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Campus Activism in the White South: An
Examination of the Southern Student
Organizing Committee

By

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Introduction

The contemporary socio-political landscape in the United States is constantly changing and complex. There are truly unprecedented events happening seemingly every week, yet historians of the United States would be well suited to see the reflections of this country's history in the events of today. There is no direct analogue for today's culture, politics, and social problems, but there are clear similarities. Even thinking solely about the divisiveness of the political and social theater of the contemporary United States, some problems of the past century are still clearly present. The political arena is particularly theatrical, but that theater has brought to light issues within the political landscape, especially in regions that are controlled by one political party. Nashville is a perfect example.

In March of 2023, hundreds of protesters, many of them students, gathered at the Tennessee statehouse to protest for more stringent gun laws following a mass shooting at a school. These protesters gathered in the galleries and hallways of the statehouse, causing a significant disturbance without causing any physical damage. Three members of the state legislature, Justin Jones, Justin Pearson, and Gloria Johnson, joined the demonstrators in the chanting, showing their support of the protest by joining the chanting with a bullhorn on the floor of the state legislature. As a result of their actions which were in violation of the rules of the legislature, Justin Pearson and Justin Jones were expelled from the Republican-controlled legislature while Gloria Johnson was saved from expulsion by one vote.

The expulsions were quickly condemned by both the general public and by politicians and public figures around the country. The President of the United States was quick to comment

on the situation, calling it “undemocratic” and an event “without precedent”.¹ The public followed their expulsion with even more protests at the Tennessee statehouse, ensuring that the legislators understood their anger and disappointment with their actions. However, it was not the legislature that reinstated the lawmakers, it was their individual districts who returned the representatives to their seats.² Despite their return, their initial expulsion raised many questions about the political process and protest in the United States. Yes, the three Tennessee lawmakers broke rules of decorum, but that had never warranted expulsion from the legislature before. It brought up questions of racism within the legislature and whether this event was an abuse of power by the majority party. One other line of questions that came from this event was how to go about organizing in an environment where those demonstrating are in the minority and where demonstrating could be a dangerous act. Indeed, the protesters both on the floor and gallery on March 30th were clearly in the minority opinion in Tennessee where Republican lawmakers hold a distinct majority.

When protesters of the American Left look for a historical precedent for their actions and strategy, the most obvious example would come from the New Left activism that permeated the country in the second half of the 20th century. Exemplified by the long fight for Civil Rights and the strong opposition to the war in Vietnam, activists made their voices heard for years, bringing significant change in their communities and the country as a whole. This activism was particularly notable in the American South where the activists were at a significant disadvantage.

¹ Kerry Breen, “The ‘Tennessee Three’: Why Were Two of the Democratic Lawmakers Expelled, and What Happens Now? - CBS News,” CBS News, April 12, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tennessee-expulsion-house-democrats-expelled-what-happens-now/>.

² Marc Ramirez, “Second of Two Tennessee Lawmakers Expelled by Republican Majority Reappointed Wednesday,” USA TODAY, April 12, 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/04/12/tennessee-three-second-expelled-lawmaker-could-return-after-removal/11641568002/>.

The established culture was entrenched in the South so much that it was a battle every step of the way for those who wanted to bring about significant change.

The history of the New Left and student activism is well trod ground, perhaps to the point of redundancy. This does not mean, however, that the prevailing narratives of student organizing do not need new eyes. New methods, information, and ideas shape how historians engage with the past, and it is always necessary to look at what has been done and what is missing. Looking at the history of the New Left, one could argue that the New Left was not just a movement of youth activists in the 1960s and 70s. Rather, the ideas of those brave people instilled a lasting culture of awareness of inequality and dissent against the power structures in American society? That would maintain that inequality. Though modern protest movements seemingly lack the cohesion of those of the 60s and 70s, student activists today? still overwhelmingly echo the voices of those who came before them. Few issues are more prevalent today than the continued struggle for racial and social equality within American society. Yes, significant progress has been made for almost every marginalized group in the United States, but the structures that uphold inequality run deep in this country, and the effects of inequality are still apparent. While these struggles still persist, the people still actively resist the tyranny that attempts to hold them under. To see this resistance in action, one only needs to look to college campuses to find the remnants of the New Left in the United States.

Progressive values still run deep at American institutions of higher learning. It seems as though the nature of the university inspires this sort of idealism and vigor. Students have always been a prominent demographic for organizing. Prominent groups such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) worked incessantly during the 1960s to bring about equality, and students continue to do that work today

at their own institutions and in their own communities. Even lesser known groups held an important role in the history of student organizing. One group in particular has been drastically overshadowed by the more prominent organizations of the 1960s, despite their unique position in the history of student activism. The Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) was a one of a kind organization consisting of students from every state in the South, committed to organizing in an overtly hostile environment in order to bring white students and community members into the movement for equality. Like many New Left organizations during the 1960s, the SSOC eventually decayed and collapsed in June of 1969, but much can still be learned from the history of this group. The contemporary political climate in the United States seems eerily similar to that of the 1960s. Politicians seem intent on widening a deep rift in American society based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and political affiliation. In many states, it seems futile to organize against the powers that aim to divide and subdue the marginalized peoples of the United States, but the history of the SSOC demonstrates that such organizing can still be impactful without being outright successful. They demonstrated what it means to organize in a hostile environment, and they showed that even though the margins may be slim, change is possible, and there are always those who will fight for equality despite the opposition in front of them.

A few fundamental questions at the heart of the history of the New Left, and the history of the SSOC as a result, is whether their actions were truly revolutionary, and whether the impact of their actions was important given that these groups often failed to reach their ultimate goals. The SSOC formed in 1964 with excitement and passion. They sought to show other white southerners that there were those among them that were committed to organizing for Civil Rights and other progressive causes, and through their organizing they hoped that they would be able to

bring more white southerners into the movement and together build a better South, free of all the inequality and divisiveness that had defined the region since the ratification of the United States Constitution. SSOC, focused mostly on disseminating information and bringing more awareness to progressive issues in the South and southern college campuses, often failed in its goals. Even the initial ideals laid out at their founding meeting in Nashville in 1964 were never fully realized. After only five years of operation and multiple significant changes to the structure of the organization, the Southern Student Organizing Committee dissolved in 1969.

My project asks: despite this perceived failure, what was the impact of this organization, and what can be learned from these organizers? First, it would seem that the SSOC was able to demonstrate that organizing in a hostile environment was not only possible, but it was also able to happen without falling into the same radicalism that drove so many away from other student organizing campaigns from the same period. It also demonstrated that the SSOC was able to foster a strong political minority that could still make waves within these hostile environments even when the power structures in place were too powerful to be dismantled by such small opposition. Their actions may? Do? serve as an inspiration to those students who still operate and organize in hostile conditions.

