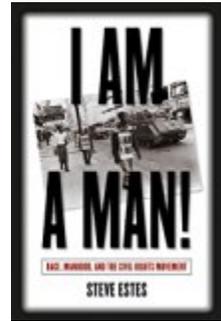


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A Double-Edged Sword: “Manhood” and the Long-Term Impact of the Civil Rights Movement

In the spring of 1968, black sanitation workers took to the streets of Memphis, Tennessee to protest years of discriminatory treatment, low wages, and unsafe working conditions. Seeking to garner public support for their efforts to establish a union and secure pay levels high enough to support their families, the workers adopted the declaration, “I Am A Man!” as their slogan. On the surface, the strikers’ choice of a simple declaration of manhood to express grievances rooted in complex issues of race and economics may seem just that: overly simplistic. According to Steve Estes, though, the historical attachment of “manhood” to one’s status as a citizen, a worker, and a family provider meant that the choice of such a theme was both understandable and appropriate. Indeed, having been denied their rights in each of these aspects of their lives, the striking workers could not have adopted a more apt organizing theme. Moreover, Estes notes, the strikers’ claims to “manhood,” were not only more complex than they may have seemed on the surface, they were also part of a long tradition in black protest that dated back to the days of slavery. The Memphis Sanitation Strike demonstrates, then, that one cannot appreciate the full dimensions of the African-American freedom struggle without acknowledging its relationship to ideas about “gender relations and gender identity” (p. 4). Estes’ *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* explores this relationship and assesses its impact on the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

The book opens with a brief introduction that surveys the ways in which notions of manhood have always been

part of the black freedom struggle. Following this introduction, Estes opens with a chapter that explores black men’s participation in World War II, an event that he posits as both the true beginning of the civil rights movement and the basis for a renewal of civil rights claims rooted in appeals to manhood. Estes writes that black men, having proven their manhood to themselves and to the country, entered the postwar world determined to claim the rights afforded them as citizens and men. When those claims continued to be denied, these same black men were now able to draw upon a renewed sense of themselves—as men—that had been forged via their wartime service. This confidence was bolstered by a male camaraderie that would prove beneficial to their subsequent organizing efforts. In these ways, then, claims to manhood served as both the inspiration and the foundation for the emerging civil rights movement.

Because the definition of “manhood” was ever-shifting, though, Estes argues that its long-term effectiveness would depend on the specific ways in which it was employed. Early in the movement, Estes argues that appeals to manhood were rooted in an expansive vision of that concept—what he refers to as a “humanistic organizing tradition.” This tradition inspired black men *and* women to challenge the full range of racial oppression and imagine a more inclusive society. As such it contributed to the development of truly egalitarian ideals and helped shape a new definition of “manly” courage, one that was based less on physical retaliation and more on participation in movement activities like voter regis-

tration and nonviolent civil disobedience.

As the civil rights movement progressed, however, Estes argues that the predominant definition of manhood became increasingly less inclusive in its vision. More specifically, manhood too often became defined “in the strict sense of men’s rights rather than the broader construction of human rights” by which it had been earlier employed (p. 140). Such a limited vision ultimately turned many civil rights struggles—particularly during the latter stages of the movement—into efforts aimed primarily at what Estes terms “masculinist uplift.” Such an ideology—by focusing exclusively on the needs of men—“served to obscure the questions of racial and economic equality that lay at the heart of the original struggle, complicating and sometimes conflating these issues with the related question of what it meant to be a man” (p. 8). Moreover, the tactics that a “masculinist” ideology inspired, and the rhetoric employed to support it, too easily became aggressive and violent—a development that, however justified or understandable, nevertheless further “distract[ed] the nation’s attention from some of the deeper problems that the civil rights movement had attempted to address” (p. 187).

