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Charles Gomillion, Educator-Community Activist

Jan M. Fritz

ABSTRACT

Sociologist Charles Goode Gomillion has devoted his life to improving the status of black Americans living in the South. This essay provides information about Gomillion's years in South Carolina and Alabama and his professional work at Tuskegee University. His civil rights activities in Macon County, Alabama—including his involvement in a landmark Supreme Court case—also are discussed. Four documents written by Gomillion follow this essay.

Sociologist Charles Goode Gomillion has devoted his life to improving the status of black Americans living in the South. His work certainly is remembered by students and faculty who were with him at Tuskegee Institute over a forty-year period and by adults of the city of Tuskegee, Alabama where a public building and street have been named in his honor. Civil rights scholars and activists also remember him because of his involvement in a landmark Supreme Court case. Unfortunately, his writing and clinical activities have gone largely unnoticed by sociologists.¹ This essay is intended to correct that oversight.²

Charles Goode Gomillion (1987a) was born at high noon on Sunday, April 1, 1900, in Johnston, a small town in rural Edgefield County, South Carolina. His father, a custodian, was illiterate and his mother could barely read and write. But both parents encouraged Charles and the three younger children not only to work hard and be frugal but also to recognize the value of asking questions and reading. Gomillion remembers going alone or with his mother to ask "white folks to give us magazines," and his mother regularly bringing home *The Chicago Defender*, a weekly newspaper directed at black readers, and the NAACP's *Crisis*.

At the age of 16, Gomillion left his hometown to attend high school at Paine College, a small Methodist school in Augusta, Georgia.³ He was admitted on

probation because he had completed only 26 months of formal education. Gomillion worked the whole time he was at Paine to pay for his education, but began every new academic year in financial debt to the school. Of the 35 students who were in his entering class, only Gomillion and five others were graduated.

Gomillion continued his education at Paine and was graduated cum laude in 1928. He had become a social science major in college because the school dropped psychology, his initial major. Also, Gomillion lost interest in psychology while taking an introductory sociology course from Professor Isadore Williams,⁴ a graduate of Howard University. Her primary text was E. A. Ross' (1920) *Principles of Sociology*, and Gomillion (1987a) "fell in love with the processes of social interaction" which Ross emphasized.

Bertram Doyle was another one of Gomillion's teachers at Paine. Doyle, Dean of the College and Professor of Sociology, had graduated from the University of Chicago after writing a dissertation on the etiquette of race relations. Gomillion took only one course from Doyle, but the class only had half-a-dozen students and it was a good opportunity for him to get to know the teacher. Gomillion was very impressed by Doyle's knowledge, his excellence as a teacher and even his speed reading ability. Doyle later moved to Fisk University, and Gomillion was drawn there because of his respect for Doyle.

Gomillion held many jobs to pay for his education—in Philadelphia; Augusta and Milledgeville, Georgia; Detroit; and Hartford, Connecticut. But after he finished undergraduate school, he spent most of his career at Tuskegee Institute in Macon County, Alabama. Gomillion passed up a position selling life insurance in 1928 to take a one year position teaching history in Tuskegee Institute's high school program. His mother-in-law had found the position at Tuskegee and his work there developed into a relationship lasting more than forty years.

Tuskegee Institute, founded by Booker T. Washington in 1881, was to be a high school and college for black students with an all black faculty and administration. The school was located in the city of Tuskegee, approximately forty miles east of Montgomery, the state capital, and about forty-five miles southwest of Columbus, Georgia.

Gomillion taught in Tuskegee's high school for five years⁵ and then was promoted to the college program. He later became a professor of sociology, and served as Dean of the School of Education, Dean of Students, Chair of the Division of Social Sciences and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Gomillion (1987a) stayed at Tuskegee, he says, because he "had total freedom. No president interfered with any of my activities. There was no criticism if (because of my activities) I made arrangements to cover my classes." During his tenure, Gomillion (e.g., 1942, 1947, 1952, 1957b, 1959b, 1962a, 1965a) published articles about civil rights, voting and the status of blacks in the South.

