THE INTEGRATION OF THE AMERICAN MIND: INTELLECTUALS AND THE

CREATION OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1944-1983

by

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For Kathy, who beats all the belles of Tennessee

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AS AN IDEA

Like most any inquiry that attempts to "make our ideas clear," to borrow the

philosopher Charles Peirce's phrase, a conversation partly inspired the words that follow.

In one of my numerous early and confused attempts, typically stuck in a hermeneutic

tangle of one kind or another, to explain to a group of people what this project was about,

an especially practically-minded historian exclaimed to me in a fit of well-deserved

frustration, "C'mon already; everybody knows what the civil rights movement is."

Of course, consensus like this on any historical event is never so easy, but his

exasperated comment posed some interesting questions. Like any form of popular

opinion, it offered only a small measure of a potentially more complete truth, but I had to

wonder: who are "everybody" and what do they "know?" Furthermore, what does it mean

to 'know" in this case? In other words, does some conventional wisdom exist about the

civil rights movement? Presumably, most Americans think they know what the

movement is, but if one were to poll large numbers of people on the subject, my guess

would be that they would leave their assumptions about it unexplored. If pressed, they

would probably offer different accounts of the events in question, use different events to

make up a narrative, or grant its importance while being unable to describe in any detail

exactly what it was.[1]

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[1] In a 2000 Gallup poll, for example, nearly 85% of those surveyed agreed that the civil rights
movement of the 1960s had a "great" to "moderate" impact on the nation's policies, while 86% agreed
either "strongly" or "somewhat" with its goals. The pollsters chose not to ask specifically what the nature

Which raises an additional question: why did the historian who put the question to me choose the present rather than the past tense to describe the movement? This use of the present tense "is" indicates to me that the movement might be a type of *knowing* rather than a settled known: not a fixed, agreed upon set of events with any confirmed meaning. Rather, the movement is still very much contested ground, despite being unquestionably regarded as an inherently good (if rather dimly conceptualized) thing. Along with the defeat of fascism in the Second World War, it remains a tried and true example of unassailable moral virtue, of good winning over evil, a usable and protean concept located somewhere along a faint horizon where emotionalism, moral rectitude, and collective national reconciliation meet, however uncomfortably.

Yet, when considered as a type of thinking or speaking about politics in the United States, one conclusion does emerge: the civil rights movement was the most important *intellectual* transformation since the Second World War; in terms of domestic influence, possibly the most important since the Civil War. Still, people often disagree about what it meant, and rarely measure its impact in the same way. So in a broad, national context, the creation of the modern civil rights movement was a complex business. To understand at least some of these complexities, I argue here that the movement should be considered as an *idea*, or set of rules that act, to abuse somewhat a Wittgensteinian turn of phrase, as a language game in America, lending peculiar meaning and value to terms like "acceptable" and "unacceptable," "reasonable" or "unreasonable," especially in any discussion of race or ethnicity.

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of that impact was, or what such "goals" were. Gallup Poll News Service, "The Environment" April 3-9 2000 < http://brain.gallup.com/documents/questionnaire.aspx?STUDY=P0004015> (12 August 2006).

For example, today only those people whom most Americans associate with a pre-civil rights (and therefore benighted) time in our national history condemn racial integration for fear of miscegenation and racial degradation, whereas more than a few perfectly reasonable pundits dismiss efforts at racial integration as heroic yet impractical, naive idealism. The latter group proves much more "reasonable" because they make the "acceptable" historical reference. (That is, they identify integrationism as a plausible if not entirely practical ideal because the civil rights movement represented a brief moment in our national history when such an ideal seemed achievable.) In this respect, a reference to the movement reveals how many Americans understand concepts like reason and reasonableness in modern politics; it legitimizes most any discourse about our national identity. In numerous ways resembling this example, the civil rights movement taught countless Americans how to speak and write for practical political ends after 1945, and it will continue to do so well into the future.

To better understand these lessons, we might describe how the movement became so widely available for use and reference by so many people, and thus seek some answers to questions like: what makes a claim to the movement so useful and even necessary for political purposes? As a partial answer, I describe here not only a few of the ideas that contributed directly to the movement as popularly conceived, but especially those reactions to and interpretations of the civil rights movement by intellectuals, as a concept or term in their competing and complementary narratives of American history, the sum of which today comprises a quintessentially American style of political and cultural activity. I explore how the movement, considered as a powerful new idea, changed the nature of

political practice and public discourse in the United States, but also fused with and incorporated existing discourses.

So in a sense, my project confronts the politics of memory, which is just another way of saying that the civil rights movement is a tool for interpreting American history more generally. I assume in this case that the process of memory construction is dynamic, and that the line of demarcation between history and memory cannot be clearly drawn. What follows lacks the characteristic style of those studies lately concerned with what might be called "institutional" or "public" memory: the formalized study of memorials, objects, or occasions which act as triggers designed to make people remember or imagine an event or person(s) in a particular way and for a specific agenda or purpose. Unlike those studies, my concern is not precisely with the authors, arrangers and/or contents of museums and motion pictures, or specifically dedicated markers like those on roadside signs or in cemeteries, nor with nationally or locally designated historic places or holidays intended to shape public recollection of some historical phenomenon. My treatment of the civil rights movement differs from those approaches because it draws no clear distinction between an original set of historical events called "the Civil Rights Movement" and the idea of the civil rights movement, constantly negotiated and never fixed.[2] As such one cannot speak, with much confidence, of distorted or contested memories emanating from some common, agreed-upon origin, but only of a continuously developing type of political practice characterized by the claiming of a concept and/or the use of a phrase called the civil rights movement. The immediacy of that initial or

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[2] As such, I have chosen not to capitalize civil rights movement. We might consider the capitalized "Civil Rights Movement" to refer to the movement in its more traditional or grassroots manifestations, as that led by African Americans, often beginning with the *Brown* decision in 1954 and ending somewhere in the mid to late 1960s.

originating experience cannot be recovered entirely. Only interpretation—that is,

politics—remains.

