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The Civil Rights Movement and Selective Memory

Historians are well aware of how popular memory often distorts, mangles, or manipulates the past. Most historians of the United States want the public to understand that the civil rights movement was not created on May 17, 1954, when the Supreme Court issued the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision; that the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was not its undisputed leader; and that King's assassination was not the end of the struggle for equal rights. According to popular mythology, the civil rights movement faced opposition only in the Deep South, and with the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 the movement triumphed over America's racist past. Many illusions cloud the public perceptions of the civil rights movement and its significance. *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* is a collection of essays that explores how this period has been reinterpreted, misinterpreted, and expropriated by a variety of groups and individuals. Editors Renee Romano and Leigh Raiford have compiled a volume that deserves a wide readership by historians and especially the public. It is a timely volume, with original, interdisciplinary research (only three of the thirteen essays have been published before) that provokes further reflection on the meaning of the civil rights movement.

The volume opens with a collection of four essays, regarding the construction of memory, written by Owen J. Dwyer, Glenn Eskew, Derek H. Alderman, and Romano. One phenomenon considered by several of these essays is the creation in recent years of civil rights museums and memorials (such as statues and naming of streets, etc.)

honoring those involved in the movement. Often the public and/or private actions that made these museums and memorials possible required prolonged struggles to gain public support, especially outside of the African American community. Funding some of these institutions has meant isolating the problems of race in the past disconnected from current racial problems. While these museums and memorials have quite properly commemorated the achievements of the civil rights movement, representing the diversity and the differences of goals and tactics within the movement has proved difficult at best. Even in the African American community specific proposals for naming streets or parks after leaders of the movement, most commonly after Martin Luther King Jr., can be controversial. In the essay on the pursuit of justice against bombers of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Romano highlights how the media selectively examined the issues raised by justice delayed by several decades. In most accounts of the trials of the elderly Klan bombers, the spotlight stayed on the white prosecutors with African Americans presented as passive victims. The media reported on the vehement racism of the bombers without mentioning the depth of support for segregation in the political system of the time. The convictions of these bombers rarely sparked further discussion of the need for greater justice and reconciliation, but instead they were seen as shutting the door on a tragic event.

Four essays are grouped around the theme of "visualizing memory." The authors of this section, Edward P.

Morgan, Jennifer Fuller, Tim Libretti, and Leigh Raiford, analyze how the civil rights movement has fared in mass media, films, television, and photography. News corporations during the civil rights movement attempted to portray the struggle as between African Americans and the white, racist South, leaving aside racism in other parts of the country and policies and practices beyond Jim Crow laws. This misrepresentation has continued in the contemporary popular media. The veneration of Martin Luther King Jr. at the annual celebration of his birthday overlooks the diversity and democratic spirit of the civil rights movement. Both during the civil rights movement and in retrospectives about it, the mass media usually presents all controversy as binary struggles, which ignores the continuum of voices that do not fit within this limited spectrum. The 1990s produced a rash of television programming about the civil rights movement partly because of dramatic events reminiscent of the 1960s, such as the South Central L. A. riots, as well as the anniversary of civil rights events, such as the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The media likes to play the “then vs. now” game, which often takes the form of answering the question of how much racism survives in contemporary America. Personal stories of racial reconciliation often reassure the public that civil rights progress is real, but serious examination of structural issues such as re-segregation of public schools, continuing gaps in employment and income across racial lines, and incarceration rates of African American males seldom get presented.

This section also includes discussion of counter-cultural media and its rejection of capitalism and integration. Here films, novels, and magazines highlight the civil rights movement failures as part of a broad rejection of corporate, militaristic American society. The Black Panther Party embodied the militant rejection of mainstream America in the late 1960s, and the party’s most recognized symbol was a picture of Huey Newton seated in a wicker chair holding in one hand an African spear and in the other a rifle. Although widely reproduced by the Black Panther Party and others, the photograph also caused dissension within the party because of its focus upon Newton. The success of this photograph has invited imitations as has an equally famous FBI most-wanted poster of Angela Davis, which the magazine *Vibe* used to advertise fashion, much to the consternation of Davis. Black Power influenced a genre of blaxploitation movies where African American stars, male and female, kicked ass and restored justice in the style of B western movies restoring peace and order on the frontier.