Gomillion (1987b) says he “never wanted to be anything other than a teacher” and reluctantly accepted a number of administrative posts at Tuskegee only because he was allowed to teach one or two courses per academic session. Gomillion (1987a) described his teaching in the following way:

Most of my courses start out with, ‘Who am I? What courses am I taking? How can these courses help me as a citizen or worker? and What can I use from this course in the kind of work I’ll be doing?’ I want to teach (students) their roles as citizens and as college graduates . . . what they could do and should do.

Gomillion thought if he could get his students to think about these questions, they would do better in school and in later life. To do his best as a teacher, he thought he needed to give his students the same kind of freedom that the presidents of Tuskegee had given him.

In the early 1930s Gomillion wanted to go to the University of North Carolina for full-time graduate study and to take part in the research that was being conducted on the sociology of the South under Howard Odum. But the University of North Carolina did not admit blacks to its graduate school at that time, and Gomillion couldn’t afford to attend any of the prestigious colleges in the North.

Gomillion (1987a) did arrange a leave from Tuskegee for one year, 1933–34, to take graduate courses at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. There he decided to study what he wanted rather than take the courses required of those enrolled in a degree program.⁶ He came to work with Doyle, who had moved from Paine College, E. Franklin Frazier,⁷ who had left the Atlanta School of Social Work, and Charles S. Johnson, who had been with the Urban League.⁸

Seven years later, in 1941, Gomillion received a scholarship allowing him to spend one quarter in the Ohio State University’s graduate program in education. While there, he was advised to enroll in the graduate program in sociology. He had to drop out periodically for financial reasons, but finally received his Ph.D. in sociology in 1959, when he was 59 years old. His adviser was Brewton Berry, an expert in race relations, and Gomillion did his dissertation on civic democracy in the South.

In addition to his work at Tuskegee, Gomillion (1987c) engaged in a number of “eye-opening” field experiences. In the summer of 1934, after completing a year of work at Fisk University, faculty member Charles Johnson asked Gomillion to join a field research project. Supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the project would send teams of researchers to selected counties to interview tenant farmers, plantation landlords (if possible), and business people, such as grocers, who had connections to agriculture. Gomillion was asked to be part of a team of three individuals assigned to visit one county in Texas and two in Mississippi.

After Gomillion heard that two blacks were lynched in Mississippi, he tried to withdraw from the project. He had early childhood experiences that contributed to his fear⁹ and, as he put it, "I'm not good at controlling my temper. I was afraid I wouldn't survive" (Gomillion, 1987a).

Johnson convinced him to take part in the project by telling Gomillion to leave the talking to a light-skinned black woman who was part of the team, and the team leader, Lewis Jones:

Let Edmonia be Miss Ann, the other guy will be the chauffeur and you be nigger boy in the back of the car (Gomillion, 1987a).

Gomillion said it was difficult at times, but "I kept my mouth shut."

In 1937, Gomillion worked in the field once more—interviewing cotton and tobacco farmers in Alabama, North Carolina and South Carolina. He worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the Division of Resettlement, under the direction of sociologist Edgar A. Schuler. The government wanted the information for a study comparing farmers who were being resettled with those who were not. Collecting the facts and helping to analyze them once again gave Gomillion the opportunity to learn more about the problems blacks were encountering.

While Gomillion's teaching and written work were known locally, he is remembered nationally for his involvement in the civil rights struggle.¹⁰ He was the forceful, patient President of the Tuskegee Civic Association (TCA) from 1941–45 and again from 1951–68 and in 1970. As President, he began to challenge Macon County's treatment of black citizens.

The struggle was long and difficult. Numerous legal actions had to be initiated and a boycott of the city's white businesses began in the early 1950s, several years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The boycott—or, as it was called in Tuskegee, the trade with your friends campaign—was officially endorsed by the TCA in 1957 and lasted two more years. It was so successful that half of the white-owned businesses were gone by the spring of 1958 and sales were down 45–60% for those that survived. As a result, white resistance started to diminish, voter registration began to take place, and the courts started to be responsive.

