

# H-Net Reviews

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Patricia Sullivan. *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xiii + 335 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4564-6; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2260-9.

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“It might have been all different, Jack....You got to believe that.” Willie Stark’s dying words to Jack Burden could also characterize Patricia Sullivan’s *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*. Sullivan has produced a compelling narrative of the struggles of liberals in the American South in the 1930s and 1940s, and the eventual defeat of a budding southern liberalism by the race issue and the communist issue. If either of those obstacles had been overcome, Sullivan argues, the history of the South in the past fifty years could have been different. Based on dozens of oral histories and extensive archival research, *Days of Hope* details the story of southern liberalism in a curiously hopeful era. As the cotton economy collapsed under the weight of the Great Depression, reform-minded southerners hoped to use the crisis as a crucible in which to forge a truly “New South.” In the heady days of the New Deal, a great many reformers joined with Communist party members and other radicals in a broad coalition to promote social reform, racial equality, and economic justice.

Southern liberals and radicals participated, in their own way, in the global movement known as the Popular Front. During the 1930s, Communists, socialists, and moderate liberals put aside many of their differences to join together in a fight against the perceived global threat of fascism. As Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, the global Great Depression created the conditions which permitted the emergence of a nightmare version of the Right. Fascist movements promised to save civilization from economic catastrophe by destroying the elements which threatened the traditional order: the Left, including labor unions, liberals, and Communists. The threat of aggression from fascist states like Germany and Italy on the international scene was paralleled by internal threats to democracy in those countries, like the USA, which did not elect fascists to power.[1] In the United States, the traditional southern “Bourbon aristocracy” became a likely target of anti-fascist rhetoric; the reactionary South was seen as a bastion of anti-democratic traditionalism which threatened the entire nation.

In addition, the South was seen by many reformers as a threat to national economic recovery. Poverty-stricken, dependent on a failed cotton agriculture, and possessing little industry save low-wage textile mills and Birmingham’s outside-owned steel interests, the South was, as President Roosevelt termed it, “the Nation’s No. 1 economic problem.” The South’s people worked too hard for low wages and consumed too little, constituting a drag on the nation’s economy. The South was “a low-wage region in a high-wage country,” and the South’s conservative leadership—the planters and their textile mill-owning allies—had long since decided that it could not expect to earn an adequate return on investment in the masses of southern people, thus education and basic social services received little public money.[2] Liberals and radicals hoped that the nation’s economic collapse would reveal the weaknesses of the South’s traditional leaders and energize the southern masses—black and white, on the land and in the mills—to demand change.

Sullivan describes this background briefly, then effectively mobilizes evidence for the existence of a substantial Popular Front movement within the South. This movement was led by middle-class liberals such as Clark Howell Foreman, descendant of two editors of the Atlanta *Constitution* on his mother’s side; Lucy Randolph Mason, descendant of two of Virginia’s most famous patriots; Charles Houston, leader of the NAACP’s legal campaign against segregation; and many others. The scattered elements of this movement came together with leaders of organized labor—principally the CIO—in 1938 to form the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. The Southern Conference welcomed participation by all those interested in promoting political, racial, and economic democracy in the South, including members of the Communist Party. In the heyday of the Popular Front against reaction and fascism, such collaboration was possible.

The Popular Front in the South had an additional element, a complicating factor which eventually helped doom the movement. In addition to bringing Commu-

nists and non-Communist radicals and liberals together, in the South the Popular Front also implied an alliance of those who wanted to launch a direct assault on racial segregation and those who saw segregation as a secondary issue which might divide the movement. Southern reformers “were ever-mindful of the squandered potential of the Populist movement”; C. Vann Woodward’s *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel* (1938) “was widely read and discussed” within southern New Deal circles (p. 106). As a result, the Popular Front movement, symbolized by the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, chose the poll tax as its principal focus during the late 1930s and 1940s. The poll tax had disfranchised large numbers of poor blacks and whites, and the issue thus had a biracial appeal. This approach allowed “traditional southern liberals” like Virginius Dabney, whose main goal was simply to make separate but equal facilities truly equal, to work with a broader coalition of liberal forces. In the best Popular Front tradition, the poll tax issue allowed liberal and radical forces to mobilize around the minimum program of reform attainable and agreeable to all elements of the southern Left. The issue fit nicely with the expressed goals of the Southern Conference, to promote political and industrial democracy in the South.