There are four areas that are central to looking at the SSOC and their work in the South. First, how did the SSOC, both on Southern campuses and in Southern communities relate to the Black Freedom Struggle and race relations as a whole? Second, with the increase in industrialization in the South following World War II, how did the SSOC position itself in relation to labor organizing and unionization? Third, how did the emergence of the Vietnam War as a point of conflict alter the SSOC's organizing strategy? And lastly, how did the SSOC grapple

with radical politics that often permeated the New Left both in the South and elsewhere in the country?

Prior Scholarship on the SSOC and Southern Culture

The history of the New Left has been extensively covered by historians dating back from the movement itself. Despite this, the history of the SSOC has barely been touched by historians aside from cursory mentions in lists of other more prominent organizations. The prominent histories of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) provide some light coverage of the work of SSOC, but they fail to give any real attention to the group. Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle* provides only a slight reference to the SSOC, describing it as an organization borne out of SNCC itself as white students were looking for a new way to engage in the movement and work in white communities.³ Despite being a fraternal organization, works focusing on the Students for a Democratic Society have failed to make meaningful connections to the history of the SSOC.

While there have been a few scholars to have dedicated small works covering the Southern Student Organizing Committee, only one historian has conducted extensive research on the organization: Gregg Michel. Michel is the predominant historian of the SSOC. His book *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969* is the only book covering the entire history of the organization.⁴ Since the completion of this book, Michel has continued to dedicate his time to researching the SSOC and expanding on the history of the student activists in the South. He has contributed multiple works regarding the SSOC to larger

³ Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969*, 1st ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3.

⁴ Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*.

volumes on the New Left and student organizing. His article “Building the New South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee” in *The New Left Revisited* provides a shorter history of the SSOC that emphasizes the importance of the organization despite its relative obscurity in comparison to the other larger New Left organizations of the time.⁵ Michel’s work has shifted towards surveillance more recently, though the SSOC is still paramount. “Government Repression of the Southern New Left” goes into detail about the struggles of Southern activists, particularly those in SSOC, regarding government intervention in their operations.⁶ Michel’s contributions to the scholarship on the SSOC are impressive and important. Without his extensive research on the organization, the history of the SSOC may have been lost to personal recollections and small collections of documents held by former members given that many of the organizational documents were burned due to fears of being persecuted by the United States Government.⁷

The SSOC emerged at a pivotal time in American history, when racial segregation and discrimination were deeply entrenched in Southern society. Michel's research helped scholars of the American South and the New Left comprehend the strategies, challenges, and achievements of this student-led organization. Through his meticulous study, he uncovered insights into the SSOC's tactics, such as organizing sit-ins, protests, and voter registration drives, which aimed to challenge the status quo and dismantle systemic racism. Michel's research also delved into the ideological framework of the SSOC, highlighting its commitment to nonviolence and its efforts to forge alliances with other civil rights organizations. By examining the SSOC's interactions

⁵ John Campbell McMillian and Paul Buhle, eds., *The New Left Revisited*, Critical Perspectives on the Past (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/4815013>.

⁶ Robert Cohen, ed., *Rebellion in Black and White: Southern Student Activism in the 1960s* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/9108595>.

⁷ Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 4.

with prominent New Left organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Michel provided a comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness and synergy among different groups striving for racial justice. Moreover, Michel's work helped to amplify the voices and experiences of the young activists involved in the SSOC. By documenting their stories and contributions, Michel preserved an important chapter of American history, ensuring that the sacrifices and accomplishments of these student organizers are not forgotten.

And while Michel's work is significant to our understanding of the southern New Left, it is not without its faults. Michel's focus lies primarily on recounting the overall history of the SSOC and emphasizing the organization's impact on southern college campuses. However, Michel, and other scholars who have elected to mention the SSOC, come up short regarding questions about the place of the SSOC within the American South. Regionalism was one of the founding principles of the SSOC. It was a significant aspect of the foundations of the organization, and Michel argues that it was an important factor in the demise of the SSOC in 1969. However, these scholars of the SSOC have not covered in any significant detail the actual southern culture that the SSOC was connecting with.

The history of the SSOC is incomplete without an examination of the cultural history of the South. One scholar stands out in this field, James Cobb. His work on Southern industrialization and culture is some of the best in the field, and it provides an excellent backdrop for analyzing the Southern Student Organizing Committee. In particular, the book *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* is the perfect primer for those interested in the cultural and ideological history of the South.⁸ It provides a refutation of prior scholarship by W.J. Cash, and it

⁸ James C. Cobb, *Away down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/5747593>.

thoughtfully describes the transformation of Southern culture from the colonial period to the late 20th century. Cobb's analysis of Southern culture provides the backdrop for the operations and initial ideology of the SSOC. Of particular note is the development of the Lost Cause narrative in the South, a nostalgic interpretation of the former Confederacy and life in the Old South. In addition to this, the SSOC was operating in an era of shifting Southern identity. The first half of the 20th century, according to Cobb, represented a period of shifting identity for many Southerners. The South seemed to have built an identity of individuality and distinctiveness formed through opposition to the North. This idea is increasingly important when examining the Civil Rights era due to the way the Black Freedom Struggle played into the Southern opposition to the North.

Cobb's other writings also shed light on the historical foundations of Southern culture and the factors that have shaped its identity. In his book *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, Cobb explores the unique landscape and cultural landscape of the Mississippi Delta.⁹ He highlights the significance of agriculture, particularly cotton farming, in shaping the economic, social, and cultural fabric of the region. The Delta's fertile soil and proximity to the Mississippi River made it an ideal location for large-scale plantations, which relied heavily on enslaved labor. This legacy of plantation agriculture profoundly influenced Southern culture, as it gave rise to a distinct social hierarchy, a strong sense of place, and a deeply rooted connection to the land.

One of the defining features of Southern culture is its strong emphasis on traditions and heritage. Cobb's work explores the enduring significance of these cultural practices and rituals.

⁹ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/1372402>.

In *The South and America Since World War II*, he examines how Southern culture evolved in the face of social, political, and economic changes in the post-World War II era.¹⁰ Despite the transformations taking place in the region, Southern culture remained deeply rooted in traditions such as storytelling, music, and food. These cultural practices serve as a means of passing down knowledge, preserving history, and strengthening community bonds.

In addition to Cobb's writings, there are several other authors who have made important contributions to the history of southern culture and identity. Kevin Kruse's work *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* provides an excellent look into the urban politics amongst working-class and middle-class white Atlantans during the 1960s.¹¹ Through his examination of Atlanta's white neighborhoods, Kruse provides a robust history of an emerging ideology amongst Atlanta's white population. John Dittmer also makes important contributions to this history with his book *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Placing local people at the center of his history of the Civil Rights Movement, Dittmer provides important groundwork that demonstrates how white southerners engaged with the Civil Rights movement, even in a limited capacity.¹² Another incredibly significant work that would likely have been important to the activists of the SSOC is *Southern Regions of the United States* by Howard Odum.¹³ Though published in 1936, this volume provided an extensive survey of every facet of the South ranging from geography to government to culture. Odum then went on to publish another volume alongside Harry Estill Moore titled *American Regionalism: A Cultural-*

¹⁰ James C. Cobb, *The South and America since World War II* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/8294221#top>.

