

Leon F. Litwack. *How Free Is Free? The Long Death of Jim Crow.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. 187 pp. \$18.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-03152-4.



Reviewed by Christopher Schmidt

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In *How Free Is Free? The Long Death of Jim Crow*, Leon F. Litwack brings to print the Nathan I. Huggins lectures he delivered at Harvard in 2004. The book consists of three chapters, each centered on the black experience during a different period of American history. The first chapter begins with Reconstruction and moves through the early twentieth century, focusing on how black men and women understood and resisted racism's depraved depths during the high-water years of Jim Crow. The second chapter turns to World War II, a period marked by a combustible collision of African American optimism and the continued reality of life in segregated America. The most tightly focused of the three chapters, it offers a preview of Litwack's work-in-progress, "Pearl Harbor Blues: The Black South and Race Relations in World War II." The final chapter picks up with the late 1960s, when many black activists expressed a growing disillusionment with the mainstream civil rights movement, and then moves to more recent issues and events, including

rap music, the 9/11 attacks, and Hurricane Katrina.

This is a short book that covers a great deal of ground. In contrast to his earlier major works, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (1980) and *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (1998), here Litwack necessarily adopts an approach more impressionistic than comprehensive. His portrait of African American resilience and resistance over the past century and a half revolves around two basic historical claims. First, Litwack emphasizes that social and political rights are inadequate without economic rights. The civil rights achievements of the past century failed to truly respond to the damaging legacy of slavery and Jim Crow largely because they lacked a serious concern for economic justice. Second, he argues that white racism has been and continues to be the central obstacle to racial equality. This can be seen particularly in the unsteady commitment of the federal government to racial equality--Litwack identifies a recurrent pattern in which progressive reforms

are inevitably "compromised, deferred, and undone" (p. 4). The decades since the civil rights movement have seen racism become less flagrant, but also more insidious, more difficult to dislodge. These claims are the touchstone truths around which the book revolves, their validity assumed rather than rigorously demonstrated. (On a general level they are basically irrefutable, although Litwack's use of these arguments to explain specific historical events, particularly in the recent past, can be quite provocative.) Litwack's primary contribution in this book is in describing the ways in which African Americans have recognized and articulated these truths. He does so by drawing on a generous selection of excerpts from oral histories, fiction, poetry, and songs. This approach effectively recreates the mind-set and emotions of some of the most eloquent and insightful voices from the African American community, capturing their aspirations, their frustrations, and particularly their anger at racial inequality.

One of the most striking aspects of this book is the way Litwack allows his own voice to be subsumed by the words of his historical subjects. These words come not only from familiar sources (W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X), but also from those less known or often unknown voices that Litwack has so effectively drawn on in his previous books: sharecroppers, maids, laborers, servicemen, and anyone else whose words Litwack is able to resurrect. In conveying the language and tone of some of black America's most passionate and eloquent voices, the book pushes against the limitations of the genre of traditional historical scholarship. Litwack offers extended excerpts from novels, poems, songs, and oral histories, sometimes including just enough text to bridge from one excerpt to the next. Occasionally, he simply inserts, without introduction or identification (other than a footnote), some lines from a song or a section of poetry. The result is a distinctive mixture of historian and subject material. It is an engaging tour of

African American insight, eloquence, humor, and anger in the face of racial injustice.

If there is a single overarching theme to *How Free Is Free?* it is persistence: the persistence of white racism, the persistence of racial inequality, and the persistence of African Americans who refuse to accept racial injustice. "It is all very different. It is all very much the same," Litwack concludes at the end of the book. "In the early twenty-first century, it is a different America, and it is a familiar America" (p. 143). This emphasis on the continuities of the African American experience means that over the course of the book, the historical actors Litwack brings to the foreground sound strikingly alike. The whites who appear in this book tend toward the ignominious end of the spectrum of racial enlightenment, somewhere between openly racist and apathetic. And the African American voices that dominate the text return again and again to several basic themes: anger and frustration at the failure of white America to follow through on progressive ideals and policies, recognition of the intransigence of white racism, and an insistence on the limitations of civil rights without sufficient attention to economic inequality.

It is worth noting, however, that Litwack's characterization of African American sentiment at any particular point is based largely on his source selection. He relies on black voices that are almost without exception demanding, uncompromising, and often simply angry. (Blacks expressing their desire to kill whites is practically a motif of the book.) These views represent an important and sometimes underappreciated slice of African American thought, one that Litwack clearly admires for its insight into the pervasive injustices faced by blacks and its ability to powerfully capture black frustration with these injustices. But to extrapolate these statements into a broader generalization of African American attitudes can be misleading. His description of the effect of World War II on black veterans, for example, points in a

radical, even apocalyptic, direction: "Not only did blacks lose respect for whites, but those who had fought lost another quality which had been instilled in them over several centuries--namely, fear of whites" (p. 92). But is this attitude representative of the experiences of the thousands of black soldiers who served in World War II? Much African American activism in the years immediately following the war was notable for the way it combined civil rights militancy with patriotic fervor. Similarly, describing recent decades as a period of civil rights "rollback, backlash, and resentment," and of "growing despair" by black Americans captures an element of contemporary race relations, but hardly the complex whole (p. 138).

Yet Litwack's stated goal is not to describe the diversity of beliefs among African Americans or to diagnose the complexities of white racial attitudes. Rather, he envisions this book as a rebuttal to simplistic and ahistorical claims that the United States has moved beyond the shadow of slavery and Jim Crow and has entered some sort of color-blind or post-racial moment. *How Free is Free?* is best read as a historically informed work of cultural criticism with an explicit agenda. It is aimed at those who find "refuge and comfort in a highly selective memory that refused to acknowledge the experience of black people as part of the American heritage" (p. 6). "Most Americans," Litwack concludes, "reveal a continued blindness to crimes against humanity inflicted on other Americans, crimes condoned by the state and the courts" (p. 140). This book forces the reader to appreciate the harsh reality of these crimes as well as their damaging legacy, while also conveying the strength, the character, and most especially the eloquence of black America.

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