A historiographical example might help explain my meaning. Consider the civil

rights historian Charles Eagles' proposal:

> No scholar would propose writing about the movement from a
> position hostile to its goals and aspirations, but a more objective view of
> its participants should be possible. Increased objectivity does not require
> repudiation of the movement's commitment to justice, freedom, and
> equality, and it should not be interpreted as showing a lack of appreciation
> for the bravery, courage, resilience, and heroism displayed by the
> "trailblazers and torchbearers" of the crusade.[3]

Coupled with his observation, borrowed from the Cold War historian John Lewis

Gaddis, that "writing in the midst of a struggle can lead to a lack of scholarly detachment

and an asymmetrical approach" Eagles, rather unwittingly, puts his finger on a messy

collision between history and memory. The former, especially when conceived of as a

scholarly science, involves clearing away the prejudiced, subjective dross of memory and

politics for the truest story possible. "Truest" in this case means the historical,

developmental narrative one puts together by combing as many sources as possible,

carefully ranking their credibility by evaluating them for their apparent biases,

corroborating this account of events with that account and with relevant historical facts,

and so on. To his credit, Eagles is very much aware that he fights an uphill climb; the

detachment and objectivity he wants will require lots of forgetting, and the rich

interpretations he anticipates will not happen without loss.

He insists, in other words, that scholars arrest the flow of politics to embrace the

space of pure reason. It's an idealistic, quasi-Rawlsian solution to the problem; historians

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[3] Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era" *The Journal of Southern History* LXVI (November 2000): 840.

should enter something like a veil of ignorance where the agreement stipulates dedication to craft in empirical terms. One goes in acknowledging "the movement's commitment to justice, freedom and equality" but does not allow the passions of the politics of memory to enter into or ultimately overwhelm the outcome. The scholarly agreement made, the results demand respect. The hoped-for conclusion will be potentially more complex, more radical, or more compelling histories freed from the limiting discipline of political imprecations. This is one way of looking at it, and a laudably ethical one at that. I offer something different; a genealogy of an idea that posits neither a clear starting point nor ending point, nor the assumption that any fixed, agreed upon meaning was or will ever become entirely evident. Contestation is essential; conversations predominate, and definitive conclusions are far more difficult to come by.[4]

When thought about in this way, one fundamental conclusion does emerge, however: the civil rights movement, despite intense disagreement about its basic meaning, changed the way that most Americans envisaged their democracy. Yet scholars rarely cite it for as having this sort of an impact on American thought and speech.[5] To repair this oversight, and in an attempt to understand the present-day allure of the movement in this country, "The Integration of the American Mind" describes overlapping developments: first, the view of the civil rights movement in many Americans' imaginations—as a widespread, acceptable way of approaching political problems in the United States. Second, it describes the struggles of intellectuals; the story of how the

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[4] Some political theorists contend that a few common concepts (especially democracy) are "essentially contested" that is to say, when one uses these terms, the proper use of them inevitably results in endless disputes—see W.B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (vol. 56, London, 1955-56): 167-198. It may well be that, because the civil rights movement today is often inherent in discussions about American democracy and its history, it too is "essentially contested."

[5] See the next chapter for a more detailed discussion.

ideas that these thinkers believed in became refined or challenged by epochal changes in national laws and by the appearance of a grassroots movement that was embedded in and revitalized an ongoing, larger struggle by black people to realize freedom or the promise of American democracy. These thinkers imagined the civil rights movement in several different ways, which resulted in a novel approach to politics on the national level. I tell a story here of the intellectual activity that this movement (contested and often ill-defined) inspired and the character that it took on, which in turn created the *idea*, or the specific type of political practice or thinking, that people today call "the civil rights movement." The American mind integrated around this broad, encompassing idea; American *minds* struggled with its implications and contested meanings. The movement illuminated persistent national problems, none of which reached final resolution. So while the problem of racism and its innumerable attendant questions for the meaning of democracy in this country continued to bedevil American thinkers, their description of and approach to these problems changed forever, conditioned by a concept called the civil rights movement.

A Word on "Integration" and "Mind"

To explain how intellectuals negotiated this idea of the civil rights movement, I use the terms "integration" and "mind" in rather idiosyncratic but useful ways different from commonplace understandings. Generally speaking, the term "integration" describes a vision for society, often accompanied by a methodology, where racial divisions become insignificant and where people feel free to act, think, or live in "colorblind" ways.[6] Thus

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[6] Of course, "colorblindness" is a politically loaded term that has been used by many different people and groups for many different purposes. See chapters four and five for a more detailed discussion.

one might differentiate integration from desegregation, the latter meaning the removal of legal or institutional structures that recognize racial categories. For the purest integrationist, desegregation constitutes but a step in a long journey aimed at the ultimate amalgamation of races in society, in terms intellectual, cultural, social, political, and even biological. Though advocates of this position remain hopeful, to this point in American life their vision has proven unrealistic. More often, integration signifies a vague yet somehow cohesive American ideal that people recognize as primary, whether for reasons of shared historical consciousness or social vision, *before* identifying themselves as belonging to a particular race or ethnicity. Thus integration is rather different and certainly less developed an idea than, say, W.E.B. DuBois' dialectic of double-consciousness or the novelist Ralph Ellison's sense of the dynamic tension between a "futuristic" democracy and the comfort of genetics. Nonetheless, many people commonly associate the term integration with the civil rights movement, whether or not those were always the precise ends its spokespersons envisioned.

So however muddled, this association of the word "integration" with the idea of the civil rights movement cannot be discarded entirely; the two terms will inevitably continue to inhabit the same conceptual territory. I suggest here that integration be used to describe the process by which the civil rights movement became a term one might use to deal with political problems and issues. One might disagree with integration as a vision or a method, but still engage in the type of *intellectual* integration described here, where the movement became a crucial concept used to explore the relationship between race, racism, and ideas about American democracy—its status and its prospects.