Gomillion won his most impressive legal victory (Gomillion versus Light-foot) in the U.S. Supreme Court in 1960. Gomillion's successful suit stopped the local gerrymandering which had kept all but about ten blacks from voting in town elections. According to the attorney for the Tuskegee Civic Association (Guzman, 1984:xi), "the Gomillion case is one of the landmark cases of the century. It opened the door for the redistricting and reapportioning of various legislative bodies from city hall to the U.S. capitol and also laid the foundation for the concept of 'one-(person)-one-vote.'"

Gomillion's activism was in organizations that wanted to improve the position of blacks in the community. Activism, however, is not always popular and, even when it is, it is not acceptable to all segments of the community. Gomillion's involvement, for instance, as a board member of three organizations—the Highlander Folk Center, the Southern Negro Youth Congress and the Southern Conference Educational Fund—was suspicious to some because these groups had been accused of being Communist front organizations (e.g. Anonymous, 1964; Georgia Commission of Education, 1957.)¹¹

Gomillion (1987b) was willing to work with people with different political leanings if they shared his objective, civic democracy. Gomillion never publicly denied the charges of communism because he thought "those who know me know I'm not a communist and those who don't know me wouldn't believe me anyway." He told two successive Presidents of Tuskegee that he was willing to resign if they thought his behavior in any way embarrassed the school. His community actions were never criticized by university officials and they never even asked him about the accusations of communist affiliations.

In the 1960s, when progressive northerners joined hands with southern blacks and whites to address issues of racial inequality, Gomillion didn't march. He (Gomillion, 1987b) was berated by some for this, and he particularly remembers an occasion when a Tuskegee student confronted him about his lack of involvement in the Selma to Montgomery march. He replied, "Any dumbbell can march, no dumbbell can do what I'm doing" in organizations and in the courts.

Gomillion (1987a) had made a strong verbal response. He let the student know about his expertise but did not tell her his point of weakness. Gomillion always tried to avoid the possibility of a physical confrontation. He "tried to stay out of positions where (he) might lose it . . . because of anger." He worried about confrontations because he wasn't sure he "could turn the other cheek." As Gomillion put it: "I can't tolerate anyone interfering with my movement . . . I can take verbal abuse . . . (but) don't block my movement."

Four documents written by Gomillion are reprinted in this issue of the *Clinical Sociology Review*. The first, "The Tuskegee Voting Story," appeared in a 1962 issue of *Freedomways*, a quarterly review of the Negro freedom movement. The article is included to give readers a better understanding of life, at that time, in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Two letters follow this article. The first was sent in February, 1959 to Charles Gomillion by a member of a White Citizens Council in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Gomillion's response, written in March, was published totally or in an abbreviated form in a number of newspapers.

The third item, "Questions Which Might Be Asked in Planning a Program of Social Action," was written in the late 1950s and published in the 1966 anniversary program of the Tuskegee Civic Association. The brief list was used,

for many years, by the leadership of the Tuskegee Civic Association in deciding which cases or projects the association should take on or support. The association was very interested in determining in advance, as best they could, the possible impact of a project in relation to expenditures of money and time.

The final article is an unpublished paper, "The Role of the Sociologist in Community Action in the Rural South." Gomillion was scheduled to deliver this paper at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Chicago in 1965. He was unable to attend the meeting but the paper was presented by a southern newspaper editor, Ralph McGill.¹² Gomillion's style in this paper—gentle, non-confrontational—is characteristic of the approach he used in papers to be delivered at sociology meetings. In this article he encourages sociologists to be active in bringing about progressive social change.

Conclusion

Gomillion (1987a,c) describes his life's work as that of an educator and community activist. He wanted his students and colleagues to understand the importance of using their gift—their education—to improve conditions of the society. He seems almost embarrassed when he discusses his research and writing. He thinks he didn't publish enough and he wishes he'd had a better writing style, one that was interesting, breezy and polished.

Gomillion (1987a) says "sometimes I felt I hadn't done what was expected of me . . . the research that gives prestige. But when I hear from my students and alumni, I think maybe I wasn't intended to be a research sociologist."

