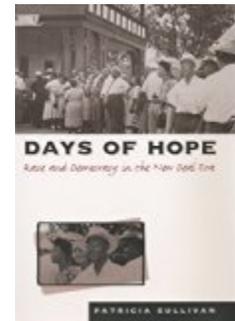


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

Reviewed by Vanessa L. Davis (Truman State University)  
Published on H-South (August, 1997)



## Southern Hope?

Three days after the 1938 *Report on the Economic Conditions of the South* was released to the public, *The New York Times* reprinted a political cartoon from *The Cleveland News*. Striking in its simplicity, the cartoon depicted a white man and woman struggling in a field and joined together by a yoke labeled “economic inequality.” The caption simply read “Dixie.”[1] In many ways this cartoon encapsulates the liberal attitudes following the *Report’s* release. Although the southern authors of the *Report* went to great lengths to explain the external and internal sources of southern poverty, many Americans simply continued to view the South not as a distinct and potentially wealthy agricultural region and system, but as an area of the nation that was woefully behind the economic and industrial times. The source of economic inequality in the South, this popular opinion went, was a lack of technological and economic modernization coupled with an incomprehensible refusal to shed old anti-progressive traditions and attitudes. And, for most Americans, that was a problem devoid of racial concerns. Much like our *Cleveland News* cartoon, the nation, even the *Report* itself, presented the southern economic and social problems devoid of any racial dimensions. The distinct economic, social, and political disadvantages of African Americans were never acknowledged.

Yet when one discusses the economic conditions of the South, and Franklin Roosevelt’s subsequent New Deal programs meant to address those conditions, race can hardly be ignored. For not only were race and poverty inextricably linked in the southern United States, but,

according to Patricia Sullivan’s *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*, the politics designed to remedy these economic problems created a unique period of opportunity for those involved in reversing the second class status of southern African Americans. Sullivan’s thesis that the national crisis of southern poverty created opportunities for southern liberals to attempt to change the deep-rooted economic, political, and racial traditions of the South is promising, well-researched, and in-line with recent evaluations of the New Deal as a crucial moment in post-Civil War southern history.

In the introduction to *Days of Hope*, Sullivan boldly proclaims that her work is “the study of a generation,” one that she pursues through the examination of three central themes: the changing relationship between the federal government, the South, and the Democratic Party; the dynamic role that post-World War II black southerners played in voting rights challenges; and the development of mostly-young southern liberals and the organizations they formed to further their crusades for economic and racial justice in the South (pp. 8-9). The heroes and heroines of Sullivan’s study are, for the most part, young idealists of both races who created and used a variety of political and labor organizations to further their struggles and who capitalized on the political urgency and opportunity created by the Great Depression and Roosevelt’s New Deal. In this narrative of the New Deal South, men and women such as Palmer Weber, Virginia and Clifford Durr, Clark Foreman, John McCray, Charles Houston, and Lucy Randolph Mason rise

to the surface and represent a new breed of southern liberal. Many were at the beginning of the Depression young, well-educated, politically and socially liberal, and, for the most part, from financially stable backgrounds. They questioned the morality of racial discrimination, and were willing to create interracial organizations. They were also a part of a much larger national and international movement aimed at addressing economic and social inequality, the Popular Front movement.

The story of the challenge to the “southern way of life” that these young reformers mount is rooted in the connection between economics, race, and position in southern society, a society where economic destitution was used to buttress racial discrimination. Nowhere was this more evident than in the distribution of factory jobs after Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration (NRA) established minimum wages. When forced to begin paying a national minimum wage, southern factory owners either closed down their factories or replaced their black workers with white workers. Economic opportunity, or in this case the lack thereof, became yet another way to reinforce the second class status of African Americans while at the same time attempting to further white racial and political unity. Despite the problems that New Deal reforms might have created in their application, Sullivan argues that the urgency of the Depression created a window of opportunity for political, economic, and social change in the South (p. 66).