"Mind" on the other hand, in light of perfectly reasonable poststructuralist or neo-pragmatic suspicions about the reality of universals or the tyranny of essentialisms like "character," not to mention the longstanding bias of American historians for something best resembling positivism, seems a needlessly abstract or even quaint notion. It recalls all of the corrosive, broad brush exclusionism of mid-century "consensus" histories like Henry Steele Commager's *The American Mind*, or the at times specious, lyrical syntheses of W.J. Cash's *Mind of the South*. I suggest that the term "mind" be updated somewhat to reflect the understanding that the word can refer to something far more fluid and in a state of constant development. I do not intend to give the term any eternal or collective existence apart from it being a recognizable American political style. In its use here, mind does not assume any world-historical, Hegelian significance, but nonetheless, like *geist,* it describes a kind of widespread historical sensibility, in this case manifested as a sense of mindfulness in political discourse, where any dialogue, debate, or argument about race and democracy in the United States marks its legitimacy by including or even claiming the civil rights movement, however understood or interpreted.

No doubt to the disappointment of more precise linguistic and literary theorists, "mind" acts here as a catch-all concept to smooth over my rather shamelessly interchangeable use of words like "narrative" "discourse" and "language" to describe essentially the same thing. But it is purposively vague. In lieu of more sophisticated theoretical tools, I offer "mind"—dated, but expressive for its rich historical tradition. And at the risk of appearing epistemologically inconsistent, the concept allows for a certain interpretive freedom that a more rigorous philosophical position might not

permit—one more sensitive to the variety of positions advocated by the subjects of this study.

Outline of the Study

Therefore, in what follows I treat people commonly associated with the movement and its ideas, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., James Lawson, Jr., Reinhold Niebuhr, and Kenneth Clark, but I also examine figures not commonly associated with it, people like Lionel Trilling, Ralph Ellison, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Willmoore Kendall, and William F. Buckley, Jr. among others, all of whom made the decades most commonly associated with the civil rights movement (the 1950s and 60s) intellectually distinct. I also interpret a few sources one might call unconventional, namely fiction, jokes, television footage and photographs for their role in Americans' understanding of their nation. The various responses to and interpretations of the movement these different thinkers offered, as well as the potentially conflicting meanings that images of the freedom struggle conveyed, combined to make the movement a vague, acceptable political reference, an increasingly profitable niche in our culture industry, and a tremendously adaptable way of identifying what it means to be American.

Most of the people who appear in this study can be called "intellectuals," and ideas merit my primary concern. Simply put, this is a history of the idea of the civil rights movement as thought of by a group of people, most of whom probably would have identified themselves as intellectuals. And, like most intellectual histories that aren't biographies, this one does not tell a continuous story in neat chronological order. My interest is primarily thematic, though parts of what follows do track developments over

time. The opening chapter, "'Mississippi in Their [Our] Heads': Various Uses of the Civil Rights Movement" previews many of the problems worked out in successive chapters. By considering how prominent activists and scholars created and create monumental narratives of the civil rights movement, and by unpacking the various literary devices they employ in the process, it becomes clear that doing civil rights history means claiming its legacy. Historians stake a claim to the movement by inscribing their larger understanding of the history of American race relations onto it, valuing its preservation amidst popular and political uses of the movement that presumably destabilize or distort its meaning. It turns out that this question of possession—whose is it?—proves a powerful defining mechanism. While such definitions refine, they inevitably exclude, therefore a more realistic interpretation of the movement might start from sites of contestation and instability rather than from consensus and coherence, which may never be had. When the urge to preserve the movement in a pristine form ceases as a primary imperative, histories of the movement will prove more conducive to present-day uses. Of course, this doesn't preclude rigorous attention to historical facts; it merely involves sensitive attention to the civil rights movement as an eminently usable and often contested idea, one receptive to the fact that a variety of people and groups claim its legacy, however legitimately or illegitimately.

By these lights, the next two chapters show how a handful of intellectuals used the idea of the civil rights movement to modify or enhance their thinking. The first of these, "Liberalism, the Cult of Complexity, and the Civil Rights Movement" explores what the civil rights movement meant or didn't mean to four intellectuals, the novelists and literary critics Lionel Trilling and Ralph Ellison, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr,

and the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. It also identifies a type of intellectual activity peculiar to this group in the immediate postwar era and early Cold War, what I call "the cult of complexity," a mood or style of thinking often critical of the more simplistic tendencies of American liberalism, especially its naïve faith in the progress or perfectibility of human beings. For Trilling and Ellison, this meant that art of true merit and significance should not be constrained by the requirements of a specific political agenda. For Schlesinger and Niebuhr, complexity called for a politics leavened by the realization that human beings were capable of great evil.

The African American protest movement put these ideas to the test, and this group responded, contributing to the idea of the civil rights movement. Though conflicted at times about the value and meaning of his Jewish ethnicity, Trilling never reached the conclusion that race could or should play a significant role in the novelist's art. Ellison, on the other hand, sought to craft a type of Negro fiction that might explain the historic and cultural resources of African American civil rights protesters. For the African American novelist, the movement represented the peculiar, tragic-comic history of black folk in America.

To varying degrees, Niebuhr and Schlesinger read the movement as part of the tragedy and thus irony of American history—its accomplishments revealed only more complexities. At the tail end of a tortuous negotiation, the movement reinforced the theologian's suspicion that groups of human beings, especially when organized in the bureaucratic apparatus of the state, could rarely confirm the existence of God's grace in history. The road ahead would be difficult. Diluting Niebuhr's more tough-minded insights, Schlesinger interpreted the movement as part of the unending struggle over the

meaning of American ideals, a struggle that, although frequently punctuated by loss, was always worth joining.

