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Review Article

Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement

STEVEN F. LAWSON

While the United States tilted in the direction of political conservatism during the past decade, the history of the civil rights movement gained in popular appeal. Martin Luther King's birthday became a national holiday. Hollywood fictionalized the events surrounding the Mississippi Freedom Summer, drawing millions of customers to the box office. The multipart documentary series, *Eyes on the Prize, I and II*, portrayed this history much more accurately and won numerous awards and wide acclaim.\(^1\) Much of this interest can be attributed to the regular cycles of nostalgia that prompt Americans to recall the historical era of their youth. In this instance, memories dredged up turbulent and unsettling times, yet they also harked back to inspirational moments when ordinary people exhibited extraordinary courage. Images of civil rights heroes and heroines making great sacrifices to transform their country and their lives contrasted sharply with the prevailing Reagan-era mentality that glorified the attainment of personal wealth and ignored community health. Returning to civil rights yesteryears made many Americans feel better about themselves and what they might accomplish once again in the future.

This recent popular curiosity about the subject follows on a longer professional concern with charting the course of the civil rights struggle. Scholars who began writing about the movement in the late 1960s and 1970s focused on leaders and events of national significance. They conceived of the civil rights struggle as primarily a political movement that secured legislative and judicial triumphs. The techniques of social history, which were beginning to reconstruct the fields of women's, labor, and African-American history by illuminating the everyday lives of ordinary people, at first left the study of civil rights virtually untouched. Civil rights historians were not oblivious to these new approaches, but the most accessible evidence generally steered them in traditional directions. The documentary sources on which historians customarily drew, located in the archives of presidential administrations and leading civil rights organizations, revealed a political story that highlighted events in Washington, D.C.\(^2\) Even the oral histories contained in

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these depositories, which could have remedied the political and institutional bias in written sources by uncovering the activities of common people at the community level, concentrated instead on civil rights leaders who gained some measure of national prominence.3

A second generation of scholars, writing in the late 1970s and 1980s, sought to reshape civil rights historiography. They questioned whether the civil rights movement could be properly understood as a coalition of national organizations pressuring Washington to correct racial injustices. They suggested that the focal point for investigation should shift to local communities and grass-roots organizations. King and the other well-known players would not disappear from view, but they would take a back seat to women and men who initiated protests in small towns and cities across the South and who acted according to their own needs rather than those of central organizations headquartered in New York, Washington, or Atlanta. Given this reconfiguration of the struggle, the concept of a civil rights movement itself came under scrutiny. Once scholars moved beyond the notion of a protest "orchestrated by national leaders in order to achieve national civil rights legislation" and focused increased attention on grass-roots efforts, Clayborne Carson argued, "black freedom struggle" more fully captured the object of study. More than a matter of semantics, this alternative expression signified that protest activities were not narrowly aimed at obtaining legal victories from the federal government but sprang out of waves of liberationist struggles in black communities. Nothing less was at stake in these battles, Carson asserted, than "to create new social identities for participants and for all Afro-Americans."4

In recent years, many researchers have begun pursuing a more interactive model, recognizing the need to connect the local with the national, the social with the political. They are attempting as well to expand these analyses by examining both external influences on the national political struggle, including nongovernmental institutions, such as the media and liberal philanthropic foundations, and the internal dynamics of local movements, including relations between the sexes and the races. In addition, scholars are beginning to reexamine the ideological roots of the freedom struggle, exploring the legal, theological, and political legacies left by leaders and organizations of the 1930s and 1940s. Only by emphasizing the element of struggle—between national institutions and local activists, moderates and radicals, whites and blacks, women and men, predecessors and contemporaries—can we fashion more complete syntheses of the civil rights movement.5

The reworkings of civil rights historiography up to the mid-1980s are well illustrated in the eighteen-volume series edited by David J. Garrow. Martin Luther

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- Vols. 1–3. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, Orator.*
- Vol. 12. *At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King.*

*King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement* contains a gold mine of both classic and not-so-familiar works on the black freedom struggle. The works range over four decades from the 1950s to the 1980s, with most originating in the last twenty years. Included are published articles, many from journals little used by historians; unpublished doctoral dissertations and master's theses; undergraduate honors essays; and a state investigative agency report. An eclectic series, its contents are spread over the disciplines of history, sociology, political science, journalism, religion, and law. Those familiar with Garrow's own comprehensive trilogy on King will not be surprised by the author's efforts to identify and make readily available many scarcely known but informative sources; indeed, it feels as though the reader

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6 The volumes in this collection have different titles. Hereafter, the series will be cited as Garrow Series (GS).
is taking a peek into the personal files Garrow used to compile his various works on King.