One of the first activists to embody that potential for change in Sullivan’s narrative is Clark Foreman, the white Atlanta native who became Roosevelt’s first Special Advisor on the Economic Status of Negroes. In many ways, Foreman is the logical choice for Sullivan to begin with since he embodies many of the characteristics that the other young Turks of southern reform share. Foreman grew up in the heart of the New South, Atlanta, Georgia, and benefited from the economic and social status of his family. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Georgia he attended Harvard for one year and eventually completed his education with a grand tour of Europe. While in Europe, Foreman attended the London School of Economics, became friends with many of England’s leading radicals, and observed firsthand the impact of abject poverty on developing European nations. Upon his return to Atlanta, Foreman was a changed man. He no longer held many of the views considered proper in Atlanta society, and instead of entering into the business world of his father, Foreman became secretary of the Georgia Committee of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC). From

this position Foreman had the opportunity to explore interracial politics and worked to improve the availability of public services to Atlanta African-Americans. But even his CIC involvement was not enough for Foreman, who grew increasingly frustrated at only being able to respond to what he believed were merely symptoms of much deeper racial and economic problems. In an effort to address the root causes of racial discrimination and economic poverty, Foreman jumped at the chance to become Roosevelt’s first Special Advisor on the Economic Status of Negroes. In so doing, Foreman became a part of a growing contingent of the young, educated, and idealistic soldiers running Franklin Roosevelt’s battle against poverty.

Just as Foreman’s intellectual and ethical development is in many ways representative of the development of other southern white radicals, the political career of Palmer Weber is also instructive. Unlike Foreman, Weber did not share the economic advantages of a powerful southern family. Raised in relative poverty, Weber spent his formative years in the Blue Ridge Sanitarium recovering from glandular tuberculosis. It was here and not in the dining clubs of Harvard or around the tables of London radicals that Weber received his early education in radicalism, particularly Marxism. After securing a scholarship to attend the University of Virginia, Weber continued his political self-education by becoming involved in the university’s Liberal Discussion Group and the local chapter of the National Student League. These interests and his reading of Marx and Plato eventually led Palmer to pursue a Ph.D. in philosophy. However, his anti-lynching crusades and other activities alienated the university community, and a lack of faculty recommendations for a teaching position led Weber into public service with a Washington, D.C. staff position with the Tolan Committee on Interstate Migration.

Weber is particularly central to Sullivan’s thesis as not only a major oral history source, but also as a way to discuss and explore the intricate interactions between various political, labor, and civil rights organizations. Coming shortly after America’s first red scare, the American version of the international Popular Front movement challenged American, particularly southern, understandings of democracy and political involvement. Throughout the South organizations like the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) were created as a means of addressing the racial and economic concerns of this region that Roosevelt labeled “the nation’s number one economic problem.” In addition to its radical membership, organizations such as the SCHW, the Congress

of Industrial Organizations-Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC), the Highlander Folk School, the National Citizens Political Action Committee, and the Progressive Party struggled to join together a broad coalition of members and supporting organizations that ran the gamut from union leaders to Roosevelt administration appointees to weathered civil rights activists. At the heart of these efforts was the understanding that activists like Palmer Weber championed—racial and economic matters were intimately linked together and the only way to further reforms in either category was through national political action. Unfortunately for many of these organizations, they ran into difficulties as they attempted to negotiate the increasingly hostile and complex world of national and southern politics. Despite their efforts at national legislation outlawing lynching and the poll tax, these organizations were often frustrated by Roosevelt's and the Democratic Party's unwillingness to completely alienate the increasingly powerful and conservative cadre of southern democrats. This reticence of the national Democratic Party toward offending southern conservatives is nowhere more apparent than at the 1944 Democratic national convention and the removal of liberal Henry Wallace as Roosevelt's running mate.

In an effort to understand the development and impact of these southern liberals, Sullivan traces these organizations and their leaders through the contentious internal politics of the Democratic Party of the 1930s and 1940s. Beginning with the involvement of many of these young radicals in New Deal programs such as the NRA, Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), and the Works Progress Administration, Sullivan follows them into the creation of private political organizations such as the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the southern Negro Youth Conference, the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, and the Southern Regional Council. But probably the two most useful areas of Sullivan's organizational study are her examination of the role of labor in these political organizations and the mounting pressures brought by these activists against both state and national Democratic parties. By detailing the development and subsequent work of the Congress of Industrial Organization-Political Action Committee, Sullivan demonstrates how the leadership of organized labor became involved in the southern campaign for economic and racial equality. Civil rights scholars have long taken for granted the involvement of organized labor in the post-World War II civil rights movement, but few have taken the time to examine the beginnings of that involve-

ment.