In recent years, scholars have puzzled over the proper beginning and end of the civil rights movement. Viewed from end to end, this question involves integration and disintegration, diverse elements coming together and then fracturing. Thus the next chapter, "Civil Rights and the Integration of Historical Rupture" interrogates more closely this idea of a split or historical rupture in the civil rights movement from the perspective of four thinkers in particular: the social scientists Kenneth Clark, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and the critic Harold Cruse. The middle years of the 1960s make up the largest share of this analysis. In the estimation of all those in this group, the movement had reached a turning point during these years, so that the problem of racism in American politics demanded more aggressive or revolutionary methods. The idea of the civil rights movement, in this case dominated by the sentiment of rupture or crisis, meant a call for morally informed intellectual pursuit, better suited to overcome enduring racial inequities.

For Kenneth Clark, this mood manifested itself in a complicated vision for interracial politics, a method that acknowledged a central role for African Americans in the administration of public policy—an approach consistently compromised by his insistence that racism in the United States had rendered black culture pathological. Damaged and even ill-equipped to achieve equality with the white majority, African Americans needed the cooperation of white liberals, despite the latter's insensitivity and frequent failure to understand completely the content and meaning of black grievances. As understood by Harold Cruse, the civil rights movement signified the historic failure of

interracial cooperation, or "integrationism," but the space it opened, and the renewal of

interest it inspired, bespoke the need for revolutionary cultural forms of protest and art

unique to black people. The impasse reached by the movement meant that African

Americans must seize control of their own destiny, free from the dominating influence of

whites, who had doomed previous struggles by exploiting black folk for their own ends.

I treat Moynihan and Glazer together, as voices in an emerging chorus of

alienated American liberals who insisted that the corrosive social and cultural effects of

racism upon African Americans be described in unflinching detail and according to

practical political considerations. This tendency manifested itself in controversy,

especially given Moynihan's infamous "Report on the Negro Family" which some

contended portrayed the black family as a pathological variant of the putatively

traditional (white) American nuclear family. Although the two social scientists attempted

to revise and correct some of their more pessimistic conclusions about the character of

black culture, they never recovered entirely from the criticism that their insistence upon

unvarnished truth betrayed a white perspective, that a culture of poverty supposed a

poverty of culture. As the decade came to a close and a new one began, both became

disillusioned with the implementation of civil rights legislation, concluding that most

government efforts designed to combat black poverty only made things worse. From their

embattled perspective, the Southern component of the civil rights movement emerged as

distinct, an object of nostalgia contrasted with the misplaced vitriol of black militants and

the chaos and insuperable complexities of urban ghettoes.

The penultimate chapter, "Conservatives and the Creation of the Limited Civil

Rights Movement" completes the narrative arc of the previous two chapters, exploring

conservative claims to the movement. Interrogating various conservatives' reaction to the 1983 Memorial March on Washington and to the passage of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday, I conclude that conservatives imagined a "colorblind" civil rights movement whose goals opposed such initiatives as affirmative action and school busing. By recreating King in their own image, in the process purging him of his radical tendencies, they applied a convincing veneer to a long-standing political philosophy articulated best by the political theorist Willmoore Kendall, who argued as early as 1967 that the civil rights movement had been "killed" by the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In Kendall's estimation, American political institutions affirmed the conservative tendencies of the Founders, James Madison in particular. The civil rights movement, on the other hand, sought a form of radical egalitarianism unacceptable to most Americans. True to its history, the inherently conservative political system de-radicalized the movement by ending it through a gradual process of assimilation. Characteristically, the system upheld the basic values shared by the majority of Americans, as deliberated upon and better understood by Congress, who, as representatives of the people, embodied the best of local understandings of virtue. The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, because Congress passed them, were an acceptable assertion of civil rights, and anything beyond the letter of those laws transgressed what Kendall called "the Madisonian Mandate," namely, the intrinsic values of American society as expressed by its leading members in Congress. According to this logic, in 1983, the King Holiday, and with it the civil rights movement, could only be understood by conservatives in the most limited sense, according to what Congress

deemed acceptable—not the courts, not the president, nor civil rights activists. Ironically, Kendall's reasoning allowed conservatives to be theoretically if not historically consistent; though many of their number, including Kendall, rejected the movement during its 1960s heyday, they could embrace the limited idea of the civil rights movement by 1983 and even use its iconography without abandoning much of their basic conservative orientation.

The final chapter, "Parties Down at the Square" departs from the developmental character of the previous chapters to enter the fray, contributing possible meanings to the idea of the civil rights movement. The images of the movement, in pictures and on television, constituted the most memorable contribution to the idea of the civil rights movement because of the malleability of their possible meaning. They reaffirmed the central thesis of this study—that for American political life the movement exists in a fluid and continual state of interpretation and development.

I offer a historical experiment of sorts, spun out of the theoretical matrix of a piece of fiction, Ralph Ellison's short story about a white boy experiencing a Southern lynching ritual, "A Party Down at the Square." Extending Ellison's insights, I reason that the civil rights movement demonstration reversed Southern tradition, in this case the public lynching ritual, an event largely forgotten by mid-century, no longer carried out in town squares or during the light of day. Movement activists redefined the power relations of the ritual, carefully staging public white on black lynching for a national audience, revealing the deepest impulses of white supremacy—its dependence on sexual panic and the threat of bodily violence and mutilation.

With few exceptions (the Reverend James Lawson, Jr. in particular) intellectuals and activists never made this particular historical connection especially explicit, though they did disagree about what depictions of nonviolent direct action meant. For Christian activists, nonviolent methods offered the opportunity for redemption through suffering, an opportunity to experience Christ's love through sacrifice. Secular and non-Christian thinkers were not so sure. Malcolm X and the novelist James Baldwin (especially in the throes of his more radical mood) voiced concerns over the implication of nonviolent methods, worrying that they required little if any real sacrifice on the part of the white majority. One could feel horror or guilt, but the realization of racial equality and justice would have to challenge the preeminence of whites, a position that public rituals and demonstrations proved largely powerless to threaten. In the end, all that remained were the images of protest, subject to innumerable interpretations, uses, and abuses.