The collection consists of four volumes on King, three on various aspects of the civil rights movement, six on local communities, two on the sit-ins, two on predominantly white groups that actively supported civil rights, and one on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Three of the King volumes and the three concerning the movement as a whole mostly reproduce previously published essays in facsimile form. The contents of the remaining volumes have been reset for publication in this series. Eleven of the total consist of collections of sundry items, whereas seven are monographs. Each volume (or set of companion volumes) contains its own index, a very handy guide for a reference work so large.

The material gathered here illuminates the main historiographical themes. Many of the selections, especially the theses and dissertations, furnish observations based on oral histories with local blacks whose contributions have previously received little documentation. As might be expected in a project of this type, some of the essays are redundant, some outdated, and some deservedly overlooked. Fortunately, these are held to a minimum. Garrow briefly introduces each of the volumes and places them in context. Three of the works, those on Montgomery, Birmingham, and St. Augustine, provide insightful introductions by J. Mills Thornton, William D. Barnard, and David R. Colburn, respectively. The dissertations contain updated prefaces by their authors. Of this category, the most deserving of publication by virtue of their style and freshness of interpretation are by Joan Turner Beifuss (the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike), Irwin Klibaner (Southern Conference Education Fund), Emily Stoper (SNCC), and Ira G. Zepp, Jr. (King’s philosophical roots). Experts in the field may offer substitutions and additions, but overall, the series editor has made justifiable selections that should stimulate further research and writing. For this, scholars and libraries will be appreciative.

Yet the reader must be wary of the ways that this collection, built as it is on past scholarship, reinforces rather than challenges mainstream themes. Those engaged in key debates for the 1990s, which entail questions of chronology, ideology, community dynamics, gender relations, and leadership, will find sporadic rather than thematic help here. The theological roots of King’s philosophy, for instance, are explored in depth, but the ideological roots of black liberation are barely noted. Beifuss’s study of the Memphis sanitation strike in 1968 and the volume on the open housing demonstrations in Chicago during 1966 suggest the intertwining of economic and political agendas in the civil rights struggle, but few of the other works collected here explore this theme. Students of women’s role in the movement

7 Although they contain useful information and firsthand accounts, James H. Laue, Direct Action and Desegregation, 1960–1962 (GS 15), and Martin Oppenheimer, The Sit-In Movement of 1960 (GS 16), both written in the early 1960s, read more like the sociological dissertations they are than polished works of history. Joan Turner Beifuss, At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King, was originally self-published by the author in 1985 but did not receive a wide circulation. Aimee Isgrig Horton’s study of the Highlander Folk School, originally written in 1971, has been supplanted by John M. Glen, Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932–1962 (Lexington, Ky., 1988).

8 For a comprehensive bibliography, see Clayborne Carson, A Guide to Research on Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Modern Black Freedom Struggle (Stanford, Calif., 1989).

or of labor and communist legacies from the 1930s and 1940s will not find many previously hidden gems here. Still, a close reading of these volumes offers more than a trip down memory lane for scholars in the field. By detailing the roads already taken, they can illuminate possible paths toward a new framework for civil rights historiography.

Even Garrow's continued fascination with King, reflected in the title as well as the contents of his collection, inspires some new approaches to the man and the movement. At a time when the nation has apotheosized the Reverend King alongside other revered heroes honored with national holidays, scholars have sought to measure the man and not the icon. The King who emerges from public celebrations is a perennial dreamer, frozen in time at his most famous address during the 1963 March on Washington. Most Americans choose to celebrate and remember King's call for nonviolent, interracial cooperation in the face of festering racial injustices. What has been lost in this popular adulation is the recognition that the most prominent civil rights leader did not remain static in his thinking. Scholars have shown how, late in his career, King himself recognized that "the dream I had in Washington back in 1963 has too often turned into a nightmare," leading to his advocacy of a fundamental restructuring of American society.

Contributors to these volumes who note the ways in which the persistence of American racism, materialism, and militarism transformed King's vision generally adopt the notion of "two Kings"—the reformer and the revolutionary—to capture the clergyman's shifts in emphases and outlook between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s. Many of the authors included here, however, are more interested in tracing the roots of King's ideology than the trajectory of his politics. Standard accounts of King's intellectual roots have long followed the minister's own discussion of his development in Stride toward Freedom, which charted the influence of Henry David Thoreau, Georg Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Mohandas Gandhi, and Edgar Brightman. What this chain of philosophical development omitted was the foundation of King's thinking: the biblical Jesus and the black church. King did not often write about such matters because he aimed his publications mainly at white audiences. But scholars are now highlighting the primary impact of African-American religious experiences on King.