¹¹ Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹² John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

¹³ Howard Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chappel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936).

Historical Approach to National Integration.¹⁴ This work emphasized the importance of regionalism despite the growing nationalization of the country under the New Deal of FDR.¹⁵ These works both served as important precursors to Cobb's work on the South.

These prior writings are all incredibly helpful when examining the work of the SSOC, especially the work of Michel. However, the work of the SSOC is also found in primary source documents. A somewhat sparse amount of primary source material can be found in digital archives, and mostly in archives dedicated to other New Left organizations. One such archive is the Civil Rights Movement Veterans digital archive, which includes a small section of SSOC newsletters along with many more documents pertaining to SNCC, SDS, and other New Left organizing groups. The Wisconsin Historical Society also has an extensive digital archive relating to the Civil Rights Movement, the Freedom Rides, and various individual activists. They hold a sizeable collection of documents from the SSOC, making them a valuable source for researching the organization. The largest primary source archive of the SSOC is housed at the University of Virginia. Unfortunately, I have not had the resources to visit this archive, but the available digital and physical resources have been sufficient to complete this project.

Southern Distinctiveness at the Core

The Southern Student Organizing Committee was founded at a Nashville conference over Easter weekend in 1964. The purpose of this conference was to bring together students from across the South in order to address the perceived need for an organizing group with the specific intention of garnering support for progressive causes from white people in the South. Of

¹⁴ Howard Odum and Harry Moore, *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938).

¹⁵ Harvey Kantor, "Howard W. Odum: The Implications of Folk, Planning, and Regionalism," *The American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 2 (September 1973), 286.

immediate concern were the issues of Civil Rights and campus segregation. Overall, forty-five students attended the conference that would ultimately result in the creation of the SSOC.¹⁶ At this conference, the newborn SSOC adopted its founding goals and principles, of which an attachment to a distinct Southern culture was paramount. The first note of this came from their founding statement of broad goals for the organization entitled “We’ll Take Our Stand”, an homage to an earlier Southern writing with the title *I’ll Take My Stand*, a 1930s manifesto that decried the increasing industrialization of the South that seemingly threatened the pastoral ways of Southern life.¹⁷ The stated goals were typical of many New Left organizations in the 1960s. First and foremost it was the goal of the SSOC to bring an end to the rampant racial discrimination and segregation in the South. The students present at this first conference were coming from campuses where there were either very few or no black students. Also listed in “We’ll Take Our Stand” were a desire to bring an end to poverty, work to create better public programs to increase equality and quality of life and bring about “an end to man’s inhumanity to man.”¹⁸

With these initial goals in mind, the students at this conference decided to move forward with plans for a second conference to be held in Atlanta, Georgia a month later. On May 9th and 10th, forty students met at the second SSOC conference in order to further establish the foundations of the new student organizing group and to discuss an approach to organizing.¹⁹ Here, the founding members of the SSOC made the decision to begin producing a newsletter in

¹⁶ “Southern Student Organizing Committee (Goals, By-Laws, Budget, History Etc.) / Judy Richardson Papers / Duke Digital Repository,” Duke Digital Collections, accessed June 30, 2023, <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/richardsonjudy/jrpst002093>.

¹⁷ Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*. 42.

¹⁸ “Southern Student Organizing Committee (Goals, By-Laws, Budget, History Etc.) / Judy Richardson Papers / Duke Digital Repository.” 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

order to increase communication between the different student groups on campuses across the South.²⁰ At this conference as well, the students of the SSOC also saw the need to form an interracial organization. At the first conference, the idea was broached that the SSOC should be entirely focused on gaining the support of white southerners. However, they realized that forming a solely white organization was contrary to the overall beliefs and goals of the people forming the SSOC, so they elected to instead open membership to everyone to better align with their own goals.²¹

Through these two founding conferences, the young SSOC began to take shape, and it would begin its real action in the Fall of 1964. However, Southern distinctiveness, despite holding a prominent place in the minds of the founding members, did not take shape in the way they may have intended. Gregg Michel noted early in his book on the SSOC that the students at the first Nashville conference were looking for outlier instances of white resistance and radicalism in the South. They were not looking at southern history and identity as a whole, but rather looking for specific instances that they could use to claim that resistance and radicalism were an integral part of southern identity.²² While resistance may have been a part of the cultural heritage of the South, the primary resistance in Southern identity was the resistance to the North. Meanwhile, the students at the first SSOC conference were attempting to find instances of white resistance to the Southern status quo which were few and far between. It was a stretch to claim that this type of resistance was a true part of white southern identity.

Despite engaging with this anachronism in order to dictate their organizing ideology, the founding members of the SSOC also elected to use the most prominent image of Southern white

²⁰ Ibid, 33.

²¹ Ibid, 35.

²² Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 43.

culture as a part of their strategy. The first logo of the SSOC was a Confederate battle flag with a black and white hand clasped in front of it. It was displayed proudly on the first page of “The New Rebel”, the newsletter for the SSOC.²³ Despite this, the organizing strategy of the SSOC was not truly influenced by Southern culture. In 1964, SSOC was primarily focused on disseminating information, gauging interest among college students regarding progressive issues, and attempting to engage in an already prominent New Left movement. These are not prominent aspects of Southern culture, yet this emphasis on Southern distinctiveness never truly appeared in the way the SSOC operated. Instead, the SSOC worked almost entirely like any other student organizing group except for the fact that they worked in primarily white campuses and communities, and they had even less funding than the other prominent student organizations of the time period.

Even these founding ideals seemed to fall by the wayside within the first year of SSOC’s existence. The first southwide conference held by SSOC in November of 1964 signified a true beginning to SSOC’s operations. In Atlanta from November 13th to the 15th, roughly 144 students from around the South convened to discuss every aspect of SSOC.²⁴ The conference was planned to bring together students from across the South to participate in seminars, lectures, film screenings, and other events focusing on Southern student politics, Civil Rights, the history of the South and radicalism, and various other topics. Speakers included leaders from various Civil

²³ “The New Rebel: Newsletter of the Southern Student Organizing Committee,” 1964, <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999560652502121>.

²⁴ “Southern Student Organizing Committee (Goals, By-Laws, Budget, History Etc.) / Judy Richardson Papers / Duke Digital Repository,” Duke Digital Collections, accessed June 30, 2023, <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/richardsonjudy/jrpst002093>.

Rights organizations such as SNCC and SCLC, civil liberties lawyers, and the historian Howard Zinn.²⁵

The first full day of the conference centered around general discussion of campus organizing and how SSOC could relate to local campus organizations and students. The following days included lectures on coalition politics, academic freedom, civil liberties, and violations of constitutional rights.²⁶ There was then an extensive discussion regarding SSOC's relationship with SNCC led by Ed Hamlett, the director of SNCC's white student project and one of the founding members of SSOC. Indeed, there was some concern regarding SSOC's initial white distinctiveness. SSOC was envisioned previously as an organization dedicated to organizing Southern whites, but students at the southwide conference began to question that approach to organizing. To those present at the conference, it seemed more appropriate to engage with students on both white and black campuses.²⁷ This was bolstered by the fact that at this time, SNCC was looking to move away from campus organizing and put their focus more on organizing in communities. Therefore it was decided that SSOC would become an interracial coalition which worked on both white and black campuses across the South.²⁸

There was also a lengthy discussion of SSOC's logo that would appear on the newsletter and distributed materials, as well as the title of the newsletter itself. The logo, a confederate flag with a black and white hand clasped over it, was a significant point of contention amongst those at the southwide conference. There were students who were both in favor of and against the logo.