In what follows, I have tried to be honest to the intellectuals I treat here, especially those who merit the most of my attention. More than anything, this means understanding the temperament of their thinking, which, as a philosopher once told me, is a bit like having a dance partner. Like dancing, reading a thinker's ideas at times takes some work before finding the right rhythm. At the start, toes tend to get stepped on. Of course, some partners are more suited than others, and some people are just better dancers than others, but in every case, effort and sensitivity make up the crucial ingredients, especially in the lead, which intellectual history demands. All of this means that to take the lead, or to interpret and evaluate, requires some understanding and command of the ideas with which these thinkers grappled. This becomes especially difficult when dealing

with an ethically loaded set of events like the civil rights movement, which, as the next chapter's discussion will show, makes snap moral judgments appealing. Certainly, every one of the intellectuals treated here could be nearsighted or could be accused of failures of insight at one time or another, but without some feel for their temperament, or their characteristic approach to problems, any criticism of them rings hollow. Without this deeper understanding, we learn very little, only *that* they said or did something, not *why* they wrote down the things they did. The first approach gives us information about the past; the second allows us to learn something from it and put history to intelligent use.

CHAPTER II

'MISSISSIPPI IN THEIR [OUR] HEADS': VARIOUS USES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT

During the last forty years or so of political life in the United States, the modern civil

rights movement has cast a long shadow. As a very recent sort of *locus classicus* for any

discussion of what American democracy should look like, it is often read as a startlingly

brief episode when political engagement was presumably more purposeful and more

importantly, moral. Rarely questioned for its nobility, the movement acts as a container

for myriad political virtues; it has been mainstreamed and appropriated, used and abused

to support any number of political positions. It is, in short, the language game that

determines the ethical rules for racial politics in present-day America.[1] Interrogating this

metaphor a bit, one might ask what the rules of this particular language game are, how

they operate, and for what purpose. The following chapter seeks some preliminary

answers to these questions. Using historians' reflections on and accounts of the civil

rights movement as a guide, one might survey a partial landscape of the interpretations

that exist and thus begin to explain the meaning and impact of the movement in

American life.

First, my title needs some explanation. The first part of it, "Mississippi in Their

Heads," recalls a relatively recent episode in the history of the historical profession that

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[1] Language game as I use it here is roughly Wittgensteinian, with some notable interpretive exceptions. More orthodox Wittgensteinians would no doubt object to my use of narrative in what follows, particularly for its structuralist tendencies which Wittgenstein never meant to imply. So the use of Wittgenstein in this case is a creative misreading. Especially Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* second ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001 [1958]).

merited coverage by the national media—the unfortunate revelation, some five years ago, that the distinguished historian Joseph Ellis lied to his students by claiming to have served in the Vietnam War. Specifically, it refers to a *New York Times* piece on the subject in which the writer solicited explanations for Ellis' actions from a handful of historians. Their grudging defense of their colleague was interesting. One opined that Ellis' flair for narrative description landed him in hot water (Eric Foner), another concluded that Vietnam service acted as a stamp of legitimacy for some historians (David Oshinsky). Oshinsky offered the following: "This was essentially our passage to adulthood. It was the way we defined ourselves. Some people actually went to Mississippi—and some people went to Mississippi in their heads."[2] In a narrow sense, Oshinsky most likely meant the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, when student activism was at its height during the civil rights movement, or at least remembered that many students went to Mississippi to aid in grassroots organizing. Especially fascinating was Oshinsky's linkage between Mississippi and Vietnam. Maybe because Vietnam proved so divisive, Mississippi served as the clearer indicator of political bona fides. The movement, not Vietnam, his seemingly false analogy purported to show, made the more transparent case for grassroots credibility and therefore baby boomer virtue.

Of course, for the present purposes, this idea of Mississippi also means that the generation of historians and scholars who witnessed or experienced the civil rights movement often use those experiences to legitimize their scholarship. This should come as no surprise. Participants in the movement wrote some of the first histories of it,

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[2] David Oshinsky quoted in Janny Scott, "Prominent Historian Admits He Misled Students Into Believing He Served in Vietnam," *New York Times*, 19 June 2001 A21.

especially the journalists who covered it and activist-historians who took part in it.[3] It also comes as no surprise that the first histories of the era had a profound sympathy for the goals of civil rights movement and for its participants. In the decades since, members of this generation continued and continue to play a large role in the writing of the civil rights movement, and their impressions deeply affect the interpretations of younger scholars. In characteristic fashion, more than a few historians of the civil rights era include their experiences vis-à-vis the movement in the forewords or prefaces of the stories they tell about it.[4] But despite what this observation implies, one gains precious little by chastising scholars of a certain generation for their lack of detachment. Instead, a more interesting and useful approach might explore how this close identification with the movement informs the way some of these people put together their narratives. By understanding how and why they assemble the stories they tell, one can redirect future efforts and suggest civil rights studies that move beyond the narrative strategies now commonplace to the field. This approach is somewhat different from recent efforts to propose new directions in civil rights movement history, which argue for a more comprehensive depiction of the movement.[5]

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[3] Charles Eagles makes more extensive note of this, mentioning August Meier and Howard Zinn among many others. Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era" *The Journal of Southern History* LXVI (November 2000): 815-821.

[4] Examples of this phenomenon are numerous. Some typical examples are Clayborne Carson's excellent study, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), which includes the author's observation that "As one of many black people that SNCC influenced, I wrote this book partly to repay a debt. I learned valuable lessons from SNCC's achievements and from its failures. When I first encountered SNCC workers in 1963 as a freshman at the University of New Mexico, they gave me a view of the southern civil rights movement that was different from and more compelling than, the press reports I had read about sit-ins and marches…" (4). Also Joanne Grant's biography of Ella Baker, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1998), "I met Ella Baker in Atlanta at the founding conference of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1960" (4).

