

By LESLIE W. DUNBAR

Reflection on the Latest Reform of the South *

I NEED NOT SPEAK in justification of your concern, as sociologists, with the sit-ins. Nor will I attempt to portray the demonstrations and their effects on Southern society with broad strokes of interpretation. As some of you are aware, I hope, the Southern Regional Council has more than once ventured to put the movement into perspective and I have, frankly, little if anything to contribute further to that end. In our first report, on February 25, we said:

The deeper meaning of the "sit-in" demonstrations is to show that segregation cannot be maintained in the South, short of continuous coercion and the intolerable social order which would result.

I still think that statement is correct. The sit-ins showed how near we had come to the fork where a wrong turning could lead to terroristic policies, akin to those in South Africa; and they said to the American people, more clearly than had been said before, that the only acceptable alternate road is a short path toward desegregation.

Committed still to this broad generalization, what I shall do here is to string together a series of observations which I submit in the hope they may have some value to the social scientists who will someday write the definitive studies of the reform of the South.

1. Almost from the beginning the sit-ins have been referred to as a "movement." That both participants and observers felt this way about them is noteworthy, because the name "movement" does not catch on unless people sense that it does apply. No one ever speaks of the "school desegregation movement." One accomplishment, then, of the sit-ins was to achieve, almost from the start, recognition.

The textbooks undoubtedly contain definitions of social movements. One could suppose that a movement is distinct from other social events in at least three ways: (1) it is broadly based; (2) its adherents are committed to a specific set of principles; (3) the participants are willing to expend a great deal of personal effort. On the third point the sit-ins surely qualify.

As to the first point, it is interesting to ask when this affair which four youngsters in Greensboro started became a broadly based movement. If we ask that question, some places and dates become especially

*This is a revision of a paper read at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, August 27, 1960, in New York. Revision, however, antedated the Freedom Ride. That phenomenon poses issues too complicated to be tackled at the galley stage of an article; consequently, the Ride is not discussed here at all. Some readers may be interested in the Southern Regional Council's Special Report, *The Freedom Ride* (May, 1961); or in my article "The Freedom Ride," *New South*, July/August, 1961.

interesting: High Point, North Carolina, where on February 11, 1960, occurred the first sit-ins not led by college students; Rock Hill, South Carolina, where on February 12 there was the first demonstration in a Deep South state; Montgomery, Alabama, where on February 25 sit-ins erupted in an area of notorious tension, proclaiming that the movement was to go, so to speak, right to the lair of the opposition; Petersburg, Virginia, where on February 27 the first sit-in occurring elsewhere than at a lunch counter (it was at the public library) afforded a clearer understanding of the serious intent of the demonstrations. By the end of the first month, the sit-ins had made firm their roots in popular support.

Equally important, as evidence of the validity of the movement, has been its resurgence in the early months of 1961, after the nadir of the second half of 1960.¹ In the early days, there was a bath of publicity, which by now (March, 1961) has receded. A new demonstration gets only a brief mention in the press; arrests, if there are any, are reported on back pages; if those arrested refuse bail and crowd the jails, this attracts lessened public attention, on the old journalistic premise that expected behavior is not news. The downplay has also been, in part, the result of a deliberate management decision to mute the controversy. Yet controversy and protest continue strong, and the students have compensated for the decline in public interest by fanning their own concern with newsletters and a student newspaper.

2. As to principles, I would say that there has been remarkable consistency on two points: (a) segregation is a social and moral evil which can no longer be acquiesced in; (b) non-violence is the technique best suited for waging this particular fight. To the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and some other leaders, non-violence is far more than a technique, but they have had difficulty as yet in getting their ideas understood; their labors to spread the philosophical commitment do, however, continue. For the mass of participants and adherents of the movement, non-violence is a method both morally attractive and recommended by self-interest and prudence. Moreover, there are many cultural and traditional factors which deter Negroes from attempting organized violence, even violent retaliation, against white men.