While focusing on the poll tax, the Southern Conference nevertheless refused to “endorse the maintenance of segregation.” Indeed many members of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and other Popular Front organizations such as the Highlander Folk School “trusted that in the process of addressing common social and economic problems in the South through political education and interracial action, increasing numbers of southern whites would surmount their racial prejudices,” thus paving the way for the end of segregation at some time in the relatively near future (p. 164). The issue of segregation eventually began to split the Popular Front movement (interestingly, before the Communist issue came to dominate the reform agenda), evidenced by the formation of the more moderate Southern Regional Council in 1944. The SRC began its operations without a formal commitment to the end of segregation, and indeed, many of its founding members agreed with Alabama editor John Templeton Graves that “[s]egregation in the South is not going to be eliminated. This is a fact to be faced, but it does not preclude a constant improvement in the Negro side of jim crow” (p. 164).

When the Supreme Court began declaring white primary laws in the South unconstitutional in 1944, racist demagogues like Eugene Talmadge were quick to exploit the race issue in an attempt to beat back the forces of southern change. The crisis in Georgia was especially

revealing, since Georgia was widely considered “one of the most promising arenas for liberal political action in the South” (p. 203). Georgia had elected an avowedly liberal governor in 1942—Ellis Arnall. Arnall had helped make Georgia a showcase of sorts for southern liberalism by leading a successful fight to abolish Georgia’s poll tax, crusading successfully against discriminatory railroad freight rates, advocating federal aid for education in the South, and courting the support of organized labor. When the federal courts struck down Georgia’s white primary in 1945, conservatives urged Arnall to call a special session of the legislature for the purpose of repealing all of Georgia’s primary laws, thus making the Democratic primary a private affair. This scheme had been used in South Carolina to allow the Democratic Party to continue to hold whites-only primaries. Arnall refused to participate in any such “subterfuge” to evade the legitimate orders of a federal court. Arnall’s principled stand was praised by liberals throughout the nation. Talmadge took full advantage of the issue, running a viciously racist campaign. The Talmadge camp also inspired efforts in rural areas to intimidate black voters, purge blacks from the voting rolls, and helped create the climate which encouraged the infamous lynching of four blacks in Walton County days after the primary in 1946. Talmadge won the Democratic primary for governor in 1946 over Arnall’s candidate (Arnall himself was prohibited by state law from succeeding himself), and the liberal light began to dim in Georgia. The race issue retained its potency in the postwar South.

The defeat of organized labor in the South also contributed to the decline of the Popular Front. The CIO had provided crucial financial and membership support to the Southern Conference for Human Welfare from its inception in 1938. In 1946, the CIO launched an ambitious drive to organize southern workers in all industries, dubbed “Operation Dixie.” At the outset of the drive, CIO leaders began to distance themselves from the SCHW, and eventually asked all CIO officials to sever official connections with the Conference. The CIO’s actions were motivated by the second great threat to the southern Popular Front—the emerging Cold War. The SCHW was under investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee. HUAC would issue a report in 1947 which labeled the Conference “perhaps the most deviously camouflaged communist-front organization” (perhaps because the committee could find no hard evidence of Communist domination; committee report quoted, p. 243). SCHW’s Popular Front attitude had encouraged cooperation with Communists, and members of the Party were not prohibited from joining. “Guilt by associ-

ation” helped consign the Conference to the status of a “communist front organization.” The CIO was in the midst of fighting its own internal civil war over the issue of communism, and the Conference’s continued commitment to inclusionary Popular Front principles made the organization dangerous from the point of view of organized labor. The Taft-Hartley Act, passed in 1947, required all officials of unions certified by the National Labor Relations Board to sign “non-communist affidavits,” statements by which union officers pledged that they were not Communist Party members and that they did not support any organization which advocated the overthrow of the U.S. government. In the world of the Cold War, it became dangerous for the CIO to associate with “communist front organizations.” The southern Popular Front therefore lost much of its potential mass base; the CIO’s southern drive failed as well, in part due to the internal civil war.[3]