²⁵ "The New Rebel : Newsletter of the Southern Student Organizing Committee," 1964, <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999560652502121>.

²⁶ "Southern Student Organizing Committee (Goals, By-Laws, Budget, History Etc.) / Judy Richardson Papers / Duke Digital Repository," 23.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Michel explains that some of the activists at the conference argued that the use of the Confederate flag was deeply insensitive and it could make black students see SSOC as an antagonistic organization.²⁹ This feeling was shared by both black and white students, many of whom did not want their organization showing what they deemed to be a symbol of oppression and racism. However, there were those who spoke favorably about the logo. The most notable advocate for the Confederate flag logo was Ed Hamlett. Ed argued that the flag was a symbol of the “heritage of poor white southerners.”³⁰ Others also thought that the hands clasped represented the common problems that white and black southerners faced. Similar arguments were made regarding the initial title of SSOC’s newsletter *The New Rebel*. Some thought that engaging with these aspects of southern heritage was beneficial while others deemed it unacceptable. In the end, the gathered students decided to abandon both the Confederate flag symbol and *The New Rebel* as the title for the newsletter, deeming them to be too divisive for the newly interracial organization despite their connection to southern heritage.³¹

These discussions did not work to truly support the initial outlook of SSOC. Rather, they worked to expand the vision of the young organization. SSOC came out of the southwide conference with a much wider vision than had previously been considered by the founders back in April of 1964. The students who gathered in Atlanta in November of 1964 came out of that conference with a much wider view of projects they could engage in, including work relating to academic freedom and free speech issues alongside the initial work of supporting the black freedom struggle. This wider vision however, seems to have made SSOC lose some of the initial

²⁹ Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 83-84.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 84.

³¹ “Southern Student Organizing Committee (Goals, By-Laws, Budget, History Etc.) / Judy Richardson Papers / Duke Digital Repository”; Southern Student Organizing Committee, “Newsletter,” 1965 1964, <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999560780402121>.

ideals that came about in April. The students were less focused on southern distinctiveness and instead a more general approach to campus organizing. The abandoning of the symbols and language related to the Confederacy are notable departures from their attempts to connect with white southerners, but the departure was more emblematic of the organization that emerged from the November conference. This wider vision for a New South is what SSOC would carry forward in its organizing.

SSOC on Campus and Communities, 1964-1967

Following the southwide conference, students returned to their respective campuses around the south to pursue various causes they found important. SSOC, as an organizing committee, worked to support those students at campuses throughout the South who wanted to work towards progressive causes. The wide ranging vision that came out of the southwide conference led to students engaging with issues they deemed important to their own campus. While SSOC was still dedicated to desegregation, it's role as a support system for students across the South resulted in SSOC engaging with a more diverse range of issues. Students throughout the region worked to bring about changes on their own campuses, hoping to see greater acceptance for free speech on campus, lessen restrictions on academic freedom, and help to bring students into the progressive movement in the South.

Students in Florida, for example, took a pointed interest in pressuring their university to expand academic freedom at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Growing out of the Student Group for Human Rights (SGER), a group of white students in Gainesville who had previously advocated for civil rights, these students began to shift their focus after building a relationship with the SSOC. These students focused on reforming university policies that restricted the social lives of women on their campus, as well as various other loco parentis policies that influenced

student life.³² Activists in Gainesville formed the Freedom Party, a group of students who aimed to bring about university reform through disseminating information to their campus community, as well as running for positions in the student government. Though the party failed to elect any of its members to the student government, it did bring progressive issues to the debate stage in Gainesville, and it turned out to be an example of what progressive white students could bring to their own campuses across the South, inspiring further action related to university reform at SSOC conferences in 1965 and 1966.³³

SSOC sponsored a speaking tour in 1965 which had Steve Weissman, a veteran of the Berkely Free Speech Movement, travel to campuses in every southern state to speak about progressive causes and hold workshops on student activism in addition to fundraising for the SSOC. Weissman also traveled with Hedy West, an Appalachian folk singer.³⁴ This speaking tour demonstrated how the SSOC was still attempting to maintain its regional approach to organizing alongside an expanded view of issues it engaged with. The Berkely Free Speech movement was viewed by many in the South as openly radical and something many people deemed too far removed from what they would want to bring to their own campuses.³⁵ However, by bringing in Hedy West, the SSOC also held onto the regional focus that it was founded with. Perhaps the folk singer could bring in more students and expose them to the progressive work that Weissman was encouraging them to engage with. At the very least, the tour served as an effective fundraiser for the SSOC with the performances of Hedy West bringing in enough money to pay for the tour and add to the limited funds of the young organization.

³² Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 96; Southern Student Organizing Committee, *Newsletter*, May, 1965, 5.

³³ Ibid, 98; Southern Student Organizing Committee, *Newsletter*, May, 1965, 1.

³⁴ Southern Student Organizing Committee, *SSOC Handbook, Spring, 1969*, 1969, 3.

³⁵ Southern Student Organizing Committee, *Newsletter*, May, 1965, 1.

That is not to say that civil rights were not important to SSOC activists. For example, in Nashville shortly after the founding of SSOC, students from Scarritt, Vanderbilt, and Peabody came together to organize protests against the still segregated restaurants in Nashville.³⁶

Indeed, Civil Rights was still one of the cornerstone issues that students throughout the South consistently engaged with. One excellent example of this early Civil Rights activism comes from the University of Virginia. Shortly after the November southwide conference in 1964, students in Charlottesville grew impatient with the passive approach to Civil Rights the established liberal student organization on campus, the UVA chapter of the Virginia Council on Human Relations, had been taking.³⁷ Inspired by what they saw at the SSOC southwide conference, these students decided to form a new organization, the Students for Social Action (SSA). The new organization formally associated itself with the SSOC shortly afterwards.³⁸ The SSA went on to build support for the SSOC's Mississippi Christmas Project which had students from SSOC working alongside the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to help run voter registration drives and repair some of the houses and community centers that had been damaged by opponents of Civil Rights.³⁹

The SSA also worked on their own campus to further Civil Rights. They criticized the antiquated honor code of the University of Virginia, stating that the University had no right to claim any sort of honor due to its segregated policies.⁴⁰ The SSA was also early to take on challenges off campus as well. They worked in 1965 on the Virginia Summer Project. The

³⁶ Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 92.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 100-101.

³⁸ David Nolan, "A Personal History of the Virginia Students' Civil Rights Committee," David Nolan Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society. Southern Student Organizing Committee, *Newsletter*, January, 1965.

