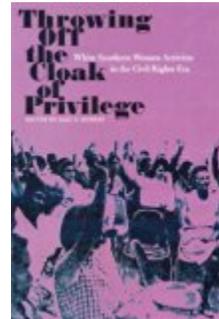


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gail Murray, ed. *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. xiv + 229 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2726-5.

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Many of the landmark studies of the civil rights movement have focused on the role of major leaders of the movement, virtually all of whom were male. Women in general (aside from a few exceptions such as Rosa Parks) have received much less attention, despite the fact that most historians recognize that women—typically a majority of the membership in black churches and associations that sustained the movement—were essential to its success. Now Gail Murray’s collection examines the degree to which white women used their churches and associations to begin challenging southern racism as well.

While black and white women share a similar lack of attention from historians, there are crucial differences in the experiences of these two groups. The stakes for black women’s participation were usually much higher, involving threats to life and economic security rather than to social prestige, as was usually the case with white women. Nevertheless, a number of white women did risk their reputations and social standing to pursue a commitment to justice, as they defined it (which was not always the same way their black allies did). And for some of them, their lives were much more difficult as a consequence.

The volume includes eight essays. The first four focus on individual women: Dorothy Tilly, Alice Norwood Spearman Wright, Frances Freeborn Pauley, and Anne Braden. The last four focus on regional networks of women activists, examining the impact of these networks in South Carolina, Little Rock, New Orleans, and Memphis. The first group of essays is arranged roughly chronologically and thus comparisons between the motivations and careers of these women are somewhat dif-

ficult. Although the events of 1954, including the *Brown* decision, represented a major turning point for many in their attitudes about race, Tilly, Wright, and Pauley were longtime activists who gradually incorporated racial justice into their lengthy agenda of reform causes. These women were not radicals, but came to recognize that the oppression of blacks in the South was an issue that demanded their attention.

Edith Holbrook Riehm’s essay on Dorothy Tilly notes that Tilly had been inspired by Eleanor Roosevelt to seek out ways in which southern women, white and black, could come together to discuss reform of the racial status quo. The Fellowship of the Concerned, founded in 1949, is among the handful of interracial organizations that formed in the 1930s and 1940s. Alice Norwood Spearman Wright of South Carolina, discussed in an essay by Marcia G. Synnott, helped build connections between generations of women reformers during her long and varied career, which included work on the Council on Human Relations. Wright served as executive director of that organization in South Carolina from 1954 until 1967. Kathryn Nasstrom’s essay on Frances Freeborn Pauley, who served in many organizations dedicated to improving race relations and raising class awareness, also examines how southern women wrote about themselves and the significance of their work. Nasstrom underscores the difficulty of evaluating the role played by gender in the activist work of these women, when they themselves denied its significance in shaping their careers. Anne Braden, the subject of an essay by Catherine Fosl, is perhaps the best-known woman portrayed in this collection. Braden, a journalist and activist from Kentucky, is also, as Fosl notes, “not representative” of most southern white women (p. 103). Braden was controversial not only be-

cause of her civil rights activism, but also her association with the Communist Party.

After *Brown*, white women in Little Rock, New Orleans, and elsewhere formed organizations to ensure that public schools remained open. These women had various levels of commitment to integration, but their shared emphasis on public education for all children made them suspect to white opponents of *Brown*, and created common cause with black activists and parents. It is striking that several of these groups chose to remain segregated, arguing that an integrated group would be less effective in lobbying efforts. This may well have been true but it also highlights the limits of some of these women's activism. Only later did some of them come to embrace opportunities for cross-racial dialogue and organizing.

Cherisse Jones's essay on churchwomen and their reactions to the blossoming civil rights movement in the 1940s shows that while these women were willing to challenge the racial status quo, they were far from radical. Although the United Council of Church Women insisted that women from all denominations, and of all races, could join, Jones shows that debates over the positions on racial issues taken by the organization were ongoing and sometimes bitter. Laura Miller's essay on Little Rock demonstrates that these women did not necessarily think in terms of gender oppression. Most of these women, highly organized and politically astute, re-

sisted presenting themselves as a challenge to the existing power structure. Instead, they used that structure, as well as stereotypical assumptions about their own roles and capacities—and even, at times, prevailing attitudes about race—to undermine the status quo more subtly. Rarely did these women seek to challenge the economic order of the South. Gail Murray describes a growing awareness of class issues among white women activists in Memphis, but in the aftermath of Martin Luther King's assassination, such awareness had become more widespread.

This collection shows both the possibilities and limitations of white activism in the South during the mid-twentieth century. The women presented in this volume provided valuable support to the black activists seeking to overturn Jim Crow. However, this support came on terms defined by the white women themselves and tended to operate within the gender and racial norms prevalent in the South at that time. For example, white women were most motivated and most effective in seeking to expand and protect access to education for children of both races. This issue fit neatly into the set of concerns considered most appropriate for women. Those women who defied those expectations, such as Anne Braden, paid a heavy personal and professional price. But Murray and the other authors in the volume have done a fine job illustrating the complexity of white southern responses to the civil rights movement.

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