

# H-Net Reviews

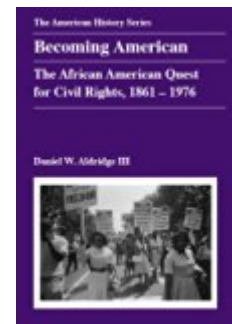
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel W. Aldridge. *Becoming American: The African American Quest for Civil Rights, 1861-1976*. Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 2011. xv + 381 pp. + 10 pp. of plates. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88295-280-2.

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## Civil Rights History without Context

In *Becoming American*, Daniel Aldridge writes a survey history that attempts a “thorough introduction to [African American] civil rights efforts” occurring between the years 1865 and 1976 (p. xiii). The book offers a lot of historical detail and introduces readers to some of the historians who have helped construct this narrative. Aldridge builds on the historiographic consensus that the African American struggle for civil rights has been a fight of long duration which began at least as early as 1865. However, he adds a questionable periodization caveat: the civil rights struggle, according to him, ended in 1976, and the problem of institutional racism that became evident in the years since represents another era of contestation different and separate from the earlier period. The year 1976 stands in symbolic significance for Aldridge because it was the bicentennial year, during which more black voters went to the polls than any previous year and furthermore supported a southern Democratic candidate for president.

The arbitrary nature of this end date, while seemingly insignificant, is less important than the confounding assertion that some unnamed historians—really a straw man argument—proffer the achievements of the mid-twentieth century as less significant than they were. I am not sure who Aldridge is referencing or exactly what significance is being understated or what that really means. The point, asserted but not developed, is never elaborated on and merely creates the veneer of an argument. As one would expect, such an argument is not very

convincing. It serves as cover for a fairly conventional survey history covering what the author deemed worthy of mentioning in the African American civil rights story between 1865 and the 1970s.

Aldridge too often relies on descriptions that lead to ambiguity and he misses the opportunity to engage some important historiographic debates. Terms like “underclass,” for example, are left unanalyzed. The author repeatedly uses it merely as a descriptive term indicating extreme impoverishment and one that embraces the simplistic negative model of Daniel Moynihan and others, ignoring the rich work of Adolph Reed, Stephen Steinberg, Michael Katz, Robin D. G. Kelley, Herbert Gans, and many others. Their analysis of this term and the scholarship reinforcing and orbiting it needed some engagement. Instead, Aldridge unknowingly pushes forward middle class values or, as Adolph Reed would assert, he slips into the ahistorical trap of applying late Victorian morality to a later historical context. The result is the sidestepping of critical issues, to the detriment of a deeper student understanding of politics, economics, and culture. The student misses out on the rich historiography that encompasses the contentious term “underclass” and thus the book loses the chance for an amazing teachable moment. It is questionable scholarship to assume the term is uncontested and poor teaching to not expose students to the complicated question of how class has operated in American history.

This treatment of the term “underclass” reveals an underlying current in *Becoming American*. Aldridge performs a not so strange marriage between American exceptionalism, modernization theory, the culture of poverty ideology, and free market ideology. We learn that the reason Booker T. Washington offered a better more pragmatic approach to the African American social-economic-political condition than other activists/intellectuals (W. E. B. DuBois, communists, nationalists, etc.) is because blacks suffered from “underdevelopment.” Yes, Aldridge uses this term repeatedly. It is a misadvised and loaded term used as a form of shorthand to sweepingly explain that African Americans had to rise up from the economic gutter that slavery and farm labor represented and endure the violence and oppression of racism. After working hard enough to survive and eschewing futile “protest politics” (a term never defined) during the era of Jim Crow, they gained the power to change the system: that is, get rid of de jure segregation and protect the right to vote (because the right to vote was extended in 1870 with the Fifteenth Amendment). Sure, courage, grassroots organization, timely leadership, intelligent use of the media, all played their part in the struggle. Somehow this compelling morality tale loses all resonance when it is tied to this framework of underdevelopment. Even if one accepts Aldridge’s model the reader will be disappointed: he never tells the history about how blacks did become developed, whatever that may mean. The narrative is filled with many gaps, leaving the reader confused about the coherence of the history.