³⁹ Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 101, 86.

⁴⁰ Nolan, "A Personal History".

Virginia Students' Civil Rights Committee (VSCRC) led to project with support from SSOC and SNCC. Black and white students from around Virginia traveled to southern Virginia to challenge the status quo of segregation by going into segregated communities and taking an open stand against segregation. Activists also worked to register voters, demand better city services, and develop community poverty programs to help black citizens.⁴¹

The work of the SSA and the VSCRC demonstrated that while SSOC in its early operations was not the most active organizing group itself, it was able to disseminate information effectively and support groups on the ground at campuses throughout the South. Indeed, students organized on campuses throughout the south creating student groups that had been inspired and supported by the SSOC following the 1964 Atlanta conference. SSOC demonstrated in its early operations that the message of a southern organization taking on progressive causes was effective in mobilizing students throughout the region, but it did not have to have a narrow vision. Leaving these various student groups to their own devices showed the multitude of issues that white southern students found important. One issue in particular emerged in 1965 to be quite significant to many southern students: the war in Vietnam.

As the United States became further entrenched in the conflict, students began to take notice. Sifting through information, students throughout the United States began to stand in opposition to the conflict. This opposition grew slowly in the South, but by the second half of 1965 students on southern campuses were beginning to take a stand against the conflict. Various teach-ins were held throughout the south, with successful events that drew thousands of students at Emory University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Florida. These events,

⁴¹ Nolan, "A Personal History".

supported by local organizations supported by SSOC including SSA and VSCRC, the leadership of the SSOC began to see that they would need to engage more with the conflict.⁴²

Support for the antiwar movement was not universally backed by SSOC membership. There were many people within SSOC who openly supported the United States' involvement in the conflict. This internal division was expressed in the November SSOC newsletter in 1965. However, SSOC leadership eventually elected to take an official stance in opposition to the conflict. The first major action for SSOC in this regard was helping to plan the Southern Days of Protest, a series of events across the south that included speeches by Tom Hayden pickets of pro-war rallies.⁴³

Furthering its open support for the antiwar movement, SSOC sponsored various events. In April of 1966, SSOC activists organized a peace vigil in Atlanta following its Spring meeting. It also worked with SDS to organize protests of the Selective Service College Qualification Test, a test administered to high school and college students to determine if they qualified for deferments from the draft.⁴⁴ This opposition to the exam was also informed by the SSOC's adherence to southern regionalism. SSOC viewed the exam as particularly harmful to southerners who they saw as less wealthy and poorly educated, so they were less likely to pass the exam and thus be selected for the draft.

This reasoning, however, is a slim connection to the South. By this point, SSOC had all but left behind southern culture as it related to its organizing strategy on college campuses. It was still primarily focused on bringing students on white campuses into the movement, but in terms

⁴² Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 104-105; Southern Student Organizing Committee, *New South Student*, November 1965, December 1965. The SSOC renamed their newsletter to the *New South Student* in the Fall of 1965.

⁴³ Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 113.

⁴⁴ Southern Student Organizing Committee, *Worklist Mailing*, April 1966; Southern Student Organizing Committee, *New South Student*, April 1966.

of the type of action it participated in, the SSOC was more or less like any other student organizing committee of the period. The small connections to southern culture within their monthly newsletters were not reflected in the actions of the students on campus. Despite this lack of regionalism in their actions, the SSOC remained committed to the South as its regional focus, and by 1966 it was the dominant student organizing group for white students in the South due to its focused work on white campuses. Its existence proved that there were indeed white students who were willing to work towards a more equitable South.

While the SSOC was primarily focused on organizing with students throughout the South, there was an effort to bring activism into white communities as well. Though the SSOC officially was an interracial organization, the majority of members and affiliates were white, and thus it would seem that organizing in white communities would be a more effective course of action for these young activists. This thinking was exacerbated by the immense changes in SNCC. By 1966, a more radical ideology had permeated SNCC, and all white people had either left or been removed from the organization. As a result, those who still wanted to remain a part of the broader New Left movements in the South looked to the SSOC in order to continue their work.⁴⁵ However, this did not result in an enormous influx of membership to the SSOC as many white SNCC members were already active in the SSOC as well, some being founding members.

This separation of the races in organizing was solidified in 1966 at the Spring conference in Atlanta. Stokely Carmichael, the new chairman of SNCC, explained that African Americans were the ones who could work most effectively in African American communities, and that it was the role of white activists to work in white communities. They emphasized the idea that it

⁴⁵ For more on SNCC see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*.

was SSOC activists who would be able to do this most effectively.⁴⁶ This meeting sparked a change in the SSOC, and it reoriented their larger projects back toward organizing in white southern communities. SSOC also had so few black members that the shift towards racial separatism between the two organizations did not cause drastic changes. Greg Michel also noted that despite the separation, students involved in the SSOC did not see this as the end of the relationship between the two organizations. Some SSOC members saw this change as necessary, and they also believed that SNCC and SSOC would still be able to work synergistically because the SSOC's commitment to civil rights was still at the forefront of the organization's goals.⁴⁷

The first major project that came out of this reorientation was the North Nashville Project. The project was an attempt to organize in the poor communities of Nashville, particularly the poor white community in the Cheatham neighborhood. SSOC organizers attempted to build interest in community programs that would address deteriorating housing conditions, poor job prospects, and lacking municipal resources. The SSOC activists participating in the project hoped that the poor white members of this community would see that they were experiencing the same types of problems as their black counterparts, and that this realization would lead them to interracial problem solving.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, nothing tangible came from this effort at community organizing. Having not engaged in white community organizing in the years prior to the North Nashville Project, the SSOC activists were unaware of the problems they would face in Cheatham. They were unable to make inroads with the white community there. Despite their desire to engage with these poor white southerners, many of these students came from a background of comparative wealth and

⁴⁶ Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 120; Southern Student Organizing Committee, *New South Student*, May 1966.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 120.

⁴⁸ Southern Student Organizing Committee, *New South Student*, December 1966.

privilege. This difference alongside a general disinterest from the local community combined to pose such a significant challenge to the SSOC activists that the project was abandoned by the end of 1967.

1967 itself was a turning point year for the Southern Student Organizing Committee. Greg Michel goes into great detail on this transition, but to quickly summarize, the leadership of the SSOC shifted to a new “Second Generation”. There were still people in SSOC who worked in the early years of the organization’s lifespan, but new members took the reins. One major cause of this change was an alteration to the overarching structure of the SSOC. Rather than being a staffed organization which supported smaller groups across the South, in 1966 the SSOC shifted to a membership organization with each member sending in dues and establishing SSOC chapters on their individual campuses.⁴⁹

The leaders that came out of this “second generation” were more willing to engage in direct action and protest, as well as shift focus away from the Civil Rights Movement and more towards the antiwar movement. One clear example of this was the protest that was held during President Lyndon B. Johnson’s visit to Nashville in 1967. SSOC members led by Brian Heggen picketed outside the Capitol building during the President’s speech, calling for an end to the United States’ engagement in Vietnam, and following the speech, Brian Heggen threw himself in front of the President’s limousine as he attempted to leave. The driver narrowly avoided Heggen, and the Secret Service immediately arrested Heggen. This was a galvanizing and divisive moment for SSOC. It represented that the new generation of SSOC activists were willing to engage in much more confrontational actions in addition to their previous work. It also was the

⁴⁹ Southern Student Organizing Committee, *Constitution Adopted June, 1966*, Wisconsin Historical Society; Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 127-128, 133.

first sign of significant division within the SSOC. A protest and disruption such as this was unheard of in SSOC's prior activity. Throughout 1967, SSOC activists throughout the South would continue to bring attention to the Vietnam War and the draft, holding various protests, marches, and educational events to help gain support for the movement.