[5] The most recent call for new directions is Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005); the most comprehensive is Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era." Other notable contributions

According to the logic of arguments for a more comprehensive view, if we include more institutions, people, and points of view in our histories of the civil rights movement this more complete picture will necessarily lead to richer interpretations. While this is a perfectly worthwhile position that should yield the desired outcomes (if historians keep writing, we will eventually know more about the subject) it seems more meaningful to give histories of civil rights a fresh reading on the level of epistemic concerns. In other words, how do historical narratives of civil rights reflect the ways of knowing that scholars have when they write about this topic? Or, in keeping with the opening metaphor: what is the intellectual content of the Mississippi in so many historians' heads? To better understand how the thinkers in question construct their narratives, three overlapping problems need consideration: first, the overwhelming effect of the movement's religious language on historical narratives, second, the question of American liberalism as it relates to the civil rights era, and third, an ongoing debate over movement periodization.

Monumental Historical Consciousness: Exodus, and Prophetic African American Religion

While many historians recognize that the civil rights movement included religious as well as secular voices, the impact of much of its religious language on the writing of historical narratives has yet to be confronted fully.[6] In practical terms, this is the product

include Charles M. Payne, "The Social Construction of History" in *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University California Press, 1995): 413-441; and Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Historical Review* XCVI (April 1991): 456-71.

[6]Nearly every scholar acknowledges religion in some way when accounting for the civil rights movement. Some make it central to their concerns, for example, David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004);

of an overemphasis on Martin Luther King, Jr. in particular, and on the movement side of the picture more generally.[7] To be sure, efforts that emphasize leaders and activists other than Martin Luther King, Jr. move against King's ostensibly dominant religious language—and more importantly—against his unique intellectual influences. Yet, the general pull of many activists' heightened sense of "theological drama" proved a powerful disciplining agent in the stories that others subsequently told and now tell about it.[8] While respectful of the scholarly imbalance, the force of King and others' religious language should not be dismissed as mere high-flown rhetoric. The religious tropes employed by leading civil rights orators combined in a systematic attempt to lend the movement shape and narrative, and the tendency of civil rights scholars to create powerful and even quasi-mythic accounts of the movement is a direct consequence of these orators' conscious efforts.

In effect, many movement leaders acted as educators and historians, using narrative strategies to explain diverse events. A very basic example is Martin Luther King, Jr.'s contention that Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus attested to the fact that the seamstress "was a victim of both the forces of history and the forces of destiny. She had been tracked down by the *Zeitgeist*—the spirit of the time."[9] Scholars of civil rights note this with some frequency of course; King often

Dennis C. Dickerson, "African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55," *Church History* 74 (June 2005): 217-235; Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Vincent Harding, *There is a River: the Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt, 1981).

[7] Charles Eagles notes this problem, Eagles, *Toward New Histories*. 815.

[8] Charles Marsh, "The Civil Rights Movement as Theological Drama" in *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South,* Ted Ownby, ed. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002): 19-38.

[9] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King*, Jr., James Washington, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991): 424.

spoke in such lofty Hegelian tones—but against the intricacies of German idealistic

philosophy (which few activists or historians have ever had much time for) many

grassroots activists believed that powerful historical and moral forces were at work.

Speaking in 1960 at the organizing meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee (SNCC) in Raleigh, North Carolina following the early successes of the sit-in

movement, James Lawson, Jr., a pivotal figure in the Nashville demonstrations and in the

grassroots movement more generally, put the matter in similar terms—student activists

had been waiting for an appropriate historical moment. Ultimately, for Lawson this

moment was at hand in 1960, so that the students' "witness" was "not to be matched by

any social effort either in the history of the Negro or in the history of the nation…In his

own time, God has brought this to pass."[10]

The civil rights movement, according to King and other key figures, was an epic

drama, historically conditioned by the long African American struggle from slavery to

freedom, characterized by cycles of resurrection and reconciliation where those involved

somehow came into being or experienced "the truth," or "freedom."[11] In this sense the

experience of violence was a public display of this truth, sometimes depicted through the

camera's lens. To paraphrase King in (Reinhold) Niebuhrian mode, the forces of darkness

were defeated by the "yes" of the cross. Even movement participants of many different

persuasions, the secular as well as the religious, admitted that they felt they were "making

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[10] James Lawson, "From a Lunch Counter Stool," in Francis Broderick and August Meier, eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971): 309
[11] On Martin Luther King's casting of the movement as epic drama, see Marsh, "The Civil Rights Movement as Theological Drama," 19-38.

history."[12] For this reason crucial, if under-examined factors in the grassroots movement were workshops and hastily assembled educational institutions where this narrative was made and consistently reinforced. To encourage *espirit de corps*, to lend the movement momentum, activists had consistent reminders that they were part of a broader historical process ending in "freedom" very broadly construed.[13]

At the root of these kaleidoscopic references to historical consciousness was the unifying narrative of African American religion, specifically in its prophetic and Exodus modes.[14] Though these two prevailing modes overlapped and fused, the latter had deep and obvious roots in African American culture. Historically speaking, Exodus acted as collective deliverance, from the transformative experience of slavery and freedom, but also as a narrative recapitulation of that transformation. Exodus became more than a biblical reference point; it was ritualized and constantly refashioned to fit historical circumstances so that individual protest events opened up possibilities for personal liberation within a larger move toward collective freedom, sung about in freedom songs, learned about in freedom schools, or agitated for under the rubric of the Mississippi

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[12] "Making history" from an anonymous freedom summer volunteer, quoted in Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 3, similar sentiments *passim.*, 66-115. Vincent Harding, "Community as a Liberating Theme in Civil Rights History" in *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991): 17-29, also notes this sense of historical consciousness as a form of community or "spirit."

[13] Wesley Hogan, **"**The Nonviolent Anvil: James Lawson's Nashville Workshops" unpublished conference paper in author's possession; Daniel Pearlstein, "Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools." *History of Education Quarterly* 30 (Fall 1990): 297-324; John R. Rachal, "We'll Never Turn Back: Adult Education and the Struggle for Citizenship in Mississippi's Freedom Summer." *Adult Education Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (May 2000): 166.

