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**Review Article: The Long and the Short of It: New Perspectives in Civil Rights Studies**


There was a time when the history of the civil rights movement followed a relatively straightforward narrative. The movement began in 1954 when the US Supreme Court handed down its *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision, kick-starting a wave of nonviolent direct action protests, beginning the year after with the 1955–6 Montgomery (Alabama) bus boycott. From that point onwards, the story of the movement was virtually synonymous with the story of local bus boycott leader Martin Luther King, Jr, who went on to become the leader of a national movement for civil rights. In 1957 King was named president of the newly founded Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and he presided over a series of nonviolent direct action protests; the 1960 Sit-ins (leading to the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)); the 1961 Freedom Rides (led by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)); and, with the SCLC, two campaigns in Alabama: in Birmingham in 1963 and in Selma in 1965. Together with other events, such as King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech at the 1963 march on Washington and SNCC’s 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, these campaigns elicited white northern public support and federal government action. This in turn led to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which ended segregation in public facilities and accommodations, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which helped assist black enfranchisement. By 1965, the movement’s two main goals of desegregation and voting rights had been met. This ‘Montgomery to Selma’ narrative, as historian Adam Fairclough has labelled it, was sometimes later stretched to a ‘Montgomery to Memphis’ narrative to include the events of King’s life from 1965 to his assassination in 1968.1

This King-centred movement narrative has been increasingly challenged in recent decades, beginning with a first wave of community studies in the late 1970s and 1980s.2 Examining protest campaigns in towns and cities, and then later in counties and states, such studies have collectively made several important observations.3 Firstly, black protest occurred in the 1950s and 1960s in


3 Studies since the 1980s include Emiye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill, NC 2005); Fairclough, *Race and
places that King never visited. Secondly, black protest movements in these and other communities can be traced back beyond the 1950s and 1960s and into the 1930s and 1940s; sometimes earlier. Thirdly, much of this black protest rested upon a local mobilization of resources and organizations, rather than relying solely (if at all) on the support of national figures and national organizations. These local studies contend that the civil rights movement is best understood as a grassroots ‘bottom-up’ movement, rather than a ‘top-down’ movement driven by nationally recognized leaders and the federal government.

Such a re-conceptualization of black activism led in 1986 to historian Clayborne Carson questioning the usefulness of the term ‘civil rights movement’. Carson said that the movement instead belonged to a much larger ‘black freedom struggle’ which was characterized by continuities in black protest rather than differences. Almost 20 years later, in 2005, historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall articulated an even more expansive idea of a ‘long civil rights movement’ that reflected the ever-growing, all-encompassing nature of civil rights studies. Like Carson, Hall called for an understanding of the movement that went beyond the 1960s to examine its origins and its legacies, but she also called for studies that moved beyond an exclusive focus on southern struggles to examine black struggles in the North, Midwest, and West that incorporated a more nuanced reading of racial struggles through the prisms of gender and class, and that looked at continuities in white resistance to racial change as well as the continuities in the struggles of black activists.

Throughout this discussion there have been scholars reluctant to fully buy into the idea of a ‘black freedom struggle’ or ‘long civil rights movement’. Writing in 1988, historian Richard H. King warned that studies looking to ‘create a sense of continuity and coherence’ between the civil rights movement and other phases of the black freedom struggle risked ‘in doing so . . . minimize what was relatively unique about the movement’. In 1990, historian Adam Fairclough noted that ‘The trouble with such broad definitions . . . is that in stressing history’s “seamless web” they turn history into a homogenized mush, without sharp breaks and transformations.’ Directly challenging Hall’s


‘long civil rights movement’ terminology, in 2007 historians Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang complained that such a label ‘collapses periodization schemas, erodes conceptual differences between waves of [what Cha-Jua and Lang term] the BLM [Black Liberation Movement] and blurs regional distinctions in the African American experience.’

Movement participants have added their own thoughts to the shifting historiographical sands, from Louisianan white activist Hugh Murray’s decrying of altering terminology: ‘The people who were involved in the movement in the 1950s and 1960s called it the civil rights movement...Historians in pipe-smoke filled rooms ought not to try to change it’, he wrote – to a Louisianan black activist in the 1990s who declared, in seeming support of the longer perspective, ‘Been in the movement all my life.’

The books under review in this essay are written within the context of these continuing historiographical debates and each, in its own way, grapples with the issues they raise. Four of the books focus largely on the origins of the movement (pre-King), four on the King-centred phase of the movement, and four on the legacies (post-King) years of the movement.