In addition to the work in opposition to the Vietnam War, the new generation of SSOC activists recommitted to organizing in southern white communities. The overall failure of the North Nashville Project was evidence that the SSOC activists had significant trouble entering poor white communities, so they chose to approach workers unions instead. One prominent instance of this organizing was with the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) in 1966 and 1967 with workers in North Carolina. The main focus of SSOC workers was to increase student support for the TWUA in North Carolina, and their work was quite successful. In March of 1967, SSOC helped bring over 300 students and workers to a pro-union march in Greensboro. Building on this momentum, SSOC activists successfully encouraged union members to bring their black counterparts into the campaign. Unfortunately, the TWUA labor campaign was unsuccessful in winning a victory for the workers themselves, but it showed that SSOC had the capacity to engage with southern white workers and even facilitate a coalition between black and white workers.

As SSOC operations continued into 1968, different organizational issues began to take hold. Michel notes that the individual campus chapters of SSOC often were disconnected from the main body. While most of the organizations often overlapped in their focus, each campus acted essentially as a singular organization, separate from the larger whole. In addition to this, SSOC began to bring Confederate symbolism and rhetoric back into its mainstream publications. The name of the SSOC newsletter returned to *The New Rebel*, and the previously abandoned

logo of a black and white hand clasped over the Confederate flag returned in 1968. This change came about in an attempt to re-establish SSOC's original commitment to its southern regional identity, and as the organization was no longer attempting to organize an interracial coalition, there was no fear of turning away prospective black members. Language relating to secession also became increasingly popular in SSOC writings, especially regarding the war in Vietnam. Their newsletter also began to include many more writings regarding the history of southern radicalism in an attempt to gain more support as membership began to wane in the final years of SSOC's operations.

Overall, SSOC's middle years were tumultuous and constantly shifting. The group of white southern students were able to become the most prominent progressive organization for white students in the South, and through their work they were able to bring attention to a multitude of progressive causes. However, their work was severely limited by the constantly changing goals, demographics, and organizational structure of the organization. While these students were able to claim some success between 1965 and 1968, their overall impact on university policy, workers rights, and building community programs was quite limited. The final two years of SSOC operations would be the nail in the coffin for SSOC, which continued to face many of the same problems it had always endured without the resources to remedy them.

Microhistory, Modern History, and the SSOC

By adopting a microhistorical lens, we can uncover the unique contributions and challenges faced by the SSOC in its specific regional context in the final year of its operations. Microhistory, as an approach to historical analysis, emphasizes the examination of individual actors, objects, events, and localized phenomena in order to illuminate broader historical processes. In the case of the SSOC, a microhistorical approach allows us to explore the

organization's grassroots organizing efforts, the interactions between members, and the impact of their activities on local communities. However, applying the microhistorical approach to modern history, as opposed to earlier periods, presents its own unique challenges. Perhaps the most pressing is the increased access to accurate information. Modern history relies much less on the anthropological strategies that other microhistorians utilized due to the increased availability of primary source materials. Instead of relying on a handful of sources, historians of the 20th century have access to a plethora of sources coming from all levels of society. Historians still must take into account the nature of the sources themselves. Drawing inspiration from discussions by Saidiya Hartman, one must look into the availability of sources, look for biases in the sources and the archive, and look intentionally at which stories are missing from those records in order to find a clearer picture of the past.⁵⁰ In addition to this, looking at the objects of history provides even more opportunities for better understanding the past. Attempting to find intricacies in objects is another valuable tool for microhistorical analysis. While the context of the final newsletters of the Virginia SSOC is far less complex than that of 18th century sailors transporting seeds, there is still immense value in understanding the way the newsletters themselves “lived” within the history of the SSOC.⁵¹

The SSOC operated in a deeply conservative and racially divided region, where the civil rights movement faced staunch resistance and violent reprisals. By focusing on the SSOC's activities in the South, we can gain insights into the challenges faced by New Left activists operating within hostile environments. We can examine how the organization navigated racial tensions, coordinated with existing civil rights groups, and mobilized student activists to

⁵⁰ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14.

⁵¹ Sarah Easterby-Smith, "Recalcitrant Seeds: Material Culture and the Global History of Science," *Past and Present* 242, no.14 (November, 2019): 215-242.

challenge the status quo.

Additionally, a microhistorical approach enables us to analyze the organizational dynamics and ideological shifts within the SSOC itself. By examining the internal debates, strategies, and evolving priorities of the SSOC, we can gain a nuanced understanding of the complexities and tensions that shaped the New Left movement at large. Such an analysis can shed light on the strategies employed by the SSOC to bridge gaps between different communities and promote solidarity within a diverse and decentralized organization.

The Final Newsletters of the Virginia SSOC

One specific chapter of the SSOC is particularly unique. There were chapters on college campuses in every former Confederate state, all operating according to their own agendas, but the SSOC chapter in Virginia is an excellent place to examine the multitudinous factors that led to the eventual dissolution of the Southern Student Organizing Committee in 1969. The SSOC was beginning to lose membership and broad interest in 1968, so the organization's central leadership elected to restructure and decentralize the organization.⁵² The most drastic change was the implementation of a new constitution intended to give more authority to the individual state chapters. It removed national leadership positions and instead created state caucuses made up of SSOC members that would hold the responsibility of creating statewide programs. The hope was that the transition to a decentralized organizational structure would allow the state caucuses to better address the unique issues in each state and do so more quickly and efficiently without having to go through the national channels.⁵³ This change was significant, but it was also a reflection of the original founding principles of the organization. The SSOC was founded based

⁵² Gregg Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 186-87.

⁵³ Gregg Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 187.

on the idea that the South had a unique culture compared to the rest of the country, and this unique culture created problems that could not be addressed with the traditional methods of the New Left. This decentralization is still a reflection of that culture. The central leadership of the SSOC realized in 1968 that each state had its own unique problems that could not be addressed using the national organizational framework.⁵⁴ The problems in Virginia differed greatly from the issues in South Carolina. In their attempt to better address these issues along with the problem of dwindling membership and participation, they elected to give more power to the students in each state.

