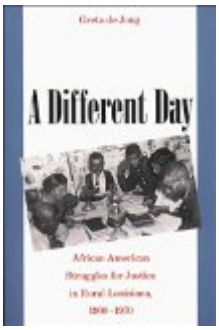
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Greta de Jong. *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xvi + 316 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2711-6.



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Published on H-South (April, 2003)

A Not-So-Different Day in Louisiana

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Greta de Jong's most important contribution is to show that rural blacks did not "join" a civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s but instead embodied such a movement decades before national attention discovered them and their struggle. The work's other main contributions are in showing the connection between the Southern struggle for black rights and labor and the old left as well as re-emphasizing the role of armed self-defense in the story of rural twentieth-century African Americans. De Jong's work illustrates, again, that the history of the struggle for racial equality in the United States is not one of ascent from the bad old days of Jim Crow to a victorious present. Instead, de Jong chronicles tenuous achievements, defeats, and ambiguous outcomes along with a few hard-won triumphs. Her conclusions are gloomy. Rural Louisiana remains a place of little opportunity for black equality in the twenty-first century.

De Jong chooses two distinct regions within rural Louisiana typified by nine parishes located in the northern cotton country and in the southeastern sugar-producing region of the state. The nine parishes fall within a set of seventeen parishes selected for voter registration work by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in the 1960s. While energetically recounting the dramatic 1960s in the final chapter, the rest of the work convincingly portrays a people who, over the decades since emancipation, had not been "waiting passively for CORE" (p. 6). The title modestly frames the period as 1900-1970 although her narrative begins earlier and extends later than those dates. She covers an array of features of black rural life from the overtly political to "infrapolitics." "Infrapolitics," she writes, "refer[s] to those actions short of organized open protest, that suggest an awareness of the sources of oppression and were aimed at circumventing white supremacists' attempts to keep African Americans powerless and poor."[1]

Based on de Jong's 1999 Penn State dissertation, *A Different Day* evidences thorough research in period newspapers, relevant government documents, collections of personal and institutional

papers, and oral interviews with movement participants. De Jong writes well and with a clarity that also contains a bit of passion. She is unperturbed to find Communists and Socialists working in the struggle up through the early 1950s before CIO purges removed the more obvious Reds from labor-organizing efforts. She thereby re-establishes the historical connection between the old, old left and the Southern civil rights movement. She also accurately establishes the role of class in the rural freedom movement, identifying a cadre of economically independent black plain folk (small landowning farmers or the self-employed) who led the movement when traditional rural black leaders (preachers and teachers) could not or would not lead. She further uses class analysis to explain both the rigidity of plantation-owners' suppression of blacks for labor control purposes and the relaxation of those bonds due to, in part, mechanization of the cotton and sugar economies.

The work is arranged chronologically into chapters, each with a strong theme. The author covers the era from emancipation to the 1970s and includes an epilogue with commentary over the last two decades of the twentieth century. De Jong places her work at the intersection of the historiography of the Southern Civil Rights movement, working class and peasant "resistance" studies, and those works examining the transformation of the South resulting from the New Deal and World War II. Of the civil rights histories, she fits most obviously with those recent studies emphasizing the role of "local people."[2] The local details and fresh interpretations will make this a valuable work for specialists in any of the three fields mentioned above as well as Louisiana history and it is well written enough to be enjoyed by advanced undergraduates.

With the planters and other influential employers firmly in control by the late 1890s, rural Louisiana blacks paid the price under a rigid system of agricultural labor control in sugar, lumber, and cotton production. Cotton landlords favored sharecropping and tenancy while sugar plantation owners and lumber companies preferred wage labor of a sort. De Jong reports that in each of the three main sectors of Louisiana's rural economy, employers used indebtedness, corrupt and racist law enforcement, violence, and systematic barriers to education to control black mobility in a successful effort to keep labor cheap.[3]

In spite of poverty and white oppression, rural African Americans in Louisiana found ways to fight back even during Jim Crow's most bleak years. De Jong believes that the twentieth-century civil rights movement could not have occurred if not for the earlier rural "infrapolitics" of resistance. The author analyzes nearly a dozen practices or behaviors that might appear unremarkable on the surface but which doubled, she argues, as subtle forms of resistance to white oppression. For example, music served both as cultural and emotional sustenance and as occasional reproach against the system. Further, for the fortunate few, performance of such music brought economic freedom from white control. De Jong believes that leaving the plantation for other forms of work or simply for another plantation can be seen as resistance. The unauthorized use of plantation resources to benefit workers--or simply stealing from employers--is another such behavior, according to the author. Blacks who put forth the prodigious effort necessary to acquire education or landownership were resisting white supremacy (a point borne out in the next generation when only landowners could afford to push for equality in rural Louisiana). Such social behaviors as building churches and lodges and practicing mutual assistance can be seen through the lens of infrapolitics as resistance to oppression. In fact, de Jong finds that African American lodges and fraternal groups acted as stealth political organizations whose self-help aims subverted a social order bent on keeping blacks powerless (p. 56).