Manfred Berg’s study of the NAACP and the black struggle for voting rights provides one version of the origins of the civil rights movement. This views the movement of the 1950s and 1960s as being founded upon legal and political struggles spearheaded by the NAACP to untangle a dense web of local and state laws that underpinned southern segregation and disfranchisement. Berg focuses on the NAACP’s struggle for black political empowerment from the origins of the organization in 1909 to the late 1960s and early 1970s. He notes that, while much work has focused on the NAACP’s legal strategy, the organization in fact worked for civil rights in a number of different ways. For example, while NAACP special counsel Thurgood Marshall won landmark court rulings such as Smith v. Allwright (1944), which outlawed the use of discriminatory all-white Democratic Party primary elections, a major obstacle to black voting rights in a number of states, Clarence Mitchell of the NAACP’s Washington D.C. Bureau, was ‘hailed as one of the most effective lobbyists in the nation’s capital’, who successfully helped to push for the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1964, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act (Berg 4). In pursuing court cases, sponsoring political lobbying, and engaging in grassroots voter education, the NAACP assisted in growing the number of

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black registered voters from 150,000 in 1940 to 1.2 million in 1952, and raising the percentage of black registered voters from 31.4 per cent of the black population in 1964 to 57.7 per cent in 1982.

Glenda Gilmore offers a different version of the origins of the civil rights movement. Her book belongs to a school which views the focus on the legal and political struggle for civil rights by the NAACP as eclipsing the truly radical origins of the movement, from black union activism to communist affiliations. Gilmore’s research, some of it conducted in previously inaccessible Soviet archives, produces compelling biographical portraits of forgotten individuals whose stories highlight the mixed outcomes of black encounters with radical politics. On the one hand, Lovett Fort-Whiteman, from Dallas, Texas, whom Gilmore claims as the ‘first American-born black Communist’, spent time in Moscow in the 1920s learning how to advance international socialism and founded the American Negro Labor Congress in the US in 1925 (Gilmore, 32). However, in the 1930s he became caught up in Stalin’s purges and ultimately died of starvation in a Siberian labor camp. On the other hand, Baltimore, Maryland-born Pauli Murray, who sought to break the colour barrier by enrolling at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in 1938, only to find the NAACP lukewarm to her cause because of her radical politics and ‘transgendered’ sexuality, discovered in radical politics a way to tackle gender as well as race discrimination (288). In 1966 she co-founded the National Organization of Women (NOW), and in 1977 she became the first black woman to be ordained as an Episcopalian priest, performing her first Holy Eucharist on campus at Chapel Hill.

Both Berg’s and Gilmore’s books touch upon the international contexts of the black freedom struggle in the USA, a field of enquiry that has expanded dramatically in recent years. Jonathan Rosenberg offers a useful overview of the topic as a way into the much larger and more detailed literature on the subject. From the first world war to the Vietnam war, Rosenberg shows how international developments have shaped black freedom struggles. The study has a broad sweep, including discussion of key moments and movements, from President Woodrow Wilson’s call for self-determination to Ghandhi’s call for decolonization, and from the Spanish Civil War, in which black regiments fought, to the Korean war, the first war fought by the USA with a
desegregated army, to the Vietnam war. It also interweaves the biographies of prominent black Americans into the story, from intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois to labor leader A. Philip Randolph, to singer Paul Robeson, through to later black activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr and Malcolm X. Rosenberg convincingly argues that ‘the epic struggle for racial justice in modern America was enmeshed in the international history of the twentieth century’ (Rosenberg 233).

Moving from the international to the local level and back to the NAACP, Lee Sartain charts the work of the organization in Louisiana, with an emphasis on the role that black women played in its development there. By using the ‘bottom-up’ focus of a state study, Sartain demonstrates how such studies can capture elements of history that the broader sweep of ‘top-down’ studies overlook. Berg’s book, for instance, casually mentions on its very last page that women ‘are a majority among NAACP members’, a fact that is not reflected in the story he tells of male-dominated national leadership and strategies (Berg 264). Building on past work that has written black women into the history of the black freedom struggle, Sartain asserts: ‘Black women’s work in the NAACP was the foundation upon which the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was built’ (Sartain 137). A local approach is revealing here, as women’s contributions were not always evident in the national NAACP hierarchy since they involved employing different sorts of skills such as ‘mediating conflicts, keeping a flow of information to group members, coordinating activities, and creating and sustaining good relations and solidarity among co-workers’ (Sartain 5).