3. The movement began in the Piedmont. The first six cities affected were in the Piedmont, as were eight of the first ten. This is probably where social scientists would have predicted the origin, had they been prescient enough to anticipate what would happen. And yet I cannot down the feeling that the Piedmontese origin was largely accidental, that the crucial factor was not geography but the presence of a group of Negro colleges situated close to each other, and that the movement could as well have begun at any one of three or four other locations. As a matter of fact, there may be something in the observation that when the move-

¹ Except around Jackson, Tennessee; somehow public attention never riveted on the Lane College students despite the strength and courage of their protest.

ment spread to the Richmond-Norfolk, the Nashville, and the Atlanta areas — each a center of Negro colleges — the nature of it changed somewhat in each place from the lunch-counter-sit-in-plus-negotiation pattern of the Piedmont.

4. The movement underscores again the almost total failure of traditional race relations to encompass educated Negroes. Southern states have, of course, always been stingy, and still, are in providing higher education for Negroes. The meager provision has been prudent in terms of the traditional race relations which had room for, indeed needed, a handful of "leaders of their race," but cannot accommodate large numbers of educated Negro men and women. Those large numbers, the products of colleges supported by the states, by churches, and by private philanthropy, now exist and are growing, and are radically subversive of Southern racial practices.

5. This is a movement of underprivileged persons, in the correct meaning of that much misused term. The Negro demonstrators have been, typically, people with advantages, but with less of them than some other groups in their society. These Negroes are not a downtrodden, destitute mass. Their advantages include an educated leadership; a power to invoke national public opinion in their support; economic strength sufficient to carry off effective boycotts; apparently ample money resources within the Negro community to pay bail and legal costs; the services of skilled lawyers; and a system of constitutional law which protects and defines their rights and limits the power of Southern states to inhibit their actions.

6. The social scientist of the future who will write the definitive study of the movement will most certainly want to view it against a background of regional economic change, of Southern industrialization and urban growth, and he may likely conclude that the movement has some of its deepest roots in that fabric of social change and reorganization. I would like to urge one point. It has often seemed to me that a curious contradiction creeps into the scholarly analyses which, for at least two generations, have dissected the South. On the one hand, there is an awareness of the distinctness of the South's culture, and this has led to concrete descriptions which have been tremendously valuable. But on the other hand, the scholarly assumption seems to be that the South of the future — the industrialized South — will be just like every other industrial region, and that, therefore, certain textbook concepts about industrialism and urbanism can be readily applied as predictors of the Southern change. Now, I think this doesn't follow, and I think the record bears me out. The contemporary South is, after all, by any world-wide or historical criterion a well-developed industrial, urban region. And it has beyond doubt borrowed many of the characteristics of other industrial, urban societies. But it still remains culturally distinguishable, and will, I

suspect, continue to relinquish but slowly its own ways. So I hope the social scientist of the future will not uncritically move into place his concepts of urban and industrial social patterns when he comes to explaining the origins and the fortunes of the sit-in movement. I hope instead that he will look for the peculiar features, not only of the traditional South, but of the changing South. Let me offer you one example. In cities North, West, and South there is a movement away from the central city to the suburbs. This frequently means a city electorate more and more influenced by low income, minority groups. The peculiarly Southern feature, however, is that these low income groups include a growing proportion of white immigrants from the countryside, who bring to the cities their rural attitudes and their strong attachment to racial prejudice. The result may be — and I repeat, may be — that Southern cities will not over the next decade or so be liberalizing centers, but will turn in various ways toward sharper opposition to social change. This is more likely to happen, if at all, in a few cities rather than generally, and Birmingham and Montgomery as examples of harsh race relations, and Dallas and Houston as examples of anti-libertarian zeal, ought to be sufficient demonstration that cities can generate a specially intense sort of reactionary spirit. But, at the very best, factional or party politics in many of our cities will tend to become increasingly permeated by the conflict of attitudes regarding race.