Take, for instance, Aldridge’s embrace of the Washington approach to politics and the disapproval of “protest politics” that runs through the book. He all but ignores the trolley boycotts of the early twentieth century (briefly referencing it for the first time in chapter 6, “The Civil Rights Revolution Begins, 1955-1962,” p. 209, when it belonged in an earlier section) and he omits the Harlem “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” movement of the 1930s. Indeed, the North plays little part in his civil rights narrative. In any case, at what point did blacks gain the economic grounding that Washington argued they needed before they could engage politics? One imagines Aldridge would argue, consistent with a modernization theoretical arc, that a large enough black middle class emerged to guide the lower classes to freedom. African Americans remained the most impoverished group throughout the civil right years of the 1950s and 1960s, as they had been in the years before this period. What had changed between the period 1890-1930

and the subsequent years? Very little in regard to job opportunities, access to housing, and educational opportunities: one can easily slip into asinine debates if one sets such arbitrary stepping stones and measuring points of progress implicit in Washington’s logic.

Inequality and the structures that perpetuated these conditions remained a constant but the history of this important contextual framework is missing in the narrative flow of the book. African Americans miraculously one day finally succeeded in getting rid of the indignities of Jim Crow apartheid through the use of the courts and some timely direct action protest. Aldridge unfortunately ignores the nuanced histories of civil rights unionism offered by such scholars as Robert Korstad, Eric Arnesen, and Michael Honey. In that vein, the author could also have broadened the scope of the quest for civil rights to include other groups such as women or Mexican Americans, and demonstrated how the structure of U.S. market capitalism facilitated and helped determine exploitative labor relations and segmented labor markets. Surprisingly absent as well is the development story of how urban renewal and its expressions of power marginalized the poor. At every turn Aldridge seeks to flatten and simplify complex histories to fit a neat linear narrative.

In the end, *Becoming American* is a defensive text that attempts to minimize the efforts of a robust and diverse leftist political tradition. The categories of moderates versus radicals are too loosely and unevenly applied so as to distort historical context and complex historical processes. The philosophy of peaceful direct action is given short shrift; the book is silent on its connections to the social gospel, Christian socialism (A. J. Muste and Reinhold Niebuhr are surprisingly missing from its pages), or the labor movement sit-ins of the 1930s. The song “We Shall Overcome,” for instance, is discussed with no mention of its ties to the labor movement and specifically the southern tobacco workers strike of the 1940s. The logic of Aldridge’s source selection is unclear at times, to the point of being heavy-handed, and this reveals at least two frustrating tendencies in the book. First, he offers a fairly conventional narrative highlighting some of civil rights history’s events and legal victories and often does so with oversentimentality bordering on melodrama. Aldridge milks the injustices of Jim Crow and the amazing violent repressiveness that maintained it as a way to keep the reader’s attention. At times he nearly succeeds but these stories appear so randomly and disconnected that ultimately the retelling fails due to a lack of analytical rigor and the absence of historical context.

This highlights the second frustrating tendency in the book. Aldridge provides little comment on larger structural issues in areas such as social and cultural phenomena or political economy. The result is a history written in a vacuum; lines of causation are missing and larger historical context is absent. The reader is treated to collages of historical detail and brief narrative vignettes organized by chronology and divided into eight chapters (with subsections within them) and a conclusion. The book is sewn together with names, dates, and events sprinkled ever so often with decontextualized historiography or rather random reference to a historian that Aldridge usually disagrees with or cites as an authority. As one might expect with a book on African Americans and civil rights covering more than a century, the typical events and individuals are covered thinly and with several omissions, depending on one's particular interests. *Becoming American* struggles to keep the reader's attention and I suspect

students will largely dislike its textbook style. At the very least, instructors will spend half their time correcting the various issues that weaken the book.

One could select and analyze many more specific issues with the book, for instance, the mishandling of Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph or even the strange title, *Becoming American*. But this would extend an already lengthy review. Suffice it to say that the book needed greater revision and refinement. An opportunity was missed to write a compelling history of the exciting and moving African American quest for civil rights. Unfortunately, Aldridge's book falls short of his promise of writing "a critical and analytical study" (p. xii). In the end, what passes for historical analysis is, more often than not, simple assertion. If the book is intended for college students then instructors may want to hesitate before assigning a reading that often reinforces circular thinking and problematic historical methodology.

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