10 The most significant recent studies include David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York, 1986); Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963 (New York, 1988); and "A Round Table: Martin Luther King, Jr.,” Journal of American History, 74 (1987): 436–81. These authors built on valuable works by Lawrence D. Reddick, Crusader without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York, 1959); Lerone Bennett, Jr., What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Chicago, 1968); David L. Lewis, King: A Biography (Urbana, Ill., 1978); Stephen B. Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York, 1982); and Adam Fairclough, "To Redeem the Soul of America": The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Athens, Ga., 1987); see also Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman, We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle (New York, 1990).


12 See Richard Hammer, "The Life and Death of Martin Luther King," in Garrow, Martin Luther King, Jr., 2: 465–78, for an early presentation (1968) of this construction.

The Garrow collection adds to this approach by offering a number of detailed treatises on King’s religious roots. Examples of this revisionism began to appear in the mid-1970s. Paul R. Garber analyzed King primarily as a “Black preacher who saw the modern Black freedom movement as a continuation of an ancient freedom movement in which, according to Exodus, God spoke through Moses, saying, ‘Let my people go.’” Whatever else he became, the Reverend King was foremost a Southern Baptist preacher. College and graduate school exposed him to formal intellectual traditions, but he made sense of them as they related to his upbringing in the home of Baptist ministers and his church-centered community. “The concept of a personal God of infinite love and undiluted power ‘who works through history for the salvation of His children,’” Lewis V. Baldwin asserted, “has always been central to the theology of the black Church.” During times of crisis and moments of doubt, King derived strength from his Christian faith and not from schoolbred systematic philosophy. Although Gandhi shaped King’s approach to nonviolence, the spirit behind it came from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. As James H. Cone explained, “black people followed King, because he embodied in word and deed the faith of the black church which has always claimed that oppression and the Gospel of Jesus do not go together.”

Digging out the roots of King’s thinking does not create an either/or proposition that lines up a predominantly Western intellectual tradition against an African-American religious heritage. The Hegelian King might have concluded that it is more likely a both/and situation. As August Meier wrote some twenty-five years ago, King was a master synthesizer who could interpret the African-American struggle for freedom in language that struck responsive chords among blacks and whites. More recently, scholars have discovered that King liberally borrowed ideas for his sermons and writings from both black and white Protestant ministers, often without attribution, and that his published books were produced with the helping hands of ghostwriters. These findings do not diminish his contribution to the movement, but they do suggest that future researchers will have to look even more carefully to follow the myriad influences on King.

This reappraisal of King’s ideological heritage, emphasizing his merger of


15 Baldwin, “Martin Luther King, Jr.,” 1: 7.

16 Cone, “Martin Luther King, Jr., “Black Theology—Black Church,” 1: 207.

17 August Meier, “On the Role of Martin Luther King,” in Garrow, Martin Luther King, Jr., 3: 635–42.

18 Keith D. Miller, “Martin Luther King, Jr. Borrows a Revolution: Argument, Audience and Implications of a Secondhand Universe,” in Garrow, Martin Luther King, Jr., 3: 643–59. Miller viewed King’s borrowing of “major themes, literary quotations and other homiletic commonplaces” in a positive light, because it allowed the civil rights leader to communicate with whites in the tried and tested language they understood. Revelations about plagiarism in his doctoral dissertation underscore the problem of disentangling King’s ideas from those of his sources. The most promising way of examining this issue appears to be looking at King’s writings as derived from the oral traditions of the black church in which, according to Miller, words were not defined as commodities. See David J. Garrow, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: Borrowing Trouble,” Washington Post, National Weekly Edition (November 26–December 2, 1990): 25.
seemingly disparate legacies, suggests that we might usefully reconsider the concept of “two Kings” that has been employed to explain shifts in his political vision. Even in the late 1960s, King abandoned neither his commitment to nonviolence and integration nor his core religious ideas and humanistic values. The great strength of King was his ability to adapt old ideals to changing situations. As demonstrated by Beifuss in her study of the Memphis sanitation strike, King’s doubts about capitalism did not so much alter as deepen in response to urban revolts that highlighted the persistence of poverty.

As early as his seminary days at Crozer, King “thought the capitalistic system was predicated on exploitation and prejudice, poverty, and that we wouldn’t solve these problems until we got a new social order.” In his first speech to a mass meeting during the Montgomery bus boycott, King signaled the profound changes that would have to sweep through American society. “We the dispossessed citizens of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity,” he thundered, “[a]nd now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality.”

The recognition that King embodied both moderate and militant political possibilities suggests a further recasting of civil rights historiography that has emphasized “two movements.” Here the Freedom Summer of 1964 and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 have served as the crucial markers. When neither interracial grass-roots activism nor federal legislation ushered in the “beloved community” of black and white together, SNCC militants replaced the slogan of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), “freedom now,” with “black power.” At the same time, rebellions erupted in northern ghettos and for several years became an annual summer event. The failure of nonviolent protest to achieve results among economically depressed blacks in Chicago in 1966, the escalation of the Vietnam War, the assault of the FBI against black militants at home, and the concurrent retreat of the federal government in fighting the War on Poverty split civil rights forces and gave national prominence to the freedom struggle as defined in terms of black consciousness and autonomy.