7. The prediction may be hazarded that the social scientist of the future will find that the effective cause of the spread of the 1960 sit-ins was a profound impatience over the rate of change, and that the single largest factor in that was disillusion and disgust over the progress of school desegregation. Agreement with this observation has led a number of voices to proclaim that Negroes are shifting their main hopes from the courtroom to direct action, and that henceforth undaunted youths and not graying lawyers will lead. How people interpret to themselves what they are doing is always important, though not always of first importance; events often follow their own logic and not the motivations of their participants, a fact which historians understand better than do social scientists as a whole. At any rate, I shall not presume to explain what the temperament and outlook of the student demonstrators are; others have already done that in quantity, and I doubt that anything I could say would relieve the present confusion. One thing, though, would seem clear: on any rational comprehension, impatience would be directed not at the method of legal attack on segregation but at the white power-holders who have evaded the law. Instead of saying, as so many have, that the sit-ins represent a new strategy, would it not be more reasonable to regard them as opening up a new front? Instead of announcing that the sit-ins mean a downgrading of the courtroom struggle, would it not be more reasonable to recognize that litigation is not an effective

means for desegregating lunch counters, and that sit-ins are not an effective means for desegregating schools?

8. On the other hand, we do the cause of racial equality no good if we are too timid to discuss its potential problems. One of these is the possibility of organizational rivalry — the ancient curse of liberal movements. Up to the present, the campaign for Negro rights has had a certain simplicity. The principal arena was the courtroom, the immediate objectives were chosen by the lawyers, and the argument always was an appeal to the Constitution. This was a very simple program, and there was little in it to cause factional jealousies or divisions beyond occasional grumbling over this or that legal maneuver. I do not, of course, mean to say that work for racial equality was confined to the courtroom; I only point out what is the fact, that the legal fight was the spearhead and acknowledged as such. Now the sit-ins have thrown a tremendous effort into an extra-legal movement. The field is open for honest disagreement over objectives, methods, and leaders. To maintain their old unity will be a real test for the liberal forces who have supported the NAACP.

9. I suspect that even those of us actively engaged in race relations work do not always sense what a tremendous and complex problem it is. I believe it will become more so as throughout the country and the world the primary task of racial reform changes from equalization to cultural assimilation. The Negro communities of the South are not today well equipped with the social organization seemingly required by modern society. This is true of urban as well as rural Negroes. There is fertile soil here for new organizations — new instruments of leadership — and for the continuous adaptation of old organizations to new problems.

10. The Tallahassee study by Lewis M. Killian and Charles U. Smith, modest though it was, is most provocative.² They found that not one of the six persons regarded by whites and Negroes as the Negro leaders of Tallahassee before the bus boycott was ranked by either whites or Negroes among the first five post-boycott leaders; and that not one of the five post-boycott leaders was ranked among the first ten in pre-boycott days. This is the old story, familiar to all students of social change, that new objectives claim new leaders. It is hard to believe that the Tallahassee development is fully typical, but something like it, if less drastic and abrupt, seems to be occurring over the South.

11. Yet as Killian and Smith also imply, protest is one thing and reform is another. There is some evidence in the stories of how a number of Southern cities have desegregated lunch counters to suggest that the older Negro leadership and the protest leaders can and do fruitfully complement each other, though coordination and mutual trust have sometimes been hard come by. My guess would be that this is the true interpretation. Negro leadership in the South is being broadened by an

² "Negro Protest Leaders in a Southern Community," *Social Forces*, March, 1960.

infusion of new elites. In the meaning of Pareto and Mosca, the established leadership generally is giving evidence not of its demise but of its health, as shown by its ability to open its ranks to new talents.

12. There has been a great deal of talk about the "new Negro." I hope there will not be a great lot more, and that social scientists will not succumb to the term and try to elevate it into a concept. It is, or so it would seem to me, after all rather condescending to herald the young man or woman acting responsibly in defense of his or her own dignity as a "new Negro." It is patronizing of him and belittling of the labor and ideals of the older Negroes. What should one expect? Should social scientists or liberals be as surprised as is the tradition-minded South to observe educated people asking to be treated as such? I must confess to a certain amount of intellectual squeamishness about the present preoccupation in scholarly as well as journalistic circles with interpreting the Negro personality. That last phrase I used advisedly, because I want to make emphatic my belief that there is usefulness in scientific analysis of Negro behavior and motivation. What seems to me objectionable is the non-scientific, dilettantish examination of the Negro as if he were some curiosity, which is only a variation of the way the traditional South discusses him. We can't all be scientists, but we all can know when to keep our mouths shut. If I need to make my point any clearer, I would say that the effect of most of the pseudo-philosophizing about the "new Negro" is, to put it bluntly, the creation of new stereotypes.