But most important for scholars concerned with the development of twentieth century southern politics is Sullivan's discussion of the relationship between southern liberals, the national Democratic Party, and several of the southern state Democratic parties, especially the South Carolina party. Monographs on both southern politics and the national Democratic Party seldom discuss the failed yet extraordinarily important political challenges waged by such groups as the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) of South Carolina and Henry Wallace's Progressive Party. The least well-known of these two challenges, the South Carolina PDP, is one of Sullivan's most intriguing and promising narratives. Begun as a challenge to the lily-white and discriminatory South Carolina Democratic Party, the PDP not only ran significant voter registration campaigns throughout South Carolina, but it also challenged the seating of the regular state delegation at the 1944 Democratic national convention. Although the PDP failed to unseat the regular delegation, it marked the first time that an all-black delegation mounted such a challenge and formed the basis for not only further organizational work in South Carolina, but also a precedent for the unsuccessful 1964 Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenge and the successful 1968 Loyal Democrats of Mississippi challenge. The 1944 convention challenge and the subsequent removal of progressive Vice President Henry Wallace from the Democratic ticket highlight the ways in which the battle between liberal and conservative democrats were shaping both southern and national Democratic politics. In fact, the impact of these battles is made abundantly clear in the 1948 Progressive Party presidential campaign of Henry Wallace and the mixed reception he received on the southern campaign trail.

Although Sullivan does an outstanding job exploring the nuances and interactions of these mostly southern-grown progressive organizations and their efforts at racial and economic equality, her analysis sometimes leaves important questions unanswered. Several times she claims, sometimes even through the words of participants such as Virginia Foster Durr, that southern blacks were "the generating force" in the struggle for southern civil rights and voting campaigns (p. 195). Unfortunately, despite these claims of their central importance, Sullivan spends relatively little time discussing black efforts. Perhaps even more unfortunate, the analysis that Sullivan does provide focuses primarily on organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Undoubtedly, the NAACP took

the lead in the formal political organization of groups of southern blacks, but its dedication to these local branches was scatter-shot at best. Although NAACP membership in the South increased because of the efforts of Ella Jo Baker, the organization's fiery Director of Branches, the national organization was less concerned with developing local leadership and campaigns than it was with using local membership dues to finance its national legal and political battles. In fact, this lack of national concern for local problems and development eventually led to the angry resignation of Baker. And the NAACP was not above removing or limiting financial and staff support for southern state branches if it felt that no significant national gains could be made. Thus, although local NAACP branches had existed throughout Mississippi since 1918, the national organization resisted appointing a full-time field secretary until 1954.[2] In effect, by focusing most of her attention on the NAACP and other national organizations, Sullivan sometimes neglects an analysis of local black efforts at improving the lot of southern African Americans. (Although in all fairness, one should note that Sullivan does provide a compelling analysis of the efforts by blacks to challenge voter discrimination in Georgia and South Carolina. However, even here Sullivan's analysis tends towards focusing on the leadership of these movements and their relationship with her radical southern organizations rather than an analysis of the efforts made by local African Americans.)

This focus on national organizations and leaders exemplifies another problem with *Days of Hope*—the disturbing lack of local southern voices. Although she agrees with the prevailing thesis that most southerners applauded New Deal relief efforts despite the opposition of southern political leaders, Sullivan's neglect to analyze these southerners renders them voiceless. Considering that the final portion of *Days of Hope* is most concerned with exploring the efforts of southern liberals to create coalitions that would increase their national and local political power, Sullivan's limited exploration of local political and social attitudes impedes any understanding of the tactics and frustrations involved in these coalition efforts. In fact, the world of the local southerner, black or white, is missing from Sullivan's narrative. Although there is ample discussion of the motivations and workings of the leaders of groups such as the SCHW and the CIO-PAC, readers are left wondering what the attitudes and actions were of the rank and file of these organizations. This is an especially puzzling omission given Sullivan's argument that these organizations not only engaged in efforts to create national political

support for their changes but also attempted to discover ways to lessen the political power and prestige of the conservative southern political leaders that they believed were limiting southern racial and economic gains.