Yet here, as with King, the notion of a bifurcated identity may distort as much as it illuminates. Among those labeled moderate for their pursuit of legal and constitutional efforts in the late 1960s were women and men whose very lives were threatened for advocating the same goals in earlier decades. In the South, moreover, “black power” continued to mean electoral power for many rural blacks long after it took on other connotations in northern cities. And, though eschewing Marxism on both philosophical and religious grounds, many activist black preachers followed King in his move toward a version of democratic socialism rooted in Christianity. Their views presaged the liberationist theology of insurgent Latin American clergy; they spoke out forcefully against the Vietnam War as an immoral and colonialist adventure.

By 1968, “moderate” civil rights leaders were prepar-

19 J. Pious Barber quoted in Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 43.
23 Adam Fairclough, “Was Martin Luther King a Marxist?” in Garrow, Martin Luther King, Jr., 1: 301–09; J. Mills Thornton, “Commentary,” in Eagles, ed., Civil Rights Movement, 150.
ing a new march on Washington—this time on the side of poor people—that promised to increase the scale of civil disobedience and disruption. In addition, if moderates were willing at times to adopt militant methods and goals, it would become apparent by the 1980s that many former SNCC militants—including John Lewis, Julian Bond, and Marion Barry—were willing to step back from the threatening definitions of “black power” and embrace electoral solutions to second-class citizenship.

Once we shift the focus to shared rather than divisive elements in the struggle, two points of convergence are particularly visible. The first is the international concerns of all segments of the movement. Members of SNCC and later the Black Panthers self-consciously embraced a Third World perspective, demonstrated in their attire, hairstyles, names, and music as well as their political agenda. Leaders in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), SCLC, and other civil rights organizations also attended to issues in Africa, Latin America, and Asia; nor was this only a response to their more militant counterparts. King’s critique of the Vietnam War and neocolonialism after 1965 was foreshadowed by a sermon he delivered in the second year of the Montgomery boycott. He predicted “the birth of a new age” for people of color throughout the world who had “lived for years and centuries under the yoke of foreign power.”

This connection between racial injustice around the globe and in the United States was paralleled by a second shared concern of black activists: the link between discrimination and poverty. The economic issues that gained prominence in King’s efforts after 1965 were long a part of the civil rights agenda. The backbone of the Montgomery boycott, the domestics and seamstresses who daily rode the buses to work, viewed economic woes and political disenfranchisement as deeply intertwined. And the woman whose act of defiance initiated the boycott, Rosa Parks, traced her organizational roots not only to the NAACP but also to the Highlander Folk School, where radical labor activists had been training community organizers since the depression decade. The man who bailed her out of jail following her arrest, E. D. Nixon, was not only a member of the NAACP but also of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

Scholars of African-American history have begun to scrutinize more closely the ways in which the shared economic and political concerns evident in earlier decades, particularly as embodied in the radical wing of the labor movement and Communist party alliances with local black activists, provided ideological inspiration and even personnel to the postwar movement. These issues are largely missing from the Garrow Series but have been explored in recent works by Robin D. G. Kelley, Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, and Karen Sacks.

As Kelley pointed out, when SNCC workers ventured into Lowndes County, Alabama, in 1965 to register voters, they revived, albeit unknowingly, a militant tradition established by Communist organizers thirty years earlier.

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The Garrow Series takes 1954–1955 as the starting point of the struggle, as does most previous scholarship and such powerful visual records as *Eyes on the Prize.* Though made for good reason—the Supreme Court’s landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling of 1954 and the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955—the decision to locate the beginning of the civil rights struggle in the midst of the McCarthy era may have led scholars to echo the silences imposed by anticommunist crusaders. Given the danger for activists of this era in owning up to previous affiliations with leftist movements, closer investigation of the backgrounds of grass-roots activists will be needed before evidence of links between post-*Brown* civil rights struggles and earlier radical campaigns emerges. Garrow’s inclusion of Irwin Klibaner’s dissertation on the Southern Education Conference Fund (SCEF) is especially welcome because it underscores the radical roots of the civil rights movement and the difficulties in sustaining support against anticommunist attacks orchestrated by state and federal authorities.

By *aiming their sights* at the grass-roots level, where detailed examination of the culture of black communities is possible, scholars can address not only the legacy of black radicalism but also the larger and equally critical issue of whether the freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s continued a previous protest tradition or started a new one. In one sense, the steady efforts of the NAACP since its founding in 1909 provide ample evidence of an unbroken line of challenges to racial discrimination in the twentieth century. But the distinguishing feature of the freedom struggle emerging in the 1950s was the use of “direct action” techniques in villages, towns, and cities throughout the South. New organizations or rejuvenated chapters of old ones guided these assaults on the racial status quo in their local areas, apparently signaling a distinct break with the past.