13. Social movements tend to require symbols. In a most tentative way, one can by now believe that the Montgomery bus boycott and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. have made on the Negro populace of the South deep symbolic impressions.

14. The focus of the sit-ins on lunch counters has been frequently treated as a mere tactic or as the occasion for facetious punditry. The treatment often has been to belittle the immediate objective — the cup of coffee, the hot dog, the doughnut — and to say that it represents only a convenient issue. Of course there are wider aims inherent in the movement. But the casual cup of coffee is important in itself. It is one of the myriad amenities taken for granted by white persons and denied the Negro. It is one of the multitude of minor slights and deprivations which Negroes feel, one should imagine, as intensely as they do the great denials. On the day I write this I had for lunch cheese blintzes and sour cream; I may be wrong, but I doubt that there is a place in Atlanta or the whole state of Georgia where a Negro could buy blintzes. This is not a trivial matter when we see it as a rightful part of an issue which looms clearly in front of our society. Whenever we have discussed equality, we have usually tended to think of the equality of public facilities and public rights. But there is also the question of the freedom of every individual to enjoy all the pleasures and the concerns of his culture. The state

anti-discrimination commissions are an approach to this problem; but there are good grounds for doubting that, racial biases aside, Southern political theory will embrace such a solution. Is there any other? Is it at all possible that something we are witnessing now in the South is and will increasingly become an alternative to the anti-discrimination agency? Reflect on the devices which are being employed: protest demonstrations; negotiations between white businessmen and Negro representatives; the creation of official and semi-official race relations committees; mediation by local, state, and national administrators. Could these same devices be effectively used in the South over the whole gamut of problems which in the North and West are dealt with by anti-discrimination agencies? If so, would they represent an inferior method? Are the regular procedures of the commissions necessarily to be preferred to the public excitement produced by the protests? Or does a democratic society derive a beneficial tonic from the direct confrontation of people and issues, as long as violence is avoided?

15. The sit-ins challenged the South a second time to form new policies to meet a new demand. When the Supreme Court in 1954 and 1955 required school desegregation, the South responded with massive resistance. When the students this year demanded equality at the lunch counters, the South has responded considerably better. Many stores in an impressive number of cities outside the Deep South have desegregated. This has been satisfying not only to the Negro youth who have had the sweet experience of success; for white Southerners of good will there also has been the rare satisfaction of seeing themselves "handle" a racial controversy and bring it to an agreeable solution without outside intervention. Of particular interest³ has been the ingenuousness of the students and the determined role-playing of the merchants. The students' innocent and vague perception of the durability and inertia of custom, and of the maze which surrounds the levers of decision making, has been a constant strength and an occasional handicap. They have ventured where older heads would not have, and in the outcome proved again that youth is not always inferior to age in practical wisdom. On the other hand, there has been in some places an evident interval of discouragement, when students found their moral appeal and the economic pressures which they mobilized to be not enough to effect a quick victory.

The merchants and the business communities generally have almost invariably responded to sit-ins by a disclaimer of responsibility. They too have been ingenuous. For they have not seen their role as civic captains to embrace leadership of social practices; this is not the role they

³ Over and beyond, i.e., the amazing intricacy of the process as it unravels in a large city: as one watches, one's feelings vacillate between impatience—"why won't they do this simple thing?"—and an apprehension that this is the way the game of decision making has to be played out. A chronicle of the play in one or several cities—say Atlanta, Richmond, Houston, Dallas, or Nashville—ought to be an illuminating chapter in the study of social control, and one hopes that a talented social scientist will someday write it.

have assigned themselves, and they have shied mightily from assuming it. I suspect that at least a significant part of their reluctance has had nothing to do with race relations or fear of economic reprisals if they desegregate; mixed with these has been a sincere distaste to act, *qua* businessmen, in this or any other field of social practice in a way that makes them conspicuous and which forces on them the exercise of a power which they would prefer to think they don't have.