De Jong readily acknowledges that "infrapolitical" behaviors might well have been motivated by

the desire for survival or a number of other factors besides the desire to engage in resistance. But, she argues, such actions intrinsically embodied dual meanings in the pressure cooker of rural Louisiana's white supremacist environment. That same environment produced the need for armed self-defense. From the late nineteenth century forward, de Jong finds among some rural black Louisianans a determination to not be victimized by the everyday acts of terrorism characteristic of the time and place. These individuals (almost never groups until the 1960s) proposed to defend themselves and their families at all costs, a tendency most prevalent and successful among black landowners. De Jong does a good job of placing armed self-defense back into its context in the history of the rural Southern freedom struggle. Armed self-defense, far from being a fringe position, only made good sense to Louisiana's rural blacks. It also carried the endorsement of such influential figures as W. E. B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. "African Americans only had to shoot back occasionally to influence white people's actions," de Jong observes with just a touch of bravada (p. 60).

World War I wrought significant changes, mostly short-term, for African Americans in Louisiana's rural parishes. Rural black men volunteered for and were drafted into the armed forces in large numbers. During the years building up to the war and the war years themselves, the number of chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) grew rapidly in Louisiana, especially in the two principal cities of New Orleans and Baton Rouge, but in the countryside, too. The vast majority of these chapters would not endure past the early 1920s due to postwar repression and a return to the chronic state of agricultural depression.

The World War I years in Louisiana witnessed a number of acts of violence against black soldiers and labor repression against black workers as whites struggled to enforce the cultural and economic order in the face of social change. Local Louisiana rural draft boards--run by the most powerful planters--enthusiastically used the federal "work or fight" decree to further assert themselves over black labor, nearly to 1865 Black Code levels of control. This would have created greater suffering yet for black Louisianans had it not been for the possibility of heading north for newly available industrial employment. The "Great Migration" swept some rural African Americans out of their parishes to New Orleans or Northern cities. In an interesting interpretive contribution, de Jong sees this mass movement of people as a continuation of the pattern of resistance by moving that had marked plantation life since emancipation. Migration achieved social change for the individual much faster and more surely than he or she could hope to achieve through decades of resistance and protest in Louisiana. Further, local black leaders tacitly endorsed migration hoping that it would improve conditions for those who stayed behind.

Indeed it did. As labor scarcity reached noticeable levels, employers began to pay lip service to improvements in treatment for black sharecroppers, cane cutters, and timber workers. A few black Agricultural Extension Service agents were hired in some parishes, although they remained controlled by the local boards that paid them. After the wartime labor shortage diminished, racial repression surged upward again as whites fought to regain their previous sense of entitlement. Planters saw black Agricultural Extension agents as threats to the social order and had them fired. Planters and lumbermen used the postwar Red Scare and the economic hardships of the 1920s to attack black labor everywhere, especially timber workers attempting to unionize.

The arrival of the Great Depression brought even more hardship before the arrival of modest federal intervention. The New Deal, de Jong believes, did spark some social and economic reforms for black Louisianans, but such reforms were eventually pushed back by local elites who came to control the implementation of New Deal

relief and reform efforts. The impact of the New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Administration on black sharecroppers (eviction or demotion to day laborers) resulted in rural disgust and leftist outrage and thus to the formation of overt protest groups such as the Louisiana Farmers' Union. The LFU remained a militant, biracial organization representing the interests of Louisiana's rural poor for the rest of the 1930s. Cotton planters still evicted many tenants and fraudulently withheld most sharecroppers' AAA checks, but the LFU did win a few victories in such cases.

The union was even more successful in gaining concessions for sugarcane workers by participating in hearings held by the Department of Agriculture to determine minimum wages and other working conditions for the industry. Federal regulation of hours and wages aided their cause considerably, assistance that was missing from the sharecropper's economy. The LFU did, however, make a few modest gains in cotton country including more widespread use of written tenants' contracts, improved black school facilities in some locales, and limited gains for black farmers' voices in the local implementation of federal farm policies. By 1940 the planters had recovered and prepared to roll back the LFU's minor gains. Planters used the tried and true method of economic retaliation, their control of local police power, and simple terrorism to break up the union. The LFU's leadership had advocated armed self-defense but, unfortunately for the rural poor, when it came to the weapons of economic retaliation, they were completely unarmed. The same was true for effective national political power of which planters possessed a disproportionate share.

