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Patrick D. Jones. *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. Plates. 318 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-03135-7.

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Civil Rights Activism in Milwaukee

Over the past decade, a literature on the history of the northern civil rights movement has emerged. The major thrust of this literature has been to distinguish the northern drive from the more familiar southern movement, asking questions along these lines: to what extent were the two regional struggles for racial justice of one piece? To what extent were they informed by and influenced by one another? How did de facto and de jure segregation play out in each region, and what difference did those variations make to the social and political responses to racism?

Into this conversation steps Patrick D. Jones's *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*, a title reflecting the basic comparison implicit in recent scholarship. As the subtitle indicates, Jones focuses on Milwaukee, a city that has received only modest attention from historians of the twentieth-century urban North. Jack Dougherty's *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (2004) focuses exclusively on civil rights debates over the city's public schools; and John M. McCarthy's brand new *Making Milwaukee Mightier: Planning and the Politics of Growth* (2009) treats the growth of the city under the leadership of Milwaukee's mid-twentieth-century socialist regime.[1] For its part, *Selma of the North* concerns itself with the history of civil rights activism in Milwaukee after World War II. Jones's topical coverage coincides with the paths broken by prior scholarship on the northern struggle, stretching from campaigns against school segregation and for open housing and concluding with a march on the state capitol in 1969 by welfare activists.

Compared to other cities that were destinations during the first Great Migration, a relatively small African American population lived in Milwaukee before World War II.[2] As in other cities, Milwaukee's African Americans experienced discrimination in housing, employment, and educational opportunities. Episodic, politically moderate struggles marked the years before the 1960s. But a concerted campaign to overturn the segregation of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) began in 1962, when attorney Lloyd Barbee persuaded the Milwaukee National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to take action. Although Barbee's efforts began within the legal sphere, with the assistance of the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC), he soon branched out into more direct protests against the school board's segregationist practices. Most egregiously, the MPS board defied the essence of the 1954 *Brown* ruling with its practice of "intact busing," in which entire classes of students and teachers from overcrowded, African American schools rode buses to segregated rooms in white schools, returning to their home school for the lunch period. MUSIC's challenges to segregation included standing in front of the offending buses and organizing student boycotts of the schools.

Following his treatment of school segregation, Jones turns his attention to the evolution of the Milwaukee NAACP, which was pulled onto the streets for protests by members of its Youth Council (YC). The efforts of the YC, a subset of young men known as the "Commandos," and their spiritual and strategic advisor, the white Catholic priest James Groppi, occupy the majority of the book. The YC coordinated public protests against

a variety of aspects of segregation in Milwaukee, most notably the practices that kept private "white" housing closed to African Americans. For a period of two hundred days in 1967 and 1968, the Commandos led protest marches through Milwaukee, drawing national attention and sympathetic participants from other places. Jones lavishes attention on the Commandos and especially Father Groppi, dwelling not only on their goals but also on the internal dynamics and masculine culture of the group. He quotes extensively from his oral history interview with Margaret Rozga, a YC member who married Groppi after he left the priesthood in 1972. Jones's treatment of Groppi, who both served as the group's lightning rod as it attracted critical attention and also was always careful to explain that the young people were the group's decision makers, is bound to become the standard reference for anyone seeking biographical information about the priest.

Jones's approach to his topic is a straightforward narrative. He unfolds his story carefully, reserving detailed discussion of significant actors' biographies for separate chapters, so that readers will never be overwhelmed trying to sort out unfamiliar personalities. Jones points out in several places that the YC's protest marches drew national attention and that Groppi became a celebrity, but it is often difficult to place Milwaukee's story in relationship with other American cities. To mention just two examples, how did Milwaukee's school boycotts relate in time, inspiration, and effectiveness to those in Chicago? Were Milwaukee's open housing marches models for activists in other places? Although the spirit of historical scholarship about the northern civil rights movement is implicitly comparative, the default point of comparison here remains the South. More careful attention to the contours of the northern movement–such as that provided in Thomas J. Sugrue's recently published *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (2008)–would have helped readers unfamiliar with its story to understand the significance of local events.[3]

The most important analytic piece of *Selma of the North* is Jones's interpretation of movement activism in Milwaukee as an "insurgency." The narrative tracks the evolution of protest during the 1960s from the conservative, legalistic challenge to school segregation to the peaceful open housing marches (where white counter-demonstrators' actions tumbled over into mobbing) to the July 1967 riot in the African American section of the city. Although the Commandos were increasingly militant, they carved out a version of Black Power politics that was insurgent, but fell short of revolutionary. Jones is careful, for example, to draw a bright line between the activism of the Commandos and the actions of rioters. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the Commandos went out on the streets and worked to keep order. Alderwoman Vel Phillips is emblematic of the transformation toward insurgency that Jones details. The first woman and African American on Milwaukee's Common Council, Phillips repeatedly, between 1962 and 1967, offered up an open housing ordinance for consideration by her colleagues, only to see it voted down eighteen to one. Frustrated with her inability to create change through her political office, Phillips joined the Commandos' marches. Thus, the center of Jones's analysis is the internal dynamics of the movement, the debates between the old and young, the moderates and the militants, the traditionalists and the innovators.

By contrast, white Milwaukeeans come across as flat, unexplained, and homogenous in Jones's hands. Some clearly resisted desegregation of schools and integration of housing, but the sources of their racism and their means of organizing against the civil rights activists remain mysterious. Jones accounts for giving short shrift to this portion of the story by referencing a "relative lack of sources" and indicating that in the context of the twenty-first century, whites are reluctant to recount the shameful racism of their younger days (p. 234).[4] This is a point where use of secondary sources from other cities where the primary sources have been plumbed would have been enormously helpful. Although Milwaukee's African Americans developed a distinctive local style of action and leadership, what Jones calls "an alternative vision of Black Power that emanated from unique local circumstances," it is clear from other scholarship that whites around the United States formed their opinions about civil rights not only from local experiences but also from national ones (p. 212).[5] Despite this shortcoming, however, *Selma of the North* is a solid entry into the expanding bookshelf on civil rights activism in the North, offering what Jones rightly calls "another tile to the mosaic" of studies about the struggle for racial justice in the twentieth century (p. 6).

Notes

[1]. On the state of scholarship on Milwaukee history, see Margo Anderson and Victor Greene, eds., *Perspectives on Milwaukee's Past* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

[2]. On Milwaukee's early black population, see Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an In-*

dustrial Proletariat, 1915-45 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

[3]. Sugrue has indicated that he did not include Milwaukee in his book because he knew that the publication of Jones's book was imminent (Thomas J. Sugrue, comments in symposium, "The North as a Civil Rights Battleground: Debating Thomas Sugrue's *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*," The Newberry Library, Chicago, December 13, 2008).

[4]. Jones mentions the scholarship of Stephen M. Leahy as a "work in progress" that suggests that "white opposition ... came from every section of the city and from all classes" (p. 299n39). Leahy's published work on this topic, however, also explicitly argues that white support for and opposition to civil rights were both spread around the metropolitan region. See Stephen M. Leahy, "Polish American Reaction to Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1963 to 1965," *Polish American Studies* 63, no. 1 (2006): 35-56.

[5]. See, for example, Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and Amanda I. Seligman, *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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