The lack of a local focus also corresponds to a surprisingly small amount of class analysis. Again, by focusing on the leaders of these organizations, most of whom experienced some form of economic or educational privilege, Sullivan skirts significant class analysis. Make no mistake, economic and class issues are primary themes in both these liberal activists and Sullivan's analysis of them, but they remain rather large, abstract issues to be grappled with on a national level. Thus, during her discussion of New Deal legislation in the South, particularly NRA minimum wage requirements and AAA crop reductions, Sullivan spends little time exploring the relatively minimum impact that these programs had on improving the economic situation of southern blacks. Instead of affirming Harvard Sitkoff's assertion that the glorification of the New Deal and Franklin Roosevelt by black southerners was a response based on "what they believed could be and has been rather than damning him on a standard of what might be," Sullivan falls prey to an all-too-optimistic evaluation of the New Deal's effect on southern African Americans and southern society.[3] Furthermore, given the economic and educational advantage of most of Sullivan's radical subjects, one is also left wondering how their own economic experiences of privilege affected their liberal political beliefs, and, more importantly, their interactions with most southerners. One gets a sense from Sullivan's narrative that these activists and their organizations were, in the words of the New Testament, "in the world but not of the world." Questions such as "How well were these radicals able to communicate with southern workers?" and "How did they attempt to translate their economic and political theories of class and race into the vernacular of the voting South?" are left unanswered. We are given some hint of the difficulties that such an interaction posed with Sullivan's discussion of Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) unionizing efforts. Faced with attempting to cultivate union membership in the South, Sullivan records that the CIO's radical message of racial equality became watered down by local white southern union members. This occurrence would suggest that the progressive organizations that Sullivan writes about not only met opposition among many southerners, but could also be co-opted for conservative purposes. However, without further analysis, the question of the ultimate effectiveness of these organizations is left unanswered.

Despite these analytical lapses, Sullivan offers the most compelling argument to date about the importance of the New Deal period as a fundamental turning point in southern history. Echoing the arguments made by the likes of Alan Brinkley, Numan Bartley, and Harvard Sitkoff, *Days of Hope* furthers the trend in southern history to view the New Deal period as a fundamental point for change in the South, although most of these scholars do qualify their discussions by emphasizing the long-term affects of the New Deal. Undoubtedly, the Depression and Second World War did create ample opportunities for long-term economic, political, and social change. By discussing the political challenges launched by liberal Democrats against both conservative southern democrats and a somewhat unwilling national Democratic Party, Sullivan highlights the beginning of a redefinition of party politics that would ultimately culminate in the political aspects of the civil rights movement and the demise of a solid Democratic South.

Furthermore, Sullivan's discussion of the long term effects of black voter registration efforts in South Carolina and Georgia support Harvard Sitkoff's assertion that "The seeds that would later bear fruit had been planted. They would continue to be nurtured by the legal and political developments, the ideas articulated, the alliances formed, and the expectations raised during the New Deal years. The sprouts of hope prepared the ground for the struggles to follow. Harvest time would come in the next generation." [4] In fact, perhaps Sullivan's greatest contribution to this growing discussion is her detailed analysis of labor's contribution to the changing economic and political environment of the South. Thus, despite the occasional analytical lapses, *Days of*

*Hope* provides a framework for situating the later cooperative civil rights efforts between organized labor, political radicals, and southern activists, and provides a much-needed context for current scholarship on the southern civil rights movement. Patricia Sullivan's *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* provides readers with a thorough, informative, and thought-provoking account of the New Deal. Despite its analytical lapses, it is a book worth reading for scholars interested in the shifting nature of southern and national politics as well as scholars interested in the coalitions and events that under-girded the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Notes:

[1]. Summer, "Dixie," *New York Times*, 21 August 1938, sec. IV p. 9.

[2]. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 48-49.

[3]. Harvard Sitkoff, "The Impact of the New Deal on Black Southerners," in *The New Deal and the South*, eds. James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 128.

[4]. Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, Vol. 1 The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 335.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

**Citation:** Vanessa L. Davis. Review of Sullivan, Patricia, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. August, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1227>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).