Of course World War II calls for loyalty and shared sacrifice met with "suspicion and mistrust" among rural Louisiana blacks (p. 117). Still, many black men and women volunteered for service or were drafted into the United States's armed forces during the first half of the 1940s. Other rural black Louisianans went into various urban occupations for the first time, many related to the war effort. For such civilian workers and military personnel positive results included training for skilled occupations, mobility, and immediately higher wages. Even for those remaining on cotton and sugar plantations, conditions and/or wages sometimes improved. With higher wages and more African Americans free of planters' dominance, the World War II years also saw an increase in overt civil rights activism.

De Jong shows a rural black community keenly aware of the government's use of "freedom" and "democracy" as the watchwords of domestic war propaganda, and, accordingly seized upon those two heavily loaded words for leverage. Here, perhaps, the author might have included some concrete examples of how and when rural black Louisianans encountered such propaganda. Nevertheless, she supplies results: rural black teachers agitated for pay raises and the NAACP grew in numbers and rural chapters as a result of the newly emboldening atmosphere. The March on Washington Movement and the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) in 1941 further encouraged and excited black hopes for opportunity in Louisiana's new defense plants. The FEPC lent only modest assistance in overcoming entrenched white resistance (companies' and workers') to African American access to skilled jobs in the defense factories.

Between the pull of new factories and the armed forces, planters faced what they believed to be a genuine labor shortage. Of course, they resorted to the usual draconian methods in order to control their rural labor supply. Planters' long-term solution--over the next twenty years--was to replace people with tractors and mechanical harvesters, a process encouraged by New Deal farm subsidies and accelerated during World War II. Further, acts of violence against newly arrived black workers increased in the cities. Most ironic, African American soldiers in uniform began to encounter increased violence from whites who per-

ceived them as an affront to the old order. But, de Jong believes that in spite of setbacks, the World War II era had a positive, near-transformative, impact on rural Louisiana's African Americans because it loosened the bonds of planter control over so many blacks' lives.

Turning aside the critics of the "World War II-as-turning-point" thesis, the author believes that the role of this economic transformation "has not been emphasized enough" (p. 145). Black World War II veterans played a pivotal role in leading the local freedom movement, and labor scarcity had forced plantation mechanization, freeing even more rural blacks from planters' social control. More blacks achieved higher education through the GI Bill of Rights. Further, with the continued growth of Louisiana's petroleum and chemical industries and the addition of food-processing plants and paper mills, employment alternatives existed to the planter-dominated countryside. Of course, these industries' owners, too, could see the benefit of a racially divided working class. But, while white supremacy continued, black independence grew during the 1950s. Most importantly, these increasingly independent, educated rural black Louisianans had achieved their level of success without planter patronage or control. The NAACP grew apace after World War II as did local voters' leagues and other civil rights groups.

After World War II rural blacks quietly took on the infrastructure of white supremacy by working for better schools, better school facilities, equal pay for black teachers, voting rights, and higher wages. Such efforts typically met stiff resistance on the local level. Local white elites still used the old methods against blacks seeking to vote: economic retaliation, intimidation by voting registrars, and, again, violence. Black teachers were fired; however, when brave plaintiffs could be found, federal courts increasingly ruled in their favor. Rural blacks also forged a short alliance with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the paper mills and other processing plants before a barrage of Red baiting and state legislation rolled back minor gains. The American Farm Bureau's Louisiana representatives led the charge for "right-to-work" laws gutting the CIO's effectiveness in Louisiana and in other Southern states. An onslaught of race baiting and Red baiting followed as the "former Right-to-Work Councils provided the basis for the formation of white supremacist groups like the White Citizens' Councils, the Southern Gentlemen and the Ku Klux Klan" (p. 167).

De Jong chides civil rights groups and the CIO in Louisiana for purging Communists and ex-Communists from their midst, but it is difficult to imagine such groups behaving in any other manner while under constant attack from the state government, local business interests, the Citizens' Councils, and the Klan. While the state government launched a withering attack on the NAACP under the guise of the second Red Scare, local officials took the opportunity in the late 1950s to undo most of the gains made in voting rights earlier in the decade.

Whites grew more touchy following the 1954 *Brown* decision. Southern politicians increased the noise level with dire predictions and ironclad promises regarding segregation. The Klan grew. So did the determination of rural black Louisianans to protect their homes and families. World War II and Korean War veterans were not only more likely to be economically free of white control, but, de Jong believes, they were also more likely to subscribe to the notion of armed self-defense. For most, this was not a new idea; indeed, for Louisiana's African American farmers and their sons, "owning firearms had been a normal part of rural life throughout the twentieth century" (p. 170).

During the tense 1950s black civil rights activists in Louisiana learned a powerful lesson about the interplay of race and class. The fragile black-white CIO coalition had been broken through charges of communism. And, although de Jong herself does not emphasize this, the white working class had proven an unreliable partner at best.