This is where casting a focused lens on the Virginia SSOC chapter and their final newsletters provides an excellent opportunity to analyze the broader issues faced by the SSOC, namely the general lack of interest in the organization, growing factionalism within the membership, and the hostility of their opposition both on campuses and their wider community. Particularly, the three newsletters produced and distributed by the Virginia SSOC provide a perfect example of broad problems not only impacting their small chapter of the organization, but the problems that led to the demise of the Southern Student Organizing Committee as a whole.

The Virginia SSOC, like most other chapters following the 1968 restructuring, had its own newsletter that would be sent out monthly to the general membership. However, the Virginia SSOC started 1969 with the goal of producing bi-weekly newsletters in an effort to increase interest from current members as well as gain new interest in the organization.⁵⁵ Being the first newsletter of the year, the Virginia SSOC was operating with an urgency and enthusiasm that

⁵⁴ Southern Student Organizing Committee, *SSOC Handbook 1968*, 2-3

⁵⁵ Virginia SSOC, *Virginia SSOC Newsletter #1*, January 1969, 1.

mimicked the broader New Left movement of the time. Students all over the country were organizing in hopes of bringing attention to the draft for the war in Vietnam, issues of persistent racial and gender discrimination despite the civil rights laws that had been passed earlier in the decade, as well as issues of free speech on their own campuses. Despite their enthusiasm however, the Virginia SSOC was already aware of the problems that were present in the organization.

The first and most obvious problem for the Virginia SSOC was funding. While the individual state caucuses were given some funding from the central leadership of the SSOC in Nashville, Tennessee, the funding was insufficient for a group attempting to reach a broad audience. The first page of the Virginia SSOC's January newsletter lists three present "needs" for the organization: the names and addresses of current members and anyone who may be interested in participating in the organization, news of events and problems happening throughout Virginia and on Virginia college campuses, especially those regarding the war in Vietnam and institutional discrimination, and money. The Virginia SSOC staff knew that their funding was insufficient, and they would "need some more [money] to make the newsletter bi-weekly."⁵⁶

Immediately acknowledging the problems facing their organization, this first newsletter continued to lay out the problems that students in Virginia were attempting to address in the coming year. The pages segmented reports from various colleges and universities around Virginia, each one presenting different problems the students found important. Students in Lynchburg were picketing to disrupt the operations of a local newspaper that had a history of discriminatory practices both in employment and the news it produced. Students at the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

University of Virginia in Charlottesville were working to bring accountability to the University itself for its failings regarding recruiting black students and faculty, as well as conducting research into the university's involvement in the military industrial complex. And students from other colleges across the state were working on issues ranging from liberal professors being fired to student publications being shut down.⁵⁷ The variety of problems signified a few things. First, it demonstrates that there was still some broad interest in New Left organizing in Virginia despite the general decline of larger New Left organizations. However, this variety also demonstrated that there was a lack of cohesion even within a single state regarding issues that needed to be addressed. There was no unified organizing effort coming from the central leadership within the state caucus, a theme that was a direct reflection of the SSOC across the South.

Despite the initial zeal expressed in the first Virginia SSOC newsletter, they were not able to adhere to their first goal of maintaining a bi-weekly publication. The second newsletter was distributed a month after the first on February 5th, 1963.⁵⁸ The operating conditions of the Virginia SSOC were clear from the first heading of the letter: "Help!!!"⁵⁹ The first page of the newsletter again carries the format of asking for help from the general membership of the Virginia SSOC, asking specifically for monthly pledges in order to pay off two hundred dollar deficit that the organization was operating under despite its three hundred dollars of funding from the SSOC headquarters in Nashville.⁶⁰ Further evidence of the general decline of the Virginia SSOC followed this clear cry for help. A letter on the second page of the mailing

⁵⁷ Ibid, 4-6.

⁵⁸ Virginia SSOC, *Virginia SSOC Newsletter #2*, February 5, 1969, 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

discussed the need for more “campus travelers”.⁶¹ Due to a shortage of funding and members, the Virginia SSOC would operate with only a single campus traveler, Bruce Smith. Bruce was a prominent member within the Southern Student Organizing Committee since its founding in 1964.⁶² In addition to only operating with one full time traveler, the Virginia SSOC would only be sending him to campuses where chapters had already been established. The final blow came with the note at the end of this call to action. The writers of this newsletter announced that Bruce, along with multiple other Virginia SSOC workers would not be returning to work during the following year.⁶³ The decline of the Virginia SSOC is paramount within this. The lack of current travelers proves the fact that there is less and less interest in the work of the SSOC in Virginia, and the desperate plea for more workers to join the movement demonstrates that the Virginia SSOC was struggling to bring in new members from around the state despite the attempt to better address the individual issues in Virginia.

This second 1969 newsletter continued on to describe the works of the various campus chapters throughout Virginia, but one small section stands out within the sea of on-campus and community activism, and it lies in stark contrast compared to the message that preceded it. The Virginia SSOC included in this newsletter a small message regarding one of their members who had been drafted and was currently at boot camp for the United States Army. Members were encouraged to send letters to lift this member’s spirits, as he had reported having a hard time adjusting to life in the military, especially after being a staunch opponent to the war in Vietnam like so many other left-wing activists. Following this touching letter was a dry mention of

⁶¹ Ibid, 2. Campus travelers were SSOC members who would travel between campuses to set up new chapters, bring news from around the state and country, and implement organizing campaigns based on the issues at various campuses.

⁶² Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, 34-38.

⁶³ Virginia SSOC, *Virginia SSOC Newsletter #2*, February 5, 1969, 2.

another Virginia SSOC member and his individual struggle. Randy Chenoweth, an SSOC staffer, had been arrested for verbally harassing a police officer at a campus event in Richmond. The mention in the newsletter is nothing more than a brief mention. There was no call to action, no words of support, and no well-wishes sent by the Virginia SSOC.⁶⁴ This was a small inclusion points towards the internal factionalism that was still at play within the Virginia SSOC. Trickling down from the broader organization, there were many members of the SSOC that wanted to move in a more radical and revolutionary direction for organizing, noting the recent changes to the organizing of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the growth of the Black Power movement in the United States. Other members wished to remain closer to the initial outlook of the organization, working to disseminate information and bring moderate and liberal white people into the movement in an attempt to gain their support and show that they were not alone in their views despite living in such conservative atmospheres. Regarding the specific incident with Chenoweth, the Virginia SSOC demonstrated that while they would still acknowledge those members who participated in more radical actions, they would not offer support or encouragement to them. Perhaps this was because they did not have the resources to support them (bail was set at \$1000 for Chenoweth), but the tone of the messaging was in stark contrast to the note directly prior to the one in question.

The final newsletter was a clear and total indication of the fall of the Virginia SSOC. The Virginia Caucus was able to keep its promise of providing a second newsletter in February, but the length alone showed the condition of the Southern Student Organizing Committee in Virginia. The entire newsletter only consisted of two pages.⁶⁵ On those two pages, the Virginia

⁶⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁶⁵ Virginia SSOC, *Virginia SSOC Newsletter #3*, February 20, 1969.