[14] Taken in part from a more complex and detailed rendering of African Americans' use of biblical figures, Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Smith notes that a unique aspect of African American culture is "a remarkably efficacious use of biblical figures, with historically transformative and therapeutic intent, in the social imagination and political performance of black North Americans." (3)

Freedom Democratic Party (for example).[15] James Farmer, the longtime leader of the

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) described this phenomenon in the following way:

"We might think of the demonstration as a rite of initiation through which the black man

is mustered into the sacred order of freedom."[16] Thus more secular-minded activists and

supporters understood the movement's revivalistic spirit. Roger Barnhill, a white college

student who worked on voter registration in Mississippi observed: "I wasn't particularly

religious myself, but I did go…once to church. And, you know, the minister was talking

about Moses and the Jews and their time had come and pretty soon it was going to be our

time and all that kind of stuff."[17]

King was of course, instrumental to this language, often portraying himself as a

Moses figure who had "Been to the Mountaintop," and had seen "The Promised Land."

While younger activists would come to protest against or even lampoon this tendency in

King's oratory, its influence upon American thought should not be dismissed. In

profound symbolic reversal, many African Americans construed America as a sort of

Egypt, where, by way of contrast, other Americans had often imagined their country as

the Promised Land.[18] In the latter case, this meant a redeemer nation with a mission to

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[15] Perhaps the most prominent and influential African American clergyman who made this connection explicitly political before the classically regarded beginnings of the movement was Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949). Richard H. King's *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996) is among the most comprehensive accounts of this phenomenon. While King does acknowledge the Exodus narrative as an important aspect of the idea of freedom during the civil rights movement, he interprets it as part of a larger "repertory of freedom" in the West rather than a specifically recapitulatory sort of historical consciousness.

[16] James Farmer, *Freedom When?* (New York: Random House, 1966): 36.

[17] Roger Barnhill, interview by John Rachal, 7 November 1995. *Mississippi Veterans Project* Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi, Reprinted with the permission of the publishers.

[18] On symbolic reversal, Lucius Outlaw, "Language and Consciousness: Toward a Hermeneutic of Black Culture," *Cultural Hermeneutics* I (1974): 403-413. "the cultural struggle involves as one if its

convert the rest of the humanity, or in secular terms, a nation well-situated to spread its democratic ideals to the rest of the world.[19] At the onset of the Cold War, this mission and its attendant creed came under attack by those who recognized the incompatibility of these ideals with segregation in the American South. America as Egypt was a tremendously effective narrative device.

Religious leaders of the civil rights movement included a prophetic aspect in their use of an Exodus narrative structure, rejecting otherworldly or socially unengaged eschatology in favor of militant calls for social action.[20] It was, in many ways, a religious revival. Sinful white Southerners who opposed the movement and those African Americans who would not participate were called upon to repent. Judgment could be avoided only by nonviolent demonstration against Southern and national injustice, which acted as a sort of therapy for America's collective racial sickness.[21] The individual could achieve momentary liberation, sense their authenticity as humans, or experience "personhood" by direct action in pursuit of moral ends. While the ultimate goals of many civil rights activists and leaders traveled under such vague notions as "beloved

decisive features, endeavors in *symbolic reversal* (reversal of symbolism) whereby one moves on the level of symbolic meaning (and, it is hoped, the level of existence) from imposed determination of one's (a people's) existence to those generated by oneself (by the people themselves) in the process of living as affirmations of that existence in its authenticity" [emphasis Outlaw's]. Also see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002).

[19]. The rhetoric of America as the Promised Land has its roots in many studies of Puritans, a lyrical reading of John Winthrop's *A Modell of Christian Charity*. For complex perspectives, see among others Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap, 1956), Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Theory of America: Experiment or Destiny?" in *The Cycles of American History*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1986): 3-22.

[20] For somewhat different "prophetic" reading of the civil rights movement, Chappell, *Stone of Hope*; also Chappell, "Niebuhrisms and Myrdaleries: The Intellectual Roots of the Civil Rights Movement Reconsidered" in *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South*, 3-18, and "A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Faith, Liberalism, and the Death of Jim Crow" *The Journal of the Historical Society* III (Spring 2003): 129-162.

[21] On African American religion and therapeutics, Archie J. Smith, *The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy in a Black Church Perspective*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).

community" or the "Kingdom of God," moral absolutes, and a dichotomized ethical world where either one was for or against informed much of the religious rhetoric of the movement. This type of language triumphed; unlike the Vietnam War, the idea of the civil rights movement became morally unassailable despite substantive disagreements among those who later invoked the concept.

The narrative trajectory of many civil rights histories reflects this religious language. With the discipline of monumental consciousness, certain histories contend that the movement is over and occurred within a chosen time frame, but its "spirit" or ethos must be kept alive, because the efforts of its many actors represent a period nobler than our own, or demonstrate the eternality of the human capacity for greatness, or "the good," the "true" etc.[22] While the set of events known as a "the civil rights movement" may be over for whatever reason of narrative choice, some eternal, absolute, or transcendent feature of the movement remains or has continued relevance as metaphor or valued lesson. In this reading, those who sided with the movement deserve acknowledgment and praise, and those who did not invite judgment for falling askance the moral tides of history.[23] Returning to the opening metaphor, Mississippi often acts as the central symbol

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[22] This term, "monumental, refers to Friedrich Nietzsche's seminal essay commonly translated as "On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life," to which the title of this piece makes reference directly. I would offer the following oversimplified definitions for Nietzsche's three categories of historical "beings" or "consciousness": the monumental describes an effort to understand the past in terms of greatness. According to its logic, the purpose of historical study is to investigate greatness in the hopes that "the great" has some sort of an eternal quality, which can be divined in the interests of reviving a moribund or mediocre present. The antiquarian refers to the veneration of the past. A type of historical piety, antiquarianism sees value in the details of the past available to us, and seeks some sort of communion with that past. The critical involves a certain forgetfulness, a condemnation of history, or the destruction of it as a way to realize present day human needs. Nietszche, "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life," in *Unfashionable Observations*, Richard T. Gray, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995): 85-167.