A section containing two essays centers on divergent memory, but it also might be called gender and memory. Both essays, one by Kathryn L. Nasstrom and the other by Steve Estes, investigate how memory of the civil rights movement and gender roles among participants have changed over time. In 1946, African Americans in Atlanta conducted a campaign to register to vote and traditional accounts of it emphasize this campaign as the starting point of a gradual political advance that culminated in 1973 with the election of Maynard Jackson, who was the first African American mayor of a major southern city. This was the crowning achievement for Atlanta boosters, both African American and white, who claimed this was a city too busy to hate. Lost in this history was the fact that women led the voter registration drive and organized the civic groups that were vital to the success of African Americans in Atlanta. Historians need to not only correct the history, but they also need to write about how such an integral part of the chain of events was omitted. Historians and participants of Freedom Summer in Mississippi have included much information about gender issues that arose among the activists working for civil and voting rights. An early account by Sara Evans noted that women workers faced sexism and discrimination by their male counterparts, but, in more recent years, this account has been disputed by some activists. In some instances, the memory of civil rights workers changed as the social issues changed. Race also may have influenced the memory of civil rights activists, as the perspective of white women and African American women were not the same. In recent years, masculinity issues have found greater voice as activists and historians have paid more attention to threats that confronted African American males in other parts of the South.

The last section of essays are grouped around the theme of deploying memory, and it looks at how deaf culture and the Christian Right have compared their travails with that of the civil rights movement. These essays are written by R. A. R. Edwards and David John Marley. Sarah Vowell concludes these essays with a brief humorous look at how persons have compared their actions with that of Rosa Parks, while forgetting that Parks was more than acting on her convictions. She was breaking the law in a time and place where this entailed great personal risks. The essay on deaf culture points out that scholars have concluded that the student strike at Gallaudet University in 1988 not only forced its Board of Trustees to appoint a deaf president, but the protest also contributed to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Gallaudet’s students saw their actions as

similar to the students who staged sit-ins and other kinds of protest during the civil rights movement. However, public consciousness is still far from accepting the fact that the deaf or the disabled, in general, form a cultural minority group. Even among persons with disabilities, there is a wide gradation of opinion. Often hearing parents of deaf children are desperate to find a medical solution such as a cochlear implant, a response that negates the deaf as equal person to the hearing.

The Christian Right received political notoriety during the Reagan years, but Pat Robertson had no political success in running for president nor in its goals of ending abortions, restoring prayer in schools, and denying gay rights. These failures led some Christian Rights leaders to conclude that conservative, evangelical Christians are a despised minority group in America, as African Americans were in the South before the civil rights movement. They see the media and courts as particularly hostile to their values. Yet, such a comparison is problematic at best. Only a few leaders of the Christian Right, particularly Ralph Reed, openly courted African Americans and attempted to broaden the movement beyond its conservative, middle-class, white American base. Attempts by Randall Terry and Operation Rescue to use civil disobedience to protest abortions failed to gain public support because of killings and bombings by anti-abortion extremists.

With so many exciting essays, it is impossible to address all the issues raised by them. There is some redundancy in them, particularly regarding the focus upon Martin Luther King Jr. The mass media certainly does not

present the civil rights movement with much nuance and sophistication, but this is hardly surprising given the way television and most print journalism treat serious questions. There is no reason to believe that the civil rights movement fares less poorly than, for example, health care, the war in Iraq, or AIDS. Scholars themselves have probably focused disproportionately on the civil rights movement in the South and not enough on other sections of the country. Cultural aspects of the civil rights movement and how it continues to influence American society beyond African American/white relations needs greater study. None of the essays compare the memory of the earlier events of the civil rights movement and historical memory, such as memory and World War II or the Civil War. Another avenue of consideration is how the civil rights movement has been remembered outside of the United States.

Invariably in such a collection of essays, some of them will stimulate a reader more than others. The editors have done an admirable job of compiling essays from a variety of perspectives. Their introductions are brief and helpful, and there is a short bibliography at the end of the book as well as notes with each essay. Classes on historical methods, public history, contemporary America, and the civil rights movement would especially benefit from these essays, but historians will find uses for them in other classes as well. This is an excellent book and all the contributors, the press, and especially the editors deserve congratulations for bringing this work together. It is a labor well worth the time and energy that produced it.

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