By 1948, the southern Popular Front had all but collapsed. The remaining members of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare threw their energies into the Henry Wallace campaign in 1948, in a vain effort to beat back the forces of reaction within the Democratic Party. Wallace toured the South during the campaign and generated enthusiastic responses from black audiences throughout the region. Though Wallace won barely a million votes on election day, his campaign was part of a slow process of opening the political process to southern blacks. The Southern Conference for Human Welfare disbanded after the election of 1948, and the dream of an interracial Popular Front movement for social justice in the South disappeared. When the civil rights movement emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, “little, if any, memory of the New Deal years informed” the “modern movement for racial justice in the United States,” according to Sullivan, though the reformers of the 1930s and 1940s had “tilled the ground for future change” (p. 275). A new American liberalism emerged in the late 1940s and 1950s to replace the Popular Front. The liberalism of the “vital center,” described by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and symbolized by Americans for Democratic Action, seemed to be motivated by a different vision of the nation’s problems and potential solutions. The term “vital center” captured perfectly the shifting reality of American liberalism: no longer in partnership with other elements of the historical Left, American liberals moved to the middle, and claimed to oppose extremism of both the Left and the Right. For southern liberals like Lillian Smith, a former SCHW member, this meant opposing both the “Right and Left reactionaries.” The Right was symbolized by southern conservatives, the Left by the Soviet Union. The

move to the “vital center” also implied a shifting interpretation of southern problems. Increasingly for liberals, the southern race problem was primarily a moral, not an economic problem, as described by Gunnar Myrdal in his classic *An American Dilemma* (1944). For southern liberals in particular, reform came increasingly to mean an amelioration of the race problem, and more fundamental questions of economic and social justice for both races were pushed into the background.

This book is based on Sullivan’s earlier dissertation. That dissertation was often cited by Numan V. Bartley in the latest volume of the LSU History of the South series, *The New South, 1945-1980*. Bartley devoted a chapter to the rise and fall of Popular Front liberalism in the South, and argued along the lines suggested by Sullivan, albeit with a more pessimistic conclusion. The Popular Front, symbolized by the Southern Conference, “tried to enlist both blacks and whites in a political movement that would materially benefit both.” With the collapse of the Popular Front, postwar liberal movements “offered white workers little aside from contempt and the right to compete for scarce jobs with black workers.” In redefining American liberalism “not in terms of the redistribution of wealth, power, and privilege but as an issue of individual morality, the new American left sharply narrowed the liberal agenda,” Bartley argued.[4]

Sullivan makes her case effectively. Some recent reviewers have criticized the veneration of the Popular Front alternative by scholars such as Bartley and Sullivan as unrealistic; some reviewers have questioned the potential for the success of such a movement.[5] Sullivan’s book attests to the vitality of southern Popular Front liberalism, and to the pitfalls of race and anti-communism. Sullivan might have strengthened her argument with a more thorough consideration of Operation Dixie and the CIO. It was the possibility of mass membership in new southern industrial unions which gave real hope to the Popular Front, and the twin blows of the rejection of the Popular Front by the CIO followed by the defeat of Operation Dixie which finally doomed the movement. This subject has been covered elsewhere, though, and it is probably unrealistic to ask much more of Sullivan on this matter. Sullivan has written an eloquent epitaph for the Popular Front in the South which should be read by students of southern history, historians of American reform movements, and all who are interested in roads not taken.

#### NOTES

[1]. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York, 1994), 142-178. Hob-

sbawm points out that in a broad sense, the liberal and communist regimes of the postwar world continued to share certain goals and strategies: both east and west of the Iron Curtain, governments rejected the *laissez-faire* approach in favor of a variety of methods of government economic management (whether through state planning and ownership or Keynesian public spending and taxation policies). Such government intervention helped produce what he calls the “golden age” of unprecedented prosperity and development for the world, 1947-1973.

[2]. Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York, 1986), 80.

[3]. For Taft-Hartley’s provisions, see James Green,

*The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 1980), 198; on Operation Dixie, see Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia, 1988).

[4]. Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge, 1995), 72-73.

[5]. See David Carlton’s internet review of Bartley’s *The New South* on H-South, March 13, 1997.

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