

H-Net Reviews

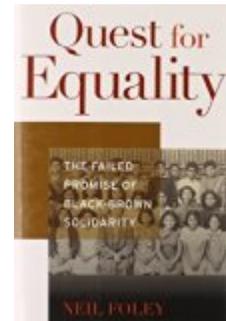
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Neil Foley. *Quest for Equality: The Failed Promise of Black-Brown Solidarity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. xiv + 223 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05023-5.

Reviewed by Steven Wilson

Published on H-Law (December, 2010)

Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep



Wilson on Foley

Any historical suspense that might have been generated by the major title *Quest for Equality*, Neil Foley immediately spoils with the subtitle “The Failed Promise of Black-Brown Solidarity.” Foley continues to telegraph his intentions in the introduction, by relating two news items from the recent past that support his theme. He takes us back to 2005, when then-Mexican president Vicente Fox suggested to Texas businessmen that: “Mexicans, filled with dignity, willingness and ability to work, are doing jobs that not even blacks want to do there in the United States” (p. 1). In the United States, Rev. Jesse Jackson decried the racial implications of the remark, and a spokesperson for the State Department criticized it as insensitive. Fox denied a racist intent, but still found it necessary to clarify and justify his remarks as deriving from a common saying in Mexico. Mexican officials touched off another cross-border controversy the very next month, when they unveiled a commemorative postage stamp of Memin Pinguin, a popular character from a comic book series first published in the 1940s. For African Americans, Memin Pinguin’s features, such as his clownish exaggerated lips, evoked painful caricatures. Once more, Mexicans had to defend their culture against criticism, and resented the need to do so, since they regarded themselves as rather less stained by historic racism than their northern neighbors.

In these early brief sketches, Foley depicts the chasm that continues to exist between black and brown peoples, but he does not delve much deeper into contemporary politics until his epilogue. Instead, by focusing

on events in the middle of the twentieth century, Foley reveals that this gulf has existed for a very long time and, moreover, that it has resisted bridging despite occasional attempts at cooperation. In each of his three main chapters, Foley spotlights an issue that seemed at one time to offer African Americans and Mexican Americans an opportunity for coordination or collaboration (that is, solidarity), but instead embodies the “failed promise” of his subtitle: first, the domestic implications of President Franklin Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor” diplomacy; next, the political struggles over federal fair employment rules; and, finally, the legal challenges to racial segregation. Foley features a large cast of some familiar characters, including African American labor leader A. Philip Randolph, alongside other players who should be more familiar than they are, such as Dr. Hector P. Garcia, the founder of the Mexican American veterans group, the American G. I. Forum. Each chapter is richly detailed and deeply researched, enabling Foley to illustrate the social, political, and legal (and diplomatic) complexity of each issue, and allowing him to give the major players and their arguments a fair hearing. Foley reminds us that, although both were minority groups that suffered discrimination by the majority, the black and brown experiences of racism were fundamentally different—being legally mandated and strictly enforced in the first case, but often customary and somewhat fluid in the second. The civil rights activists of each community developed different strategies to undermine or overcome the roots and rationale of the specific discrimination they faced.

In the first case study, Foley describes how black and brown leaders sought separately to leverage the “Good Neighbor” policy abroad into social progress for their own people at home. Mexican Americans argued, for example, that discrimination against the Mexican-descended in southwestern states threatened to poison relations with the closest neighbor of all. At the same time, Walter White, executive director of the NAACP, warned the Roosevelt administration that African-descended people in Latin America might prove very receptive to Axis claims that the United States denied basic rights to African American citizens. To Nelson Rockefeller, who had been given the task of courting Latin America, White predicted that any mixed-race, darker-skinned diplomats from the southern hemisphere would view the “Good Neighbor” policy in a dimmer light when they were personally confronted with Jim Crow’s daily humiliations, even in the U.S. capitol. Both groups sought to persuade the federal government that it was in the nation’s own best interests to end discriminatory practices. Unfortunately, these parallel but basically unconnected lobbying efforts had little lasting effect. Foley proposes that Latin American leaders wanted to avoid jeopardizing the corporate money upon which they relied, and so resisted the temptation to criticize the United States on its internal policies (what is more, they resented it deeply when the Yankees directed similar criticism at them). Then, after the outbreak of World War II, the NAACP learned that its hopes were based on the false premise that, in matters of race, Latin America was morally superior to the United States. Some countries sought to refuse shore leave to black sailors, and resisted the stationing of African American soldiers on their soil, justifying these actions in terms familiar to students of the eugenics movement. Mexican Americans’ lobbying also failed to influence domestic policy, with the possible exception that reports of abuse of Mexicans jeopardized the continuation of the “Bracero” program, the guest worker system that began as a war measure in 1943 but lasted into the 1960s. Yet, when the Mexican foreign minister temporarily blocked Texas from receiving its quota of contract workers, his concern was to defend Mexicans; he refrained from discussing the poor treatment of African Americans. This silence was the pattern on both sides of the border.

