultural Center are not responsible for the content of the following

Web sites.)

- [Bob Moses- Biography](#)
- [SNCC- Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#)
- [MFDP- Minority Faculty Development Program](#)
- [The Algebra Project](#)
- [The Algebra Project- A Report Outline with Annotated Biography](#)
- [Algebra and Activism: Removing the Shackles of Low Expectations- A Conversation with Robert P. Moses](#)
- [The Heinz Award](#)
- [Smithsonian Magazine Article](#)
- [The Algebra Project: Organizing in the Spirit of Ella](#)
- [Margaret Chase Smith American Democracy Award](#)
- [Harvard Education Letter](#)
- [Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights](#)
- [Movement Links](#)