Gender roles are also the subject of Steve Estes’s study, although his main concern is the way that ‘masculinism’ shaped the black freedom struggle (Estes 7). This is a welcome development, since gender has more often been used to explain women’s roles in the movement than men’s roles. Estes traces the shaping of black men’s gender roles in the black freedom struggle, and especially assertions of black manhood, from military experiences during the second world war to the masculinized identity of the black power

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16 Estes defines ‘masculinism’ as embracing ‘the notion that men are more powerful than women, that they should have control over their own lives and authority over others’ (7).
movement: ‘Dammit, you’ve got to talk to me like a man’, said returning war veteran Isaac Woodard to a bus conductor in South Carolina, 1946, before being beaten blind; ‘I’m a Man, spelled M-A-N!’; hollered bluesman Muddy Waters on his 1955 hit ‘Mannish Boy’; ‘I felt as though I had gained my manhood’, said a sit-in demonstrator in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960; ‘I AM a MAN’, read the signs of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968 (Estes 36, 63, 136, 137). At the same time, white male segregationists who resisted racial change employed gender-based rhetoric, from terming the Brown decision a ‘rape of the Constitution’, to feminizing white male supporters of civil rights, such as Arkansas Gazette newspaper editor Harry Ashmore, who was lampooned as a woman in cartoons (Estes 46, 49).

Ray Arsenault’s dissection of the 1961 Freedom Rides appears at first glance to be located right in the heart of the King-centred phase of the black freedom struggle. In some senses it is, revealing that there are still well-known episodes upon which more light can be shed. But like other recent movement studies, Arsenault shows that the origins of the 1961 Freedom Rides lay further back. In Morgan v. Virginia (1946) the US Supreme Court ruled, in a case brought by the NAACP, that segregation on interstate bus journeys, which were governed by federal rather than state law, was unconstitutional. The following year, 16 activists from the Chicago-based CORE held an interracial Journey of Reconciliation, travelling as two integrated teams on two buses through the upper South. The riders encountered compliance in some states and resistance, in the form of violence and arrests, in others. After another US Supreme Court ruling, Boynton v. Virginia (1960), outlawed segregation in interstate bus terminals, CORE reprised what it now termed a Freedom Ride. This time penetrating the lower South, the riders were attacked in Alabama. After a temporary halt, when SNCC resumed the rides they forced the federal government, amid mounting violence, to provide an escort for their safe transit to their destination of Jackson, Mississippi. There they were arrested and thrown into jail by local authorities. More Freedom Rides followed, albeit out of the national spotlight, during the summer of 1961. Arsenault meticulously details many of these journeys and their consequences for the first time.

The Freedom Rides played an important role in shaping the evolving civil rights policy of President John F. Kennedy. It marked the first time his administration, through his brother, attorney general Bobby Kennedy, who handled a

17 The upper South is generally considered to be composed of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas, the southern states that joined the Confederate States of America only after the attack on Fort Sumter, 12 April 1861, which triggered the American Civil War (1861–65). Typically, these states had smaller black populations and were considered to be more moderate in terms of race relations than the lower South. The lower (or ‘Deep’) South is generally considered to be composed of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, which were among the initial southern states to secede from the Union and to form the Confederate States of America (along with two other states, Florida and Texas). These states had larger black populations and were considered to be more volatile in terms of race relations than the upper South.
good deal of the administration’s civil rights encounters, actively intervened on behalf of the movement. Nick Bryant looks at John F. Kennedy’s civil rights stance from the beginning of his political career as a Massachusetts congressman in 1946 to his assassination in 1963. Helpfully, since Kennedy’s civil rights record in office has already received much attention, almost half of Bryant’s book is dedicated to his pre-presidential political career. Bryant presents Kennedy as a willing-but-unable president whose heart was with the civil rights issue but whose head cautioned against losing southern white votes. According to Bryant, Kennedy ‘feared inflaming the South, splintering the Democratic Party and alienating southern oligarchs on Capitol Hill’, which represented a ‘political miscalculation of immense scale’ that ‘helped nourish a climate in which ultimately racial extremists like Governor George Wallace of Alabama grew in stature and support’ (11–12).