As Foley makes abundantly clear in his second chapter, rather than seeking common ground, Mexican American leaders were frequently at pains to distinguish their particular goals from the African American struggle. In part, this was a defensible choice, because the Mexican

American agenda was in fact distinguishable. Yet, unfortunately, there was more to it than that: Mexican American leaders accepted the immutability of America’s color line. Under Jim Crow statutes in effect in most southern states, race was a legal binary—a person was either black or white. Foley shows the California labor organizer Bert Corona, for example, testifying before the federal Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) about black and white relations, and notes that he was not asked about the problems of Mexican Americans. The explanation for this is that Mexican Americans were identified as white, they considered themselves to be white, and they resented being treated as poorly as blacks. This was expressed in stark terms by Carlos E. Castañeda, a professor of Latin American history at the University of Texas at Austin, who worked with the FEPC to promote Mexican American labor rights. Writing to complain about a segregated Texas union’s discrimination against Mexican American oil workers (among other indignities, they had to share a time clock with the black workers), Castañeda said: “Mexican employees should use the same facilities as other white employees; under Texas law they are white, and have a legal right to insist on not being classified as colored” (p. 69). This remark succinctly expresses the “other white” ideology that had seduced Mexican Americans (and, as Foley shows, this dogma held sway in Latin America, as well). The persistence of the “other white” idea largely explains why black-brown solidarity was unlikely to gel at mid century. A too close association with blacks in the public mind risked banishing Mexican Americans to the wrong side of the line.

The third chapter traces African Americans’ and Mexican Americans’ legal campaigns against discrimination, particularly segregated education. Elements of Foley’s account, such as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund’s path to victory in *Brown v. Board of Education*, will no doubt be familiar to many readers (more so than the earlier details of Good Neighbor diplomacy or the activities of the FEPC). Other aspects, such as the story of Mexican American litigation in Texas and California, occurred in parallel with the LDF’s fight, but are probably less well known, even to students of the civil rights movement. Gustavo “Gus” Garcia and John J. Herrera, two lawyers who feature in Foley’s narrative, are certainly less famous than Thurgood Marshall. Their 1954 victory in the Supreme Court case *Hernandez v. Texas* overturned a Mexican American’s conviction for murder by an all-Anglo jury (significantly, Garcia and Herrera had departed from the “other white” line of reasoning,

in order to argue that Mexican Americans constituted a distinct class in Texas). The *Hernandez* case is often overlooked, although (perhaps because) it was decided two weeks before *Brown*, and appears immediately before *Brown* in the Supreme Court's published opinions. Foley's major achievement with this book—and especially this chapter—is to weave together these histories so effectively, by reminding us that the black and brown actors in these legal dramas monitored the progress of each others' cases, sometimes exchanged amicus briefs, and considered coordination for mutual benefit. If Foley shows that the Mexican American and African American litigation campaigns ought to be considered together, however, he also provides ample evidence that divided councils hindered a more fruitful cooperation.

In 1948, for example, Marshall wrote to George I. Sánchez, a UT-Austin professor of education and one-time president of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), who acted as a consultant and courtroom witness in Mexican American civil rights cases. Marshall was then preparing a school case in Texas, and requested copies of the affidavits Gus Garcia had used in a recently successful case. Sánchez advised Marshall that the affidavits would not be very useful, since that case, known as *Delgado*, had not questioned segregation under the separate but equal doctrine, only the “pedagogical soundness” of presuming that Mexican American children did not speak English well enough to attend classes with Anglo children. That is, Garcia had argued (with Sánchez's expert assistance) that “white” Mexican American students were being illegally segregated from

“white” Anglo peers (p. 113). Marshall turned his attention to another Texas case, *Sweatt v. Painter*, which ultimately led to the desegregation of the UT law school and set the stage for *Brown*. As Foley shows, African American and Mexican American lawyers stayed in contact throughout this period, but they were often frustrated with one another, and rarely achieved anything that rose to the level of teamwork. It is also a frustrating tale to read.

As long as they were legally white, Mexican Americans held that their own position in society would be improved if only the existing race-based laws were enforced. By contrast, African Americans made constitutional arguments that the racist laws ought to be overturned. African Americans ultimately won their point with *Brown*, but Mexican Americans were undaunted by that sea change in constitutional law. Although “equal protection” arguments won the day in *Hernandez* (another reason the case deserves to be studied alongside *Brown*), that soon proved to be a brief detour, not a departure, from the more traditional “due process” defense of whiteness. Until Mexican Americans became legally, socially, or politically “brown,” a shift that did not occur until the late 1960s, they could not recognize—as can we who look back over fifty or more years of history—that they were, or ought to have been, fighting the same basic fight as African Americans. Although *Quest for Equality* tells a disappointing story of “failed promise,” it is a story that needs to be told, and Neil Foley tells it very well in this slim but satisfying volume.

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

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

Citation: Steven Wilson. Review of Foley, Neil, *Quest for Equality: The Failed Promise of Black-Brown Solidarity*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30430>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.