As a result, manhood—an idea that had been an inspiring force in the emergence of the civil rights movement—ultimately served to limit the long-term effectiveness of the larger African-American freedom struggle. In particular, the emergence of narrow definitions of manhood—and the tactics they inspired—contributed to the movement’s failure to achieve more substantive political and economic gains. Moreover, contemporary black activism—having embraced the limited notions of manhood articulated by the efforts of the late 1960s—seems on course to suffer a similar fate, at least as far as groups like the Promise Keepers and events like the Million Man March are concerned. Focused primarily on the needs and responsibilities of men, such efforts, Estes argues, will continue to leave unaddressed deeper issues related to social and economic justice. In short, Estes writes, efforts to achieve meaningful and substantive change in the life opportunities of African Americans should be focused less on a “quixotic quest for manhood” and more on “inclusive struggles for social justice and *human* rights” (p. 187, emphasis added).

Estes traces the progression of ideas about manhood through six chapters that proceed chronologically from World War II into the 1970s. Estes explores, in order, the White Citizens’ Councils, Freedom Summer, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, the Moynihan Report,

the aforementioned Memphis Sanitation Strike, and the Black Panther Party. Taken separately, the individual chapters do not all connect directly to Estes’ larger point concerning the shift to “masculinist uplift” and its long-term consequences. Taken together, though, they build upon one another in a way that establishes the mid-1960s as the crucial moment in this progression. Although manhood had always been a contested concept, it was at this juncture that appeals to manhood began to translate into greater reliance on force as a protest strategy and that “masculinist uplift” pushed more expansive definitions of manhood to the margins.[1] Cleverly, in support of his ultimate conclusions, Estes bookends this argument with two chapters that demonstrate how narrow definitions of manhood impeded protest efforts connected to the civil rights movement, albeit within two very different organizations: the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the White Citizens’ Councils (WCC).

In its early years, writes Estes, the BPP had made a name for itself via members’ willingness to confront police officers and brandish weapons, tactics that had attracted swarms of recruits across the country. As the BPP evolved to embrace a platform that recognized the need to move beyond armed self-defense and aggressive notions of manhood, it found it difficult to shake the perception that its primary emphasis was on such demonstrations of “manly” force. Indeed, one of the photos that Estes includes—that of a male BPP member clad in an apron and emerging from a kitchen to serve breakfast to schoolchildren—is likely to surprise readers less familiar with the organization’s history. The BPP struggled with this perception on two fronts: not only were they targeted by law enforcement and other government officials who feared violence, they also found themselves wracked by internal dissension over the strategies and direction of the organization. “As a result,” writes Estes, “(t)he Panthers found that the masculinist rhetoric of their early years created an atmosphere in which violence became a means for proving manhood, not for furthering the revolution they had envisioned” (p. 177). Lost in these battles was the “progressive promise of the Panthers’ political rhetoric” that included calls for community-based food, clothing, and medical programs and efforts to “combat sexism and homophobia within their own organization and the larger movement” (p. 177).

Interestingly, if organizations like the Panthers had wished to learn the consequences of masculinist posturing, especially in terms of the flexibility it removed from one’s choice of tactics and strategies, then they could have learned a valuable lesson from the White Cit-

izens' Council (WCC) and the massive resistance campaign of the 1950s.[2] Estes discusses the role of manhood in this effort in chapter 2 and, in so doing, is to be commended for recognizing the importance of understanding the complex dynamics of resistance efforts—what many movement historians refer to as taking the segregationists seriously. Drawing upon historical fears of black masculinity, leaders of the WCC positioned the preservation of segregation as essential to the effort to protect white women and children from the dangers of “race mixing.” In so doing, they established one’s commitment to the defense of segregation as a reflection of one’s honor, a historically powerful force in Southern society. The result, though, was that little to no room was left for negotiation or compromise. Inspired by the rhetoric of the WCC, the many southerners who turned to violence served to remove the respectable veneer of segregation and force the federal government—in however limited fashion—to intervene on behalf of African Americans. “By demonizing black manhood and resurrecting nineteenth-century conceptions of honor,” Estes writes, “the councils created hysteria in the South that encouraged vigilante violence in defense of segregation” (pp. 40-41). The “moral ground” had been ceded and public opinion, if it had not already, turned towards the movement. Moreover, the contrasting nonviolence of civil rights activists offered a “brilliant caricature” of “the macho posturing and racial violence on which southern white male supremacy rested” (p. 59). Thus, it was cruelly ironic that, ten years later, black activists, although for slightly different reasons, would themselves founder on aggressive “macho posturing.”[3]