16. Could the movement have been crushed had local and state authorities chosen to overwhelm it with force? What would have been the effect on it had mobs, without official sanction, rioted in more places than they did? Can non-violent protest attain a practical objective where the rights of demonstrators are not protected by impartial law enforcement? In only one city (Nashville) where violence and official repression greeted the protests was there a settlement during the first six months. Interesting too is the apparent fact that the bombing of Mr. Z. A. Looby's home was the catalyst which shocked business and political heads of Nashville into a disposition to reach a settlement. In later months, desegregation has been achieved in Chattanooga and Portsmouth, in both of which there had been considerable disorder; in neither place, however, had the city's law enforcement power been directed against the Negroes.

17. As is appropriate for a movement rooted in a demand for justice, its participants have had to confront and resolve various ethical issues inherent in their own activity. One example is the question of fairness in the singling out of certain types of establishments, or of singling out for special pressure a particular chain, or a particular store. Another example is the question of fairness in picketing or boycotting the Northern stores of a chain in order to induce it to change its Southern practices. Another, and most important of all, is the issue of the legitimate uses of civil disobedience. Both the morally jaundiced and the morally self-confident may regard such questions as dilatory; I think they are not. There is no easy answer to them. What is important is the faithfulness of the participants to their own ethical standards, and their constancy in carrying on a dialogue with themselves about the quality of the means which they employ. Whether this is done may well determine the durability of the movement.

18. The issues brought to head by the movement have ramified in a number of directions, and this too is typical of all really important social events. Already, for example, we have had sharply presented questions of academic freedom, of the Christian tension between obligation to conscience and law, of the degree of control of colleges over their students; questions of law enforcement methods and principles; questions of the obligations incurred by states and localities in accepting federal financial aid. The movement has made tracks through many fields other than its own battlefield of segregation.

19. The prediction was sometimes made that the sit-ins would arouse Negro Southerners to make a more determined effort to apply for admission of their children to desegregated schools. This has not yet happened, except perhaps in Nashville.

20. There has been of late years intensive concern with matters such as conformity, weakness of national purpose, political apathy, and anomie. If values and purposes are in decline, one explanation might be the disappearance of tensions and conflicts within our society. Despite the ferocity of our time, we live, in a sense, in a marking-time age. Our finest political energies have in the past been given to horizontal struggles within our own civilized order, contests wherein parts of our societies have engaged each other. The extinction of slavery, the humbling of the nobility, the correction of an over-powerful church, the shattering of royal absolutism, the repudiation of plutocracy and the extension of economic benefits — to such ends have the vitality and the talents of our ancestors and some of us been directed. Now there remain but scraps of unfinished business from these historic great causes, random skirmishes yet to be fought. A good part of current despair and cynicism, perhaps most of it, can be traced to the absence of battles that are really challenging to mind and spirit. In the United States we had a last burst of enthusiasm during the New Deal period of the 1930's. The citadels of economic privilege fell surprisingly easily, and the enthusiasm died almost before it was snuffed out by the exigencies of war; when our post-war President tried to revive it, we found that people were not really interested any longer. For a great cause has to have more to recommend it than simply the satisfaction of an appetite for more goods by those who already have considerable; it has to have at its center a protest at injustices deeply felt. We mark time now, waiting for new issues to arise and claim our allegiance. The old horizontal struggles within our societies have been replaced by vertical contests of West versus East, of constitutionalism versus dictatorship, of freedom versus communism. For Western peoples, these state-led struggles do not elicit the same spirit.

But an exception is the American Negro. He has his battle and it claims his energies. In a parasitic but not therefore unmanly way others of us derive purpose from joining his cause. In the process, we come to see that the Negro revolt against injustice is a movement which can operate, and to some extent is operating, as a cleansing agent for many institutions and values of American life.