The argument for discontinuity was most forcefully presented by August Meier and Elliot Rudwick in a wide-ranging essay first published in 1976. They concluded that, despite a long and varied tradition of protest throughout African-American history, “the use of [nonviolent] direct-action tactics has been episodic and characterized by sharp discontinuities.” Each generation of black dissenters, they claimed, acted in response to current situations without drawing on history for guidance. Indeed, protesters usually initiated their struggles unaware they were repeating tactics that had been used before.

The case for continuity, however, has received substantial support in recent

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29 However, once an innovative tactic appeared, it spread in waves to other nearby locales; see Carl R. Graves, “The Right to Be Served: Oklahoma City’s Lunch Counter Sit-ins, 1958–1964,” in Garrow, *We Shall Overcome*, 1: 283–97 (GS 4).
years, building particularly on William H. Chafe's path-breaking study of Greensboro. Taking a life-cycle approach to local history, Chafe traces several generations of protest in the North Carolina city and finds important linkages from one era to another. An NAACP youth group established in the 1940s furnished participants for the sit-ins of the 1960s. Youngsters educated in black public schools during the 1950s joined the ranks of demonstrators in the 1960s. Two of the original four sit-in protesters attended the church of a clergyman who used his ministry to keep the message of freedom alive throughout the 1950s.

Chafe's approach must be applied to many other locations before we can gauge the various ways that protest movements emerged from the rich cultural heritage of black communities. Garrow's collection offers studies on Montgomery, Birmingham, Atlanta, St. Augustine, Chicago, and Memphis, in each of which the traces of earlier crusades can be detected, often as faint but significant imprints on later struggles. These studies spotlight the importance of indigenous freedom struggles as well as of individuals whose courage was fired by their earlier participation in radical organizations and grass-roots agitation. Among the civic and religious leaders who propelled the movement day by day, year in and year out, were many whose earliest efforts were linked to racially progressive organizations prior to the Brown decision. In Montgomery, this included not only Rosa Parks and E. D. Nixon but also the Reverend Vernon Johns. Even though he was replaced in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church pulpit by King before the boycott erupted, he had worked vigorously against racial injustice throughout his four-year pastorate.

Much the same situation existed elsewhere. In Atlanta in 1960, Lonnie King (no relation to Martin) and Julian Bond, students at Morehouse College, cleverly orchestrated sit-in demonstrations that led to the well-publicized arrest of Dr. King and created a political crisis for candidates during the presidential election campaign. Birmingham produced the fearless Fred Shuttlesworth, whose Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights encountered bombs, bullets, and bricks years before the massive street demonstrations of 1963 led by the SCLC.

The local case histories included here reinforce the claims of sociologists Doug McAdam and Aldon D. Morris that black communities that mobilized their internal resources and marshaled them toward liberationist ends in the late 1950s and early 1960s were not reacting to discrimination either randomly or haphazardly. Rather, they were responding through established organizations and developing lines of communication. Underscoring the importance of black churches, colleges, and civic groups in fostering and maintaining a protest network, Morris concluded that the "sit-ins became a tactical innovation within the movement because they fit into the framework of the existing internal organization." His conclusion is echoed in a recent essay by sociologist Lewis M. Killian demonstrating the ways in which seemingly spontaneous civil rights protests occurred within the context of preexisting organizations.

52 Branch, Parting the Waters, chap. 1.
53 Aldon D. Morris, "Black Southern Sit-In Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization," in Garrow, We Shall Overcome, 3: 953; see also Morris, Origins of the Civil Rights Movement; Doug McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency (Chicago, 1982).
54 Lewis M. Killian, "Organization, Rationality and Spontaneity in the Civil Rights Movement," in Garrow, We Shall Overcome, 2: 513, 514 (GS 5).
Two other monographs in the Garrow Series—Klibaner's on SCEF and Aimee Isgrig Horton's on the Highlander Folk School—also focus on the pre-Brown roots of the freedom struggle. Employing an institutional rather than a community-based approach, they too demonstrate that new groups and tactics, which seemed to appear spontaneously, actually emerged out of established organizations. At the same time, older groups and organizations were revitalized and transformed by newer ones as both joined in pursuit of common objectives. Before Brown and Montgomery, a tiny band of southern white racial progressives was committed to remaking their region along egalitarian racial and economic lines. Small in number, they were plentiful enough to form SCEF (and its predecessor, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare) and the Highlander Folk School. Their neighbors scorned them, and the authorities Red-baited them with charges of subversion. Despite their travail, liberal white southerners managed to provide valuable support for the movement through fund raising, education, and organizing.  