SSOC shared the agenda for a statewide SSOC conference that would be held at the SSOC house in Charlottesville in March. The event had been advertised in the two previous newsletters. This newsletter also included a short apology for omitting the category headings detailing the debts and spending of the Virginia SSOC from the previous newsletter. The final message that the Virginia SSOC sent out to its members was the following: “THIS WILL BE THE LAST NEWSLETTER UNTIL WE GET ENOUGH MONEY TO PAY FOR ANOTHER.”⁶⁶

As it turns out, there would be no more money to pay for another newsletter. Unfortunately, the members of the SSOC across the South believed it would be pragmatic to burn most of their records for fear of having them used against them by government agents. The result of this is a limited number of records from the SSOC, especially from the later years of the organization’s operations. Even *The Phoenix*, the newspaper of the Southern Student Organizing Committee, failed to produce any real account of the Virginia chapter’s actions following February of 1969. The only mention of happenings in Virginia came in the March issue which featured an article describing an arson attempt at one of the Virginia SSOC houses in January, an event that had already been covered in the second Virginia SSOC newsletter.⁶⁷

This final bit of coverage of the Virginia SSOC demonstrates two issues that plagued the SSOC throughout the South during the final years of its operation. Clearly, an attempted arson shows the external opposition to the operations of the Virginia SSOC. Within the newsletters, the Virginia SSOC described the attempts they were making to bring change to individual communities and institutions, and they described the opposition from those institutions. However, that opposition mostly came in the form of university officials ignoring the work of

⁶⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁶⁷ Bruce Smith, “VA. SSOC Under Fire,” *The Phoenix*, March, 1969, 7; Virginia SSOC, *Virginia SSOC Newsletter* #2, February 5, 1969.

SSOC activists and some occasional disciplinary action for students who published material that went against the moral ideology of university leaders.⁶⁸ The arson attempt was a clear violent attack on the Virginia SSOC due to its continued activism in a conservative space. It was a reminder of the deeply hostile environment that the SSOC organizers were operating in. The lack of coverage of this event, especially within the organization itself, was emblematic of the deterioration of the Southern Student Organizing Committee as a whole. In the early days of the SSOC's operations, an attempt to burn down an SSOC house would have been a rallying point for SSOC members across the South. This event on the other hand, went largely unnoticed and ignored, showing the lack of care within and without the organization.

These three newsletters told a broad story on multiple levels. The information within the newsletters was clear, and it was a reflection of both the societal issues that the Virginia SSOC was hoping to address, and, by extension, the issues that the broader SSOC was committed to addressing despite the decentralization that had occurred in 1968. These newsletters also told the story of an organization in decline, as their persistent calls for aid, both in terms of capital and membership, were seemingly heard by very few. The physical newsletters themselves told their own story. The first was a hopeful testimony that shows excitement for a new era. It was long, and it included a poster for an inauguration event that would have been more difficult to distribute than a standard newsletter or pamphlet. The second demonstrated a decline. The first two pages of the second Virginia SSOC newsletter were dedicated to calling on the general membership to contribute money to keep the operations going. This was space that would have otherwise been given to actual news from the SSOC's work, but instead showed the faltering

⁶⁸ Virginia SSOC, *Virginia SSOC Newsletter #1*, January 1969, 4; Virginia SSOC, *Virginia SSOC Newsletter #2*, February 5, 1969 5-9.

support for the organization. The final newsletter was a whimper; two pages were sent out to the Virginia SSOC members describing the agenda for a caucus-wide meeting, and the final message which confirmed the fears of the Virginia SSOC members and preempted the fall of the SSOC entirely. There were no calls for aid, as the staff members knew that none would come. Perhaps they hoped the March meeting in Charlottesville would inspire members to resume donations or continue their work with more enthusiasm, but the lack of further newsletters shows that was not the case. The final organizational meeting of the SSOC went much the same way. Many members did not attend, as they knew that it would likely be the end of the organization.

Conclusion

Despite its initial ties to a distinct Southern culture, the Southern Student Organizing Committee faced significant challenges that ultimately prevented it from becoming a lasting organization. Similar to other prominent student activist groups of the time, such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the SSOC disbanded in 1969. While the SSOC initially utilized its ties to Southern culture to mobilize and challenge racial inequality, several factors contributed to its dissolution.

One of the key reasons for the SSOC's inability to sustain itself as a lasting organization was the changing political landscape and shifting priorities of the late 1960s. The civil rights movement of the early 1960s had given way to a broader social and political upheaval characterized by the anti-Vietnam War movement, the counterculture, and the rise of the Black Power movement. As the focus of activism shifted to broader issues of war, social justice, university reform, and radical politics, the SSOC, with its emphasis on racial equality and Southern-specific issues, found it challenging to maintain relevance and attract sustained support.

Another factor contributing to the SSOC's dissolution was internal divisions and ideological shifts within the organization itself. As the 1960s progressed, ideological differences emerged among activists, leading to internal conflicts and ideological debates. Some SSOC members embraced more radical perspectives, while others favored a more moderate approach. These divisions, along with the broader ideological shifts within the student activist movement, weakened the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the SSOC.

Furthermore, the SSOC faced significant challenges in sustaining its organizational infrastructure and resources. Like other student activist groups, the SSOC relied heavily on the energy and dedication of student volunteers. However, the demands of activism, combined with increasing repression from authorities, resulted in burnout and exhaustion among activists. The SSOC struggled to maintain a stable organizational structure and secure the necessary resources to sustain its operations. This lack of stability and resources made it difficult for the SSOC to maintain its momentum and effectively address the evolving challenges of the late 1960s.

Additionally, the SSOC's ties to Southern culture, while initially providing a strong foundation for mobilization, limited its ability to interact effectively with other New Left organizations, and it caused internal divisions based around this original regionalism. The organization's regional identity, while crucial for addressing the unique challenges of the South, may have limited its appeal and ability to create a more expansive and lasting movement. Even as the regionalism in organizing and messaging fell away in the middle of the SSOC's lifespan, the internal divisions never went away. The SSOC faced the same issues as almost every other New Left organization of the 1960s, and it fell in much the same way, due to internal divisions, external pressures, and a lack of resources. The return to the emphasis on southern regionalism signified an attempt to engage more with that culture and garner more support as interest in the

organization began to fade, but this also served to sow further division within the SSOC's leadership.

SSOC had immense promise at its inception, and in some cases it was incredibly successful. Students in the SSOC were able to gain unprecedented support for progressive causes on their predominantly white, southern campuses. They also helped to build networks of student activists who would continue to support New Left causes in the years following the downfall of the SSOC, SNCC, and SDS. However, their distinctive nature was never a real factor in their organizing strategy. Though founded with the intention of utilizing the distinct southern culture to gain support from moderate white southerners, the attempts to put this culture into practice failed. Though falling short of its initial vision, the operations of the SSOC are an important note in the history of the New Left overall. The students of the SSOC were proof of the idea that despite seemingly impenetrable opposition, there are those who are willing to put in the work to bring about a more equitable society. Future activists looking to the historical record for inspiration or guidance can find many paths to success, and that success can be as simple as starting a wider conversation and presenting a new viewpoint in the first place.

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