If Kennedy has sometimes wrongly been championed as a civil rights hero, then Martin Luther King, Jr has always rightly been celebrated as such. The question as far as King is concerned is the nature of his contribution to the movement. The King-centred movement narrative has been appropriated by some in the USA as a national feel-good story about how black rights once denied were restored through the democratic process drawing upon America’s moral strength. King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, and especially its vision of interracial harmony, has become a convenient sound-bite to foreground both King’s and the movement’s more moderate aspirations. A number of historians have already pointed to King’s final years, 1965–8, as being a period of radicalization.18 Jackson goes further, contending that King was in fact radical throughout his civil rights leadership, not just in his later years. This argument is not always convincing. Jackson overemphasizes King’s knowledge of and commitment to Gandhism in his early years and fails to explain why King’s public references to Gandhi were dropped by 1960. He relies upon, but fails to engage in, any debate about King’s written work, although some scholars have questioned how accurate a representation of King’s beliefs his written work is, given King’s extensive use of ghost-writers.19 Moreover, around half of Jackson’s study still focuses on King’s post-1965 years. Therefore, instead of


19 The authenticity of King’s views in his written work is raised by David J. Garrow, ‘The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries’, Union Seminary Quarterly Review 40 (1986), 5–20; and James H. Cone, ‘Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology – Black Church’, Theology Today 41 (1984), 409–20. Lewis V. Baldwin, There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Minneapolis, MN 1991), 11–14, defends the usefulness of King’s written work. For further discussion, see John A. Kirk (ed.), Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement: Controversies and Debates (London 2007), chs 3 and 4.
correcting the early and later periodizations of King’s life as he sets out to do, Jackson ends up confirming the explanatory power of this model.

Without doubt, in the mid- to late 1960s King and the movement were beginning to switch the focus of their attention to a broader struggle for human rights and economic justice. As Timothy Minchin points out in his collection of previously-published and new essays, that struggle continued long after King’s death and the movement faded from national headlines. Following an insightful introductory essay that makes the case for connecting movement struggles in the 1960s to economic struggles since the 1960s, Minchin uses local case studies to vividly illustrate his point. Four essays chart lawsuits arising from Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which led to the successful desegregation of major southern industries such as textiles and paper.20 One essay examines the efforts of the Southern Regional Council (SRC), an interracial civil rights organization, to move from civil rights to anti-poverty campaigns in the post-1960s period. Another essay focuses on the career of Floyd McKissick, a former president of CORE, to illustrate how individuals moved seamlessly between civil rights and anti-poverty organizing. A final essay provides a study of school desegregation in Louisville, Kentucky, and shows how economic activism also merged with white resistance to civil rights, as white unions were at the forefront of opposition to bussing in the city.

Continuity in white opposition to civil rights is the central theme in Kevin Kruse’s book. Employing once again a local study to good effect, Kruse charts white opposition to civil rights, and specifically opposition to neighbourhood integration, in Atlanta, Georgia. Kruse locates early white resistance to interracial neighbourhoods in the immediate postwar period in campaigns run by fascist group Columbians, Inc. and the Ku Klux Klan. Such opposition gradually took on an air of mainstream respectability as segregation was increasingly placed under threat by pro-civil rights court rulings and legislation. The desegregation of public spaces such as buses, golf courses, parks, and pools, heightened whites’ defense of notionally private spaces. This was manifested in various ways. In 1961, local businessman Lester Maddox unsuccessfully sued for the right not to serve blacks at his store’s lunch counters. Maddox’s stand won widespread support among white voters, who elected him governor of the state in 1966. In white flight to the suburbs, whites did successfully find a way to resist school desegregation through the creation of neighbourhood schools in effectively segregated residential areas. By carefully scrutinizing the evolution of white resistance to racial change in Atlanta, Kruse provides a model for how white opposition to civil rights in the USA as a whole reformulated the rhetoric and politics of the conservative right in the postwar period.

A crucial period in the transition from civil rights to economic rights in the mid- to late 1960s coincided with the rise in popularity of the black

20 Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of ‘race, color, religion, sex, or national origin’.
power slogan. Historians have often seen black power as being a distinct break with past black activism, marking a period of decline for the civil rights movement. In focusing on one manifestation of black power, the formation of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in Oakland, California, in 1966, Curtis Austin traces how that party developed and followed a black power program for change until it finally disbanded in 1982. In doing so, Austin touches on another historiographical development of late in moving away from an exclusive focus on southern struggles to black struggles in other parts of the USA. The foreword to the book, written by BPP co-founder Elbert (Steve Estes would note) ‘Big Man’ Howard, sums up Austin’s study as well as anyone can, noting that it ‘lends a much-needed historical and academic perspective that... attempts to explain and put into context the often misunderstood details of the history of the BPP’ (Austin, ix).