As with any book, there are a few criticisms that can be made, but they are related more to degree of emphasis than to substantive or evidentiary concerns. One wonders, for example, whether Estes has overstated the role of “manhood” in World War II’s impact on the movement. Shifts in the political climate, networks forged among black soldiers, leadership experience, and, perhaps most important, new economic opportunities (and independence)—all of which Estes acknowledges—strike this reader as more significant to the emergence of the early movement than renewed claims to manhood. Put another way, one might make a reasonable argument that the more important shift was less that of black men’s self-image and more that the political, economic, and social space had opened up to allow them to assert their manhood in ways that would have been punished severely in prior years. As such, a more accurate point seems to be that, once again, black manhood was denied, even in the

face of valorous service, and, as a consequence, later appeals and challenges to black manhood were that much more potent.

Ultimately, though, such criticisms do not detract from the book’s very real contributions. Indeed, one need not agree with Estes’ ultimate conclusion regarding the negative long-term impact of appeals to manhood to appreciate the positive contributions that his work makes. In many ways, *I Am A Man!* reflects the best of recent developments in civil rights scholarship. Estes, for example, does not rely on the familiar, yet flawed “civil rights vs. black power” dichotomy, instead recognizing the connections between the two and the long roots of both.[4] Similarly, Estes does not limit taking a long view of the civil rights movement to simply stretching further back in time. Rather, he also moves further ahead—to the 1970s, 80s, and 90s—and, in so doing, recognizes that the outcomes of a movement are as crucial to understanding it as its origins. Finally, Estes’ expands upon the narrative framework of the first and second generations of civil rights scholarship to bring new perspectives and emphases to bear—and does so without becoming overly celebratory or harshly critical.

Estes is to be commended further for the eminently readable way in which he presents his ideas, proving that discussions of race and gender need not be rendered inaccessible to all but the most patient of specialists. Whether as a whole or through individual chapters, *I Am A Man!* would make a fine addition to syllabi for undergraduate or graduate courses in African-American, civil rights, or post-World War II history. At the same time, civil rights historians and specialists concerned with political and social movements will also find Estes’ work valuable (as well as a relatively quick read) for its additional insights into familiar people and events. Estes’ discussion, for example, of the Memphis-based organization of “young black militants” known as the Invaders, will surely be of interest to those working in the emerging field of black power studies. Overall, then, *I Am A Man!* stands as a fascinating journey through the race and gender conflicts of the mid-twentieth-century United States and is a welcome addition to the historiography of civil rights.

Notes

[1]. In this sense, Estes answers one of the open questions posed by Charles Payne’s influential bibliographic essay on the movement. In that essay Payne noted that “many of the developments that came to bedevil some movement organizations after the mid-sixties ... could all be thought of as shifts away from behavior patterns that

in this society are socially coded as feminine and toward patterns that are socially coded as masculine.” Charles Payne, “Bibliographic Essay,” in *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 426. [2]. A crucial distinction is that the BPP’s use of force was intended to be in self-defense. Americans, though, are often unable or unwilling to grasp the nuances of unrest or disorder.

[3]. Again, there is a real difference between the ac-

tive use of force by groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the self-defense advocated by groups like the BPP. The point, however, is that in the minds of the public, such distinctions are often lost.

[4]. Timothy Tyson’s work on Robert F. Williams is becoming the classic reference on this point. See Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams, & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

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