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Since the late 1970s, scholars and school textbooks have tended to periodize the modern civil rights movement from 1954 to 1968, an era bookended by the Brown v. Board of Education decision and Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination and characterized by the landmark legislation of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965).[1] Other scholars assert that earlier mobilization toward legal and legislative goals signal an older civil rights movement.[2] For that same time period, historians have expanded the scope of the civil rights movement, pushing its date of origin farther back in time and thus exploring the “long civil rights movement.” Scholars of the civil rights movement will certainly be interested in Victoria W. Wolcott’s Living in the Future: Utopianism and the Long Civil Rights Movement, as will labor historians and those who study utopianism and communalism.

Wolcott’s book continues the exploration of a US civil rights movement prior to the Brown decision. After a brief background exploring nineteenth-century utopianism, her work examines the early twentieth century to the 1970s, giving particular emphasis on the 1920s to the early 1960s. She highlights how workers’ education programs in the late 1910s and 1920s influenced civil rights unionism during the Great Depression and early 1940s, and because Wolcott makes links between utopianism prior to the 1950s and civil rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s, she moves topically through the decades, tracing different movements, leaders, and activists.

Besides outlining various cooperative, interracial, and pacifist strains of activism that occurred before the 1950s, Wolcott shows how seemingly disparate movements afoot in the first half of the twentieth century fed into the most recognizable features of civil rights activism in the 1960s. According to Wolcott, utopian thinking and intentional living on the part of interracialist socialists within the noncommunist Left in the 1920s and 1930s and radical pacifists in peace cells and on communes at midcentury significantly influenced the Black freedom struggle that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. This was despite the rise of
anticommunism in the early Cold War, which often obscures the link between utopianism and the civil rights movement. Beyond that, Wolcott argues for a geographical expansion of the civil rights movement outside of the Deep South. Failed attempts at civil rights unionism in the South prior to World War II and successfully executed non-violent direct action to desegregate public spaces in northern and western urban areas should, Wolcott contends, also be understood as shaping civil rights activism of the early 1960s by organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Wolcott focuses on activists who sought immediate change; they were united by three basic tenets: cooperative living, a commitment to interracialism (whether that be in living, religious worship, or activism), and a form of radical nonviolent direct action.

The book begins with early twentieth-century labor organizing. Workers’ education that came out of the Brookwood Labor School in upstate New York and the Highlander Folk School (Tennessee) taught intentional living in a social structure that embraced racial and gender equality; this world vision directly and profoundly shaped the long civil rights movement (p. 18). Brookwood and Highlander brought white socialists and Black organizers together, training major civil rights activists: Ella Baker, Pauli Murray, and future founders of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The second chapter details how worker education programs promoted cooperative living between white Christian socialists and Black Southern sharecroppers. When Black sharecroppers in Arkansas sought economic progress through the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, they encountered violent white resistance. Some fled and eventually founded the Delta Cooperative Farm in Mississippi. Many of the white socialists who frequented the workers’ education trainings also visited the cooperative farms in the South. Regardless of how long they existed, Wolcott highlights the influence that the cooperative farms and interracial philosophies had on major civil rights movement actions such as Freedom Summer in 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farm, and John Lewis’s work running cooperatives for the Southern Regional Council’s Community Organizing Project. There were direct lines from the 1930s cooperative organizing to projects of the more familiar civil rights movement. While religious scholars and biographers have studied Father Divine and the Divinites, Wolcott uses her middle chapter to establish Father Divine and his followers as Depression-era evidence of utopian practice with civil rights goals. Father Divine’s brand of utopianism was significant because it had the same goals as many of the tangible achievements of the civil rights movement: legal support of the Scottsboro Boys, antilynching legislation, nonviolent direct action for desegregation of public spaces. In the penultimate chapter, Wolcott emphasizes the western edge of the long civil rights movement by discussing Howard Thurman’s Fellowship Church in San Francisco and his work with white Quaker activist Marjorie Penney. The final chapter focuses on radical pacifist activism and the training of civil rights workers, in particular CORE, in radical nonviolent direct-action techniques. Indeed, Wolcott effectively demonstrates the significance of training and workshops by threading that element of utopianism throughout the book. The revolutionary idealism of utopian thought in the 1920s to the early 1950s animated important civil rights activists who went on to shape civil rights organizing in the 1960s.

Wolcott argues that religious histories, peace studies, biographies, and civil rights histories that examine the 1930s-1950s have been too isolated in their investigations and thus failed to see the connections between radical pacifism, interracial utopianism, and civil rights activism that her study illuminates. She untangles the ideologies of activists at the intersections of labor organizing, civil rights, and the radical peace movement. Wolcott effectively pulls previously siloed fields of study together by consulting an array of primary sources, researching in archives that house the re-
cords of the labor movement, Black culture, and both urban and rural histories. This allows her to track activists, ideologies, and utopian praxis across movements and in different geographies. This is especially effective in her discussion of rural training facilities within labor activism such as Brookwood Labor College and the Highlander Folk School, the latter of which Rosa Parks was active in prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Wolcott's nuanced explanation of the differences between urban utopian religious movements, like Father Divine and interracial living in the Delta Cooperative Farm in Mississippi, is well presented and she illustrates that both became models for civil rights organizing in their own ways. Wolcott also utilizes more recent secondary sources to show how activists connected utopianism to civil rights. A handful of biographical works about Pauli Murray, published within the last five years, supported Wolcott's contention that Murray's training and activism in the 1930s and 1940s bound Brookwood's labor training to the cooperative living of the Divinites, and to the civil rights direct action of the CORE.[3] Overall, Wolcott's juxtaposition of labor and religious histories with well-known civil rights activists such as Bayard Rustin, James Farmer, and those previously mentioned will encourage historians in all these fields to be in more direct conversation with one another. As Living in the Future proves, utopianism had a major impact on the civil rights movement because activists had learned from and trained each other for decades before the 1950s.

Notes


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