By focusing on racially progressive whites, these studies highlight the diverse attitudes held by the South's dominant race. The bedsheeted bigotry of the Ku Klux Klan and the tie and jacket prejudice of the White Citizens' Councils have been ably described. Yet many white communities were not monolithic. In a perceptive analysis of Montgomery, J. Mills Thornton argued that one cannot chart the ebb and flow of black protest without understanding the racial dynamics of the white community. Whites usually lined up behind the banner of racial solidarity, but they also quarreled among themselves about how to respond to political challenges. Fearing that racial violence would interfere with their plans for urban economic redevelopment, the moderate white civic, business, and political leaders preferred to keep the peace through the give and take of biracial negotiation, for which they came under attack from obstructionist hard-liners.  

Community histories are especially valuable in uncovering the coalitions and conflicts within and between black and white communities. The communities spotlighted in the Garrow collection display the same matrix of historical roots and contemporary organizations, civic and religious leadership and mass followings, political demands and economic goals. Together, they reveal many unheralded individuals who supplied indispensable leadership in initiating, directing, and keeping alive local protest activities through the network of black church, civic, and business organizations. Their lives demonstrate that blacks were not simply victims of separate and unequal policies; rather, they retained a measure of social, economic, and political autonomy that under the proper conditions could fuel demands for equality and power.


Nevertheless, blacks' autonomy of action along with the breadth of their political and social agenda ensured that conflict as well as community would emerge within the black freedom movement. Conflicts occurred on several levels. Local blacks hoped to gain national attention by calling in recognized leaders such as King, but disagreements developed between community activists and outside leaders over when and at what cost a settlement should be reached. In campaigns such as those in Birmingham, the SCLC sought mainly to convince national lawmakers to enact legislation eradicating de jure racial discrimination and characteristically left the scene upon accomplishing this mission. Black locals benefited from the legislation thus secured, but they were deprived of vital support for sustaining their own organizations. 39

Whatever tensions may have existed, local blacks clearly ignited struggles to which King reacted. In St. Augustine, Dr. Robert Hayling, a dentist and a leader of the local NAACP, mobilized protests against segregation and courageously fought the Klan for a year before calling King for assistance in 1964. When King turned northward to Chicago in 1966, he stepped onto fertile territory already plowed by Al Raby and the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations. In Memphis in 1968, black sanitation workers in alliance with civil rights veterans such as James Lawson precipitated the struggle that brought King to that city to fight his final battle.

Crisis-induced unity did not remove underlying differences over strategy and tactics among black civil rights activists that stemmed from generational, ideological, and economic cleavages. Predictably, they resurfaced after victory was achieved. These splits were not always destructive, however. Jack L. Walker, investigating the Atlanta sit-ins of 1960, concluded that the division of labor between black student activists and more cautious adult negotiators brought about a peaceful and substantial resolution to the conflict. 40

As community studies reveal the masses of individuals at the the heart of the movement, the efforts of women have been recovered alongside those of men. In general, racial solidarity seems to have muted sexual conflict within the freedom struggle. And, where gender differences did emerge, they might have provided some of the same advantages as did the differences between young militants and older moderates outlined by Walker. Yet any definitive analysis of gender relations in the movement awaits basic research on female participants, leaders, and followers.

Reading through the diverse works in the Garrow Series, one finds the names of numerous women who made important contributions to the movement. Jo Ann Robinson, Ella Baker, Diane Nash, Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, and Rosa

Parks are some of the more prominent figures whose efforts are recorded here. Nevertheless, we need systematic studies of how ordinary women, in their roles as mothers, wives, workers, churchgoers, and professionals affected the nature of the movement. Indeed, there are important connections to be made between the black church as the institutional bedrock of civil rights protest and the significant place of women inside it.

When *Eyes on the Prize* broadcast an episode on the Montgomery bus boycott, film footage revealed the extensive presence of women at mass meetings and on the streets walking to work. However, the narration, as in most scholarly studies, failed to analyze the sexual politics of racial struggle. A doctoral dissertation by Steven M. Millner in 1981 suggests that the heavy involvement of women stemmed, in part, from the fact that black females outnumbered black males in Montgomery's population and rode the bus much more frequently than did men. Moreover, the rude behavior black women suffered from white male drivers was doubly insulting by virtue of their sex and race. Rosa Parks's arrest galvanized the black community, in part, because she had a reputation as both an activist and a "lady." Yet, on occasion, Montgomery's female activists chose "unladylike" behavior to exhibit their passion for equality. When black male leaders were arrested for violating an anti-boycott law, for instance, a group of older women came to the courthouse, "wearing men's hats and dresses rolled up," and warned a gun-toting policeman who tried to disperse them: "[We] don't care what you got. If you hit one of us, you'll not leave here alive." It will take further research to uncover the multiplicity of roles women played in Montgomery alone.

