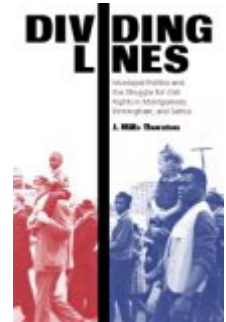


J. Mills Thornton, III. *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma.* Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2002. xi + 733 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8173-1170-4.



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For many years, historians have stressed the importance of grassroots protest in the civil rights movement. Thornton's *Dividing Lines*, though, takes the genre further. In the first place, Thornton focuses on the three cities where Martin Luther King made his name. By unraveling each local story in great detail, across much of the twentieth century, he makes a compelling case for the importance of studying the civil rights movement at the local level. Moreover, Thornton looks at the contest for power from many angles. This is not simply a study of grassroots activists in the context of each locality, but a detailed and thorough investigation of the contexts themselves. Consequently, this is a long book, but it is consistently thoughtful and thoroughly engaging.

What sets the book apart is that it calls for a reinterpretation of the movement as a whole. Thornton's starting point (rather than his conclusion, as in much of the literature) is that the movement was local, which leads him to the question, why did mass confrontational movements occur where and when they did? Or to put it another way (again to paraphrase Thornton), when

did enough African Americans in any given city believe that change was possible? From his study of these three cities, the answer lies in municipal politics, and more specifically, moments of municipal transition.

In each case, Thornton suggests that changing municipal politics, after years of seeming stability, meant that a change in the status of African Americans also suddenly seemed possible. Such moments of political change jolted the black leadership in each city into action, though not in the sense that black leaders simply started a long prepared protest. For example, Fred Shuttlesworth, the hero of the Birmingham movement, actually launched his protests in part because he feared being sidelined in favour of more conciliatory black leaders once a moderate white business leadership came to power.

Clearly there is much to be said for focusing on the actions of white leaders rather than simply looking for answers within the black community. Otherwise we are left in the bizarre position of ranking black communities across the South according to their place on a bravery or competence

scale, whereas the position in each city was rather more complicated. Municipal politics played an important factor again and again in the timing and nature of protest. In Baton Rouge, black leaders launched a bus boycott in 1953—but a swift compromise from the municipal government successfully defused the boycott, reopening divides in the city's black leadership in the process (which have not healed to this day). The intransigence of the Montgomery city council, by contrast, caused the boycott to escalate from a modest call for a pattern of segregated seating found elsewhere in Alabama to an all out demand for integration. Similarly, the seemingly confrontational approaches adopted by city leaders in Birmingham and Selma stood in contrast to the careful policy of limited concessions pursued by the municipal government in Atlanta which undermined local protest there.

No doubt some will criticize Thornton for privileging white politics over black agency. In fact, though, Thornton is attentive to the actions of black leaders. Far from relegating them, he actually notes the presence of far-sighted leaders in most communities, and the groundswell of discontent across the region. It was the very prevalence of such leadership and attitudes, he argues, which means that we need to look to other factors to understand why protest took different forms in different cities. Still, just as municipal politics varied from town to town, so too did the type of leadership and the strength of the African American community (though this in turn was of course influenced by the municipal context).

Thornton notes that his argument depends on each city being a separate unit. He puts forward compelling evidence that for all the connections between civil rights leaders across the South, most African Americans thought about their neighborhood or the local sheriff and mayor when they thought about Jim Crow. This is surely right. He concedes, though, that there were limits to this isolation. After all, this was a period of

mass communication and regular movement of people. The sit-ins which often triggered further protest in dozens of towns and cities were a direct case of copycat protests. In addition, time and again black leaders reflected upon and also acted in response to the experience of other local protests, not to say changes, across America and the rest of the world. Black leaders in Brunswick, Georgia, for example, forced municipal leaders to make concessions by playing on their fears of an outbreak of protest similar to that in Albany. No doubt the extent and nature of isolation, then, varied between cities. But Thornton makes a powerful case for the primacy of the locality in the course of protest in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma.

Thornton's argument concerning municipal political change seems entirely persuasive in the case of these three cities. Given the interpretative claims that he makes, though, of course it begs the question of its wider applicability. Obviously, it was beyond the scope of *Dividing Lines* to look in depth at other cities across the South—the impressive quality of the research into these three cities is testament to a project that began some twenty years ago. But it would be illuminating to have a comparison of other Southern cities. Is it really the case that most direct action protests (apart from those launched by SNCC) started because of municipal transitions? And when cities did not experience confrontational protest, did that result from continuity in the local political machine? One might imagine that with the rapidly changing economy and demographics of the post-World War II South, very many cities experienced changes in local politics during this period.

The search for the precise trigger for the moment of direct action in some towns need not be as narrow a question as it may appear. The rise of direct action had a long-term effect on the course of local race relations in each city, and the protests in Birmingham and Selma are famous for forcing national legislation. John F. Kennedy

claimed to be responding directly to Birmingham, and Lyndon Johnson was influenced by Selma. But a shift in focus from municipal politics to Congressional politics would, no doubt, reveal other factors that may explain the precise timing of such legislation. There had, after all, been increasing sympathy for black southerners for a number of years, reinforced by the spectacle of boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, and other protests. Rather, specific changes in allegiances and committee structures proved crucial to the timing of such legislation. Using Thornton's own call to attend to the minutiae of political development, then, the direct impact of Birmingham and Selma may ultimately have been local, just as its causes were.

More generally, though, Thornton's argument about the primary importance of municipal politics has many implications for how we understand racial conflict and the place of the civil rights movement in local and national politics. *Dividing Lines*, then, is a thought-provoking and wide-ranging study. The book is structured helpfully and sensibly. The introduction explains why Thornton chose to ask his questions and summarizes the reasoning behind his argument. The next three chapters fill in the detail for each city in turn. Having established his thesis, Thornton then explains why it should be no surprise that each city witnessed a continuing local struggle for power, though now through the ballot box. In his conclusion, he also reflects on King's role, the nature of protest and the future of the struggle for racial equality. Any reader who wants to understand the argument and its implications, therefore, can do so without reading the three main chapters. But the chapters on each of the cities are of such high quality that they are well worth taking the time to consider in depth.

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