

Historia

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Civil Rights Reconsidered

Barry D. Riccio

Barry Riccio is an Associate Professor of History at Eastern Illinois University and wrote this review in response to the number of essays covering the topic of Civil Rights. Professor Riccio briefly examines the essays of Darrell Gordon, Christina Wresch, and Lisa Grierson and provides an interesting insight to the Civil Rights Movement in correlation with each essay.



artisans of "old" and "new" history alike long ago staked out their respective turf in civil rights historiography. Traditional political historians, not surprisingly, have been most concerned with executive actions, legislative strategies, and the role of powerful pressure groups, while those who toil in the vineyards of social history by and large prefer to examine the making of history "from the bottom up." The distinction between these two schools of thought is not hard and fast, of course, and some of our most able "new" historians (Alan Dawley immediately comes to mind here) have effectively integrated social and political history, perhaps in response to Gertrude Himmelfarb's charge that too many of the newer social histories simply left the politics out.

The eminent European intellectual historian clearly did not have the historiography of the civil rights movement in mind when she mounted her indictment. For that crusade was at once social and political. The history of that movement is very much a tale of elites, but it is also much, much more than that. In fact, when it came to putting civil rights on the legislative agenda, the power elite in the two mainstream parties largely responded to pressure from below.

Hence the justification for these three essays, all of which probe the meaning of the civil rights phenomenon from "the other side." Darrell Gordon's "Highlander Folk School" is an interesting study of the impact of the not so well-known Highlander Folk School, an alternative educational institution that came into being in the thick of the Great Depression. Not only was the founder of the HFS, Myles Horton, a friend of Martin Luther King, but much more significant is the fact that this experimental school in the hills of Tennessee provided many of the foot-soldiers for the sit-ins that spread like wildfire throughout the South in early 1960. It is interesting to note that both Rosa Parks—whose courageous defiance of a Jim Crow transportation ordinance in Alabama led to the formation of the Montgomery Improvement Association and to Martin Luther King's emergence on the national stage—and the African-American businessman who did so much to get that organization off the ground, E. D. Nixon, had very close ties to Highlander. Given the centrality of both Horton and Highlander to the nascent civil rights movement, one wonders why Gordon devotes so little attention to the man and the institution. Nevertheless, Gordon has uncovered a slice of the civil rights past that has all too often been neglected or ignored altogether.

Christian Wresch's "The Role of the Church in the Civil Rights Movement" covers some of the same ground plowed by Gordon. This piece, however, is primarily concerned with the role of religion in the hopeful days of the civil rights movement. Echoing legal theorist Stephen Carter, Wresch emphasizes just how much religion was the handmaiden of reform for civil rights organizers in the South. "The pulpit," Wresch states crisply, "became their soapbox."

Now this is a very valuable observation to make. After all, the organization founded by King and Ella Baker in the wake of the Montgomery boycott's successful outcome was called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). But Wresch could push the point even further. For one, the religiosity of the movement was far more prevalent in the South (admittedly the focus of this study) than the North. Just what is the significance

of that? For another, just how important was fundamentalism itself to the movement? We know that King was brought up as a fundamentalist (in fact, his father hesitated to vote for Kennedy in 1960 on account of the latter's Catholicism), but at Morehouse College, in the young King's own words, "my fundamentalist shackles were removed." In some ways, King was closer to the early twentieth-century Protestant tradition of the Social Gospel, but he had imbibed a little too much of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's insights to be entirely comfortable in that camp.

One of the early leaders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and young lions of the southern civil rights movement, John Lewis (now a congressman from Georgia), was a devout American Baptist (note I did not say Southern Baptist). The Baptist denomination had split in two over the issue of slavery just before the eruption of the Mexican War. Southern Baptists have tended to respond more warmly to Biblical literalism, although the fundamentalists only took control of the Southern Baptist Convention about 20 years ago. Now black fundamentalism can be every bit as conservative theologically and socially as white fundamentalism, but when poor and disenfranchised blacks finally got their chance to walk unmolested into the polling booths, they voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic party, and the left wing of the party at that.

All of this is understandable enough. But the nexus of religion and politics needs to be examined more closely, if only to understand the evolution of white fundamentalism in the last 30 or so years. It is instructive to note that Reverend Jerry Falwell's first major speech on civil rights, "Of Ministers and Marchers," was addressed squarely to fundamentalist followers of King. Properly understood, Falwell asserted, religion should have nothing whatsoever to do with politics, for politics was this-worldly and invariably corrupting. However many fundamentalists may have deviated from that position in their actions, this was the official credo until the late 1970s. At that point, an older Falwell would insist that embattled Christians had no choice but to become involved in political action, what with the specter of gay

rights legislation and the ERA, not to mention a slew of other alleged social evils.