Austin explains that the BPP was a victim of its own sensationalism. In coming up with iconic slogans such as ‘Free Huey!’, ‘Kill the Pigs!’, and ‘Fuck Reagan!’ (who was governor of California at the time), as well as its trademark black berets, black leather jackets, and accompanying firearms, the BPP became an attractive symbol of radical black resistance while sowing the seeds of its own doom by gaining the unwanted attention of white authorities, notably the FBI. Austin deconstructs and looks beyond the glamorization of the Panthers to uncover less heralded but just as important areas of their operations, such as providing free breakfasts for schoolchildren and free health clinics for those in need.

Austin’s book is part of a new wave of scholarship that historian Peneil Joseph terms ‘Black Power Studies’ (Joseph 8). In an edited volume, Joseph collects together some of the cutting-edge work being done in the field. A survey of the topics indicates the wide-ranging nature of this research: the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles; Amiri Baraka, the Congress of African People, and black power politics; black women and urban politics; the intellectual contributions of black women to black power; Frances Beal and the Third World Women’s Alliance; black power and the practice of armed self-defence; the relationship between black power and the NAACP; the relationship


between black power and other resistance movements among Native Americans, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans; the celebration of the Kwanzaa holiday; and the intellectual dimensions of the black power movement.  

As well as contributing an essay, Joseph writes a useful and provocative introduction to the book which is nothing short of a manifesto for Black Power Studies. Arguing for a ‘Long Black Power Movement’, Joseph states that the aim of such studies should be to push the chronology of black radicalism back into the 1950s and forward into the 1970s; to locate black power within the context of the Cold War and global struggles for racial justice; to look at the less iconic and less glamorous aspects of black power, which have attracted less attention; to expand the scope of discussions about the legacies of the civil rights movement; and to ‘critically engage an ongoing conversation about the uses and abuses of the black freedom movement (sometimes boiled down to “civil rights”’)’ (Joseph 10).

Much of this brings us back to where this review started. Joseph’s essay illustrates the paradoxical nature of current attempts to periodize various black freedom struggles, as it looks both to define a discrete black power era and sensibility while acknowledging continuities with black struggles past and present. In advocating a ‘Long Black Power Movement’ it consciously speaks to Jacquelyn Hall’s call for a ‘Long Civil Rights Movement’ while directly challenging it, asking the question: should the civil rights movement be subsumed under the umbrella of a long black power movement, or vice versa?

To many historians, this may seem like an age-old question of whether history is more about continuity than change, and where the stress between the two should lie. In part, they are right. But there is something more interesting than that happening here, since there is a distinct racial dynamic at work. White historians such as Hall have played a large role in writing the history of the civil rights movement. Black historians, particularly younger, emerging black historians such as Joseph, have been noticeably at the forefront of Black Power Studies. There is a discernable trend in the recent literature for more black historians, who have either studied at and/or taught in Black Studies departments, which were themselves an outgrowth and project of the black power movement, to write on civil rights and especially black power issues. Meanwhile, younger emerging white civil rights historians, represented in this review by academics such as Kevin Kruse, have begun to lean more towards

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topics such as white resistance and white responses to the civil rights movement.25

While by no means as dramatic or divisive as the civil rights movement’s SNCC moment in 1966 when, after Stokely Carmichael’s election as chair, whites were politely (and sometimes not so politely) asked to leave the organization to pave the way for black self-reliance, there is an uncanny sense of movement historiography repeating movement history. Though ultimately such an analogy grossly oversimplifies and overstates the case, the trend toward a greater racialization of movement scholarship into particular areas of interest is a fascinating new development. Alongside the mix of other new developments in the past few decades, it will continue to profoundly alter how we think about the civil rights movement/black power movement/black liberation movement/black freedom struggle.

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is Chair and Dongahey Professor of History at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock. He has published a number of books, articles and essays on the civil rights movement. His books include Redefining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940–1970 (Gainesville, FL 2002), which won the Arkansas Historical Association’s 2003 J.G. Ragsdale Book Award; Martin Luther King, Jr. (Harlow 2005) and Beyond Little Rock: The Origins and Legacies of the Central High Crisis (Fayetteville, AR 2007). He has edited Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement: Controversies and Debates (Basingstoke and New York 2007) and An Epitaph for Little Rock: A Fiftieth Anniversary Retrospective on the Central High Crisis (Fayetteville, AR 2008). His next book, a co-edited volume with Jennifer Jensen Wallach, is entitled Arsnick: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Arkansas, 1962–1967 and will be published later this year.