Striving for respectable status, black activists knew the one way to avoid charges of extremism was to never talk about "the class inequalities that lay at the base of the white supremacist social order" (p. 174). In order to prosper in the short term, the black freedom struggle in Louisiana (and America) had to avoid the issue of class.

Armed with a Southern Regional Council Voter Education Project grant in 1962, young volunteers with the Congress of Racial Equality poured into Louisiana's rural parishes--in the words of one such volunteer--to "provide leadership and an example" (p. 175). By 1965, however, many CORE volunteers would be looking to local veteran activists for not only leadership but also protection. In her final chapter, de Jong adds significantly to our understanding of the civil rights "movement years" by concentrating on a few rural parishes in Louisiana. CORE volunteers found the local black elite unreceptive to their calls for direct action, in this case attempting to register to vote. The teachers feared losing their jobs and, according to de Jong, preachers undermined CORE's efforts from the pulpit. Where others have found the African American church central to the struggle for equality, de Jong finds it to be peripheral at best and obstructionist at worst. Louisiana's black believers were divided more noticeably than elsewhere in the South due to a sizable black Catholic community. De Jong notes that Protestants were more likely to protest than the white-pastored Catholics, but even among black-led Protestants, she believes "limited training and a tendency to avoid challenging the social order made most rural preachers ineffective community leaders" (p. 54).

The voting rights movement in rural Louisiana, then, eventually relied upon an old source of strength as well as a new one. Landowning black plain folk once more provided the backbone and, in some cases, the shotguns that kept the CORE project in business. A "new" group--also independent of white control--of the unemployed, the elderly, and high school students flocked to CORE's colors. One field volunteer wrote that when local leaders failed to lead "the poor, farmers, the unemployed and young people led the struggle" (p. 181). Local white elites met the voting rights movement in rural Louisiana with much the same tactics employed since emancipation: economic reprisals (increasingly ineffective), intimidation, and violence. Could the CORE volunteers and their Voting Education Project have survived in rural Louisiana relying solely on soul force? We will never know because both the locals and the CORE volunteers decided not to find out. Responding to a KKK killing in 1965, a group of Jonesboro veterans and others formed the Deacons for Defense and Justice. They provided armed guards to CORE volunteers, stood guard at CORE meetings, and "patrolled black neighborhoods at night to deter the Klan" (p. 187). The national office of CORE disapproved but the volunteers had begun to trust rural black Louisianans in such matters. One CORE volunteer wrote, "let me tell you those 15-20 shotguns guarding our meetings are very reassuring" (p. 193). The Deacons and groups like them spread. De Jong writes bluntly "where African Americans showed their willingness to defend themselves, violence seems to have diminished" (p. 193).

Rural African American poor people in Louisiana had a different agenda from their middle-class saviors. CORE volunteers discovered that rural blacks evinced less interest in integration of public facilities than in voting rights, jobs, and equal education. CORE volunteers also noted with surprise the class divisions within the black community. Rural African Americans looked on in disgust as local white elites co-opted Great Society "War on Poverty" programs in much the same manner as they had taken over New Deal programs thirty years earlier, this time with the cooperation of newly energized local black "leaders."

Perhaps *A Different Day* is too optimistic a title for this work, although de Jong finds some triumphs in the 1960s movement. More blacks succeeded in voting than ever before, more blacks felt

safe from white violence than ever, a small biracial farm cooperative began, and rural blacks made some inroads into the former white preserve of office-holding. But she remains wary of declaring victory. She believes a black elite reaped the rewards of a poor people's movement. In the long run, "failure to redistribute economic power left some of the most important causes of inequality untouched" (p. 207). But clearly the author sees great courage and even some triumph in her story of surviving poverty and containing white supremacy in rural Louisiana.

Notes

[1]. "Infrapolitics," a term coined by James C. Scott in his studies of peasant resistance, covered a range of activities from individual acts of violent self-defense to "institution building." While obviously influenced by Scott, de Jong carefully discusses the potential pitfalls of over reliance on this analysis. James C. Scott, ***The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), ***Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), ***Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); de Jong, p. 7.

[2]. John Dittmer, ***Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*** (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Charles M. Payne, ***I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[3]. Her rural Louisiana bears little resemblance to the "largely free market for labor" found in the New South by J. William Harris. Harris finds peonage only in "occasional egregious cases" resulting "not from the normal operation of the law, but from its perversion and corruption." De Jong finds peonage commonplace and "perversion and corruption" to be the "normal operation" of the law. J. William Harris, "The Question of Peonage in the History of the New South," in Samuel C. Hyde, Jr., ed., ***Plain Folk of the South Revisited*** (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1997), pp. 116-119.

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Citation: Kyle Wilkison. Review of de Jong, Greta. *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970.* H-South, H-Net Reviews. April, 2003.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7423