Wresch deserves our praise for reminding us just how much religion mattered in those early days of the movement. That religion was not without content, however, and it is precisely that which requires further exploration.

Lisa Grierson's "The Success of Gender in the Civil Rights Movement" is perhaps as much about gender as it is about race. For Grierson examines four female activists, all the while making the point that Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer, to take but two of her examples, did not owe much of a debt to feminism; rather feminism owed a debt to them. This point is well-taken, for contemporary feminism was not very much in the air until after the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Even then, it was largely a white and upper-middle-class movement, at least in its earliest manifestations. Only a decade before Friedan's work appeared, Democratic politician Adlai Stevenson, then the darling of liberal intellectuals everywhere, told a Smith College graduating class that marriage and motherhood were the only appropriate goals for the female of the species. Attitudes towards women in the early Students for a Democratic Society were only slightly less quaint. Sandra Cason and other women had a hand in the drafting of the 1962 Port Huron Statement, but most Americans (if they are familiar with this document at all) think Cason's husband, Tom Hayden, performed the feat single-handedly. In fact, radical feminism emerged first as a faction within SDS, in large measure to protest the sexist assumptions and practices of the men running that organization. I do not wish to suggest, however, that all was rosy on the other side of the racial divide. During the late 1960s, one of the Black Panther party's most able and articulate luminaries went so far as to say there was only one position for women in that party—and that was prone.

For some time now historians such as Sara Evans have documented just how much feminists of the left owed to the early, Southern-based, and largely religious civil rights organizations.

Some popular writers on the movement (Taylor Branch, for one) have not neglected the role of women, but in a 1998 CNN documentary about King in the years between Montgomery and Memphis no mention at all is made of the Women's Political Council that Grierson discusses in this paper. The women of the movement are no longer entirely invisible, to be sure, but the organizations they spawned are far more visible to the professional scholar than to the educated layperson.

There is yet another point to be made about Hamer in particular. She was, after all, one of the founding members of the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party, a party that rose in reaction against the lily-white regular Democratic party of that state. Representing the MFDP before the Democratic Credentials Committee at the 1964 nominating convention in Atlantic City, Hamer eloquently (and tearfully) told her own story—and proceeded to make the argument that her party was more representative of Mississippians than the one which had hung a "No Blacks Need Apply" sign on itself for so many generations. That speech, it seems to me, is significant for several reasons. For one, it put her at odds not only with the President of the United States and the man who was the national head of the party with which she identified, but also with a president who had gone further than any of his predecessors on the subject of civil rights. LBJ and his trusted lieutenants Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale did not want to seat the entire MFDP delegation, for fear of driving too many white Southern Democrats from the party. Above all else, they wished to maintain a broad-based reform coalition that would last for the duration. They, too, employed rhetoric, but it was rhetoric of a fundamentally different kind from that of Hamer and her forces. The former appealed to an ethic of consequences, while the latter invoked an ethic of ultimate ends.

Sociologist Max Weber was the first to use those terms, but the contrasting sensibilities he described have ancient roots. It is hardly surprising that one rhetoric appealed more to politicians and another rhetoric appealed more to crusaders. Yet there were also politicians who made moral appeals and crusaders who

thought largely in terms of practical results. Interestingly, and sadly, Martin Luther King felt the tug of both traditions, much to the umbrage of one-time allies who thought him either too cautious or too utopian. That, however, is another chapter in the history of the civil rights crusade.

Highlander Folk School: The Sit-In Movement of the 1960s

Darrel Gordon

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The Sit-In Movement of the 1960s came to be recognized as the movement that not only stirred the conscience of the South but the North as well. The sit-ins attracted the involvement of more people, both black and white, than any other civil rights activity. These activities had over 70,000 participants demonstrating in over 100 communities throughout the South and the North. Much of the success of these demonstrations derives from the involvement of the Highlander Folk School, headed and founded by Myles Horton. Horton established the school in the Appalachian Mountain region of Tennessee in 1932 in order to help the oppressed and poor, both black and white, combat their problems throughout the South. Highlander played a pivotal role in both the development of the civil rights leadership and the strategy those leaders implemented in the Sit-In Movement.

The Sit-In Movement of the 1960s played an important role in the civil rights movement, but the question remains who should be credited with the success of the sit-ins. Louis Lomax and Jo Freeman claim the Sit-In Movement comprised one of the two most important events of the civil rights movement. According to Lomax in his book *The Negro Revolt*, the civil rights movement comprises two "Negro Revolts" the Montgomery Bus Boycott in December of 1955 and the Sit-In Movement of the 1960s.¹

¹ Louis E. Lomax, *The Negro Revolt* (New York, 1962), 121.