Perhaps we need to do a better job of defining our field. We need to let an 88 year-old sociologist who has spent over 25 years solving important community problems and writing about community changes know that we value, encourage and publicize sociologists who are scholar-practitioners as well as those who are research sociologists.

NOTES

1. Gomillion's work is discussed in Smith and Killian's (1974) "Black Sociologists and Social Protest" and in Butler Jones' (1974) "The Tradition of Sociology Teaching in Black Colleges."
2. I am indebted to Dr. Gomillion for sharing his materials and agreeing to a series of interviews about his work. The detail he provided would have been very difficult to acquire without his help. Any errors in fact or analysis, however, are the author's responsibility.
3. Many of the black colleges began as high schools and later offered both high school and college programs. The pastor of Gomillion's church, Bethel CME, was a student in the theological program at Paine College and recommended the high school program to Gomillion.

4. Gomillion (1987a) has established “a little prize at Paine in honor of her introducing me to sociology.” The award is given each year to a graduating student with the best academic record in sociology.

5. Among the courses he was teaching was the only one he had failed at Paine. This was a history course and Gomillion had been yelled at by the teacher about a window shade that had been pulled down incorrectly. Gomillion (1987a) recalls “the teacher was a white Mississippian and he shouted ‘stop sitting like a knot on a log and pull the shade down.’” Gomillion said he left the room, wouldn’t apologize and never returned to the class.

6. According to Gomillion (1987a), I “took what I wanted to take to help me do a better job of teaching. I knew I wanted to teach at Tuskegee and work with organizations in the South to help them do what they could to change things in the South.” Gomillion was “trying to raise the status of blacks, economically, politically and educationally.”

Gomillion was able to attend Fisk because a professor who had known him at Paine College arranged for all tuition to be waived and the Bethlehem Center in Nashville gave him room and board. Gomillion was divorced from his first wife and had custody of their two young daughters at this time. Gomillion’s sister, who lived in Washington, D.C., cared for his daughters while he attended Fisk, and Tuskegee continued to pay him his full salary, which allowed for the support of his family while he was in school.

7. Gomillion (1987a) thought “Frazier was good in research and seemed not to be afraid of whites . . .”

8. All three professors received degrees from the University of Chicago.

9. When Charles Gomillion (1987a) was a child, his father had killed a white man. The court said this had been done in self-defense but after the trial his father never went out of the house at night. He also would not let the children do anything that would put them at risk (e.g., “deliver newspapers to the homes of whites, dance for white men for pennies”) and cautioned the children to “play with white children but don’t take any foolishness off them.”

10. Gomillion’s leadership role is documented in Robert Norell’s (1985) *Reaping the Whirlwind*. This volume, winner of the sixth annual Robert F. Kennedy book award, is an excellent account of the civil rights movement in Tuskegee. Ray Jenkins, in his 1985 review, said “In the final analysis this is a profoundly depressing book, a tale about two peoples who have an immense amount in common—notably crushing poverty and isolation—and a single irrelevant difference—their color—and yet that difference has made them perpetual enemies.”

Another important source of information about Gomillion’s role as an agent for change is Guzman’s (1984) *Crusade for Civic Democracy*. Guzman, a former history professor at Tuskegee Institute, “is remembered by former students as an excellent teacher (who was) a stickler for accuracy and thoroughness. Her book embodies these characteristics” (Vernon, 1984:B8).

11. Gomillion (1987a) said J. Edgar Hoover thought the Southern Negro Youth Congress was a communist-front organization. The alleged communist-connection was one of the reasons Gomillion decided not to travel abroad except for Canada. As Gomillion noted, “even the President of Tuskegee had problems getting papers for international travel.” Though he would have liked to travel abroad, Gomillion said “there was enough for me to see and do in the U.S.”

12. Gomillion (1987a) is not sure why he was unable to attend the meeting. His wife Jennie, who died of cancer in 1967, may have been ill or he may have had to be in court or had to prepare materials for a court hearing. Ralph McGill, the white editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, who was supportive of the TCA and a “staunch opponent of lynching,” was going to be attending the meeting. McGill accepted Gomillion’s invitation to present the paper for him.

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