The most notable controversy concerning women in the larger freedom struggle focuses on SNCC. Sara Evans has argued that many of the white women who worked with SNCC in the Deep South later became instrumental in developing the women's liberation movement. She attributed the awakening of their feminist consciousness to a variety of factors: the egalitarian ethos of SNCC, the inspiration of black women in local communities who provided the movement with strong female role models, and the revolt against male chauvinist attitudes that relegated women to conventional female tasks. Only the third argument has produced disagreement. Mary King, a SNCC staffer who along with Casey Hayden drew up a feminist manifesto in 1965 critical of sexism within the organization, has recently claimed that Evans misinterpreted the meaning of this protest. King insists that she and Hayden were not complaining about their role as women in SNCC but were questioning whether the civil rights movement could tolerate "differing political and social concerns, as various groups and, in our case, women defined them." Reconciling King's contemporaneous and retrospective statements remains problematic, but scholars are beginning to measure the impact of SNCC on the lives of

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black and white women in order to determine just how much conflict grew out of gender as distinct from race differences.44

One fruitful approach to the controversy over women's treatment within SNCC may be to focus on the way in which women helped forge the unique character of the organization and then worked to sustain their place within it. Ella Baker is widely acclaimed for her critical role in bridging generational divides and in shaping the structure and style of SNCC. Still, no full biography of Baker exists. Such a work might usefully draw on Karen Sacks's study of union organizing among both black and white hospital workers at Duke Medical Center. Sacks argued that, in large part, it was women's and men's different definitions of leadership that led to their particular roles in community struggles. Women in the Duke struggle focused on creating and sustaining support networks; men on drafting statements, controlling the highest organizational offices, and serving as public spokesmen. Because men's definition more closely fit that of the media, they were perceived by outsiders as the preeminent leaders of the movement.45

The emphasis in SNCC on establishing and sustaining community networks and encouraging grass-roots leadership supplied a ready arena in which women could flourish. And it is not surprising that Baker should have served as the midwife at the moment of SNCC's birth. Other women also felt at home with SNCC's style of activism and organization. But tensions could be expected to surface nonetheless because, even with all the important positions held by women, men most often spoke to the public and controlled the majority of formal leadership positions. Moreover, the turn toward "black power" after 1965 enhanced the status of masculine forms of militancy as it muted feminine elements of organizing within SNCC, particularly as black power moved north.

Clearly, most women thrived in SNCC, as did many men, during those years when a female style of activism and leadership prevailed. Indeed, it was perhaps the combination of a feminine model of organizing—at which men like Bob Moses excelled—with a masculine model of leadership—which women like Fannie Lou Hamer learned to use—that lent SNCC its uniqueness and force. SNCC was, after all, the civil rights group with the shortest life span but the greatest transformative power.

From its beginnings in 1960, the group recognized the truth of Baker's advice to fight for "more than a hamburger" and attacked the very structure of racial subordination. SNCC fieldworkers encountered brutal forms of white repression in remote sections of the Deep South. They experienced firsthand the abject poverty that kept rural blacks in virtual bondage. The iconoclastic group considered the NAACP too stodgy, criticized the SCLC's charismatic leadership style, and snickered at Dr. King as "de lawd."46 SNCC also clashed with sympathetic northern white liberals and national government officials who tried to compromise their political objectives. Starting out idealistically committed to nonviolence and an

44 Evans herself suggested that black and white women in SNCC had different perceptions of their roles and situations within the organization. She quoted Jean Wiley, a black member: "If white women had a problem in SNCC it was not just a male/woman problem . . . it was also a black woman/white woman problem. It was a race problem rather than a woman's problem"; Evans, Personal Politics, 81. See also Martha Norman, "Brightly Shining Lights: SNCC and the Woman Question," paper presented at Southern Historical Association meeting, Lexington, Kentucky, November 10, 1989.


46 John A. Hicks, "De Lawd' Descends and Is Crucified: Martin Luther King, Jr. in Albany, Georgia," in Garrow, We Shall Overcome, 3: 985–96.
interracial beloved community, by the late 1960s SNCC’s battle-toughened troops endorsed retaliatory self-defense, black nationalism, and the overthrow of capitalism. The group’s rising identification with Third World anticolonial struggles made it an early, outspoken critic of the Vietnam War.

Like King, SNCC has attracted many thoughtful chroniclers. Howard Zinn, Clayborne Carson, James Forman, Cleveland Sellers, and Mary King have written noteworthy accounts charting SNCC’s trajectory from reform to revolution over the course of the 1960s.47 To this list, the Garrow Series adds political scientist Emily Stoper. Her work helps explain why SNCC’s strength also made the group vulnerable to collapse during the late 1960s. She categorizes SNCC as a “redemptive organization,” whose members exhibited a “moral ethos” of righteous anger forged from mutually shared experiences of struggle and persecution. Having undergone ordeals by fire in harsh southern battlefields, SNCC staffers regarded each other as a “band of brothers [and sisters], a circle of trust.” Wary of outsiders and alienated from the mainstream, SNCC members were not equipped to deal with the bottom line of American politics—compromise. Moreover, the tightly knit organization could not withstand an influx of newcomers, however well-meaning. Thus the appearance of large numbers of white volunteers as participants in the Mississippi Freedom Summer campaign of 1964, though invited by SNCC, “brought to the surface a great deal of the pathology of black-white relations.”48 While Stoper charts the organizational strains within SNCC, many of the group’s troubles must also be attributed to the federal government, first for its hesitancy in providing adequate protection and then for waging a repressive counterintelligence program against militant blacks.

Stoper’s work, based largely on interviews with SNCC adherents, offers valuable hints for further research. In focusing on the political culture of SNCC and that of the larger society, she suggests we look more carefully at the way values, symbols, and language shaped the freedom struggle. In many instances, civil rights activists succeeded in conveying images of struggle reflecting the democratic and egalitarian ideals that Americans celebrate, at least in theory. This was certainly true with SNCC’s early history. Yet the group’s communitarian ethic ultimately conflicted with the competitive, individualistic values of those who controlled political discourse, including government officials and representatives of the media.49 Furthermore, in examining how organizations such as SNCC operated within the broader, predominantly white society, one must not fail to evaluate how civil rights


48 Emily Stoper, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization, David J. Garrow, ed. (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1989), 100 (GS 17). The inability of SNCC to handle new recruits who did not share its early experiences and camaraderie resembles the problems of the Students for a Democratic Society, as discussed by Jim Miller, “Democracy Is in the Streets”: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago (New York, 1987).

49 Oppenheimer, Sit-In Movement, 15; David Goldfield, Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present (Baton Rouge, La., 1990), discusses those elements of black and white southern culture that he found made the resolution of civil rights demands possible. William H. Chafe, “The End of One Struggle, the Beginning of Another,” and J. Mills Thornton, “Commentary,” both in Eagles, Civil Rights Movement in America, 127–55, contrast the communitarian and individualistic values in American political culture. King was a master at shaping his oratory to conform to the language of American values; see James H. Cone, “The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” in Garrow, Martin Luther King, Jr., 1: 215–33.
groups conformed to and transformed southern black conceptions of freedom. Local black southerners were instrumental in shaping SNCC's definition of liberation and black power, but they did not necessarily interpret these terms in the same ways.50

Redirection of scholarly studies to the local level, which Garrow and others have called for, should not obscure the need to move from the particular to the general, from case study to synthesis. Clayborne Carson characterized the movement "as a series of concentric circles, with liberal supporters on the outside and fulltime activists at the center."51 This assessment appropriately emphasizes grassroots efforts, yet it is crucial to acknowledge that the federal government could both strengthen and limit possibilities for change. Indeed, it ultimately required the power of Washington to break the segregationist stranglehold on first-class citizenship in towns across the country. Moreover, although the aims of national and local groups sometimes differed, in many instances they coincided. Often, local groups called for outside assistance at the same time national organizations sought test cases or local showplaces. Rather than concentric circles, the image of overlapping spheres sharing a common segment might more accurately reflect the shape of the struggle. The shared zone of cooperation expanded or contracted according to pressures from below and political considerations from above.52

Differences of interpretation are as evident among civil rights scholars as they were among civil rights activists. In part, this explains why interest in civil rights history shows little sign of abating. Scholarly texts are still rolling off the presses along with autobiographical accounts of individual activists to expand our view of the movement against racism.53 If the studies of the next thirty years are as rich as those of the previous three decades, as sampled in the Garrow collection, we all have something to look forward to. Among forthcoming works are the volumes from the Martin Luther King Papers Project and studies on women, the international dimensions of the freedom struggle, and its pre-1954 antecedents found in the labor movement and in black nationalist and racially progressive interracial groups. In addition, more in-depth explorations of the movement in Mississippi and other southern states will soon appear.54 These promise to add a critical edge and greater complexity to the portraits of protest presented here.

54 John Dittmer is working on Mississippi, Adam Fairclough on Louisiana, and Raymond Gavins on North Carolina. Robert Korstad is finishing a study on the labor antecedents of the civil rights movement in North Carolina. Robert L. Harris, Jr., is completing a study on the United Nations and the black freedom struggle.