[23] Again, Eagles' criticism of the "asymmetrical" approach of many civil rights studies indicates this. It also indicates the position of many prophetic voices of the civil rights leaders. In terms of historical accounts, William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle*

for the civil rights movement because of the extremity of the racism there, "in the middle

of the iceberg" so to speak.[24] The opposing sides are clearly delineated. Of course, this is

a tendency in many other histories (United States labor history is one such example, as is

African American history generally) but it is especially important in civil rights

movement history.

In a companion to the highly influential video series, *Eyes on the Prize*,

historian/activist Vincent Harding reminds the reader that "considerable evidence shows

us that we are yet capable of being amazed by the unexpected revelations of the great,

still largely untapped human potential for resistance and hope, for compassion and

grandeur, for courage and visionary self-transcendence—even when pressed against the

walls that oppression has created."[25] A series of images are offered by way of

introduction in an italicized, lyrical style, among them:

> *Women, men, and children, standing, sometimes being smashed down*
> *to the ground, paying the price for wanting justice, for believing in a more*
> *perfect union. Broken bones, bleeding heads, but spirits undaunted, returning*
> *from beds and hospitals and jails to stand and struggle again…for a*

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for Freedom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), has had a major influence in this regard. Portraying ostensible "moderates" as upholders of a politics of "civility," which emphasizes polite discourse at the expense of substantive social change, Chafe reinforced the position of Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in particular, that the "moderate" or law and order position was morally untenable. Efforts are afoot to understand the moderate side more fully, for example, S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail,"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

[24] "middle of the iceberg" from grassroots organizer Bob Moses, Magnolia, Mississippi, to SNCC headquarters, Atlanta, Georgia, November 1, 1961 in Robert P. Moses, *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project* (Boston: Beacon, 2001): 23.

[25] Vincent Harding, "We the People: the Long Journey Toward a More Perfect Union" in *A Reader and Guide, Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years*, Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine, eds. (New York: Penguin, 1987): 3. While many historians would not employ this sort of language, it bears emphasizing that professional historians are using this language in an effort to lend the movement a certain historical and transcendent significance for the purpose of popular transmission. It has their imprimatur. This is how many historians wish the movement be thought about by the broader public—its educational content. It is this emphasis that gives civil rights its infallibility in many circles.

"domestic tranquility" that we have not yet experienced, for a new society for us all.[26]

In rather less grandiose language more typical of a scholarly text, William Chafe, in his groundbreaking study of Greensboro, North Carolina intones, "Today, the aura surrounding the first sit-in demonstrations seems far away and unreal. Yet the core of that movement—its determined insistence on dignity, respect, and self-determination— remains as then, the hope of our society."[27] Ultimately, these monumental renderings of the civil rights movement draw their inspiration from the religious narrative of the movement: its sense of prophetic moral transcendence, of broad forces at work in human history and its Exodus tropes where historical events ebb and flow in symbolic, ritual cycles of subjugation and liberation: "*women men and children*," with "*broken bones…spirits undaunted, returning from beds and hospitals and jails to stand and struggle again…*"

The way that some historians put together the stories they tell bears the imprint of these streams in the movement's language.[28] Studies that focus upon Martin Luther King, Jr. are signal examples.[29] Taylor Branch's Pulitzer Prize-winning telling of the movement, *Parting the Waters: American in the King Years*, but also the sequel, *Pillar of Fire*, by using King as metaphor for American history during the civil rights era, tracks this language with a sort of manic precision. "History" broadly conceived of as an

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[26]Ibid., 2.

[27] Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights,* viii.

[28] In addition, Eagles, "Toward New Histories" notes the preponderance of civil rights histories with "biblical qualities" in their titles, 840.

[29] A notable exception to this tendency is David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), whose narrative is relatively free of the dramatic language of many histories with King at the center, particularly because of its encyclopedic attention to detail.

impersonal sort of force, deeply informs his project. Chapter titles such as "A Pawn of History" or "The Quickening" give the story pace, and lend it the portent and significance of civil rights leaders' pronouncements on their own historical role. Branch repeatedly emphasizes a fatalistic, at times apocalyptic, and prophetic rendering of the events covered by his study. In *Parting the Waters*, describing King's first political address in Montgomery, Alabama at the outset of the 1955 bus boycott, Branch offers, "In the few short minutes of his first political address, a power of communion emerged from him that would speak inexorably to strangers who would both love and revile him, like all prophets. He was twenty-six, and had not quite twelve months and four years to live."[30] Branch also relates the story of Chauncey Eskridge, a young lawyer and tax specialist who was instrumental in resolving Dr. King's financial difficulties during 1960, describing the relief felt by King when it was found that the books were in order: "King…suddenly rushed across his study to hug Eskridge like a long lost cousin. The Chicago lawyer dated his interests in politics from that moment. His devotion to King began to grow…consuming his life with the movement. He would be standing beneath the Memphis balcony at the instant King was shot down."[31] King's death mediates Branch's construction of a tragic narrative. The reader learns in *Pillar of Fire* that King is deeply flawed (as the revelation of his sexual indiscretions attest) and, given Branch's motivations, so is the United States.[32]

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[30]Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years: 1954-63* (New York: Touchstone, 1988): 142.
    [31] Ibid., 297.
    [32] This is a reference to the infamous Willard Hotel tapes taken from an FBI wiretap operation. Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Touchstone, 1998): 207.

Civil Rights, Liberal Reconstruction and the Cycles of American History

Arguably Branch's intermittently overwrought sense of tragedy stems from his apparent liberal tendencies. Although secular liberal ideas and black religious ones have never been entirely complementary, the two perspectives share a basic Judeo-Christian foundation. In no other case are these common roots more evident as they are in liberal scholars' claim to the idea of the civil rights movement. (The use of "liberal" here does not necessarily include the political orientation of the historians treated here, but instead describes a tendency or persuasion evident in their writing style and narrative choices.) The idea that American politics first, drifts in a "liberal" or progressive direction, or second, flows in liberal and illiberal cycles is intimately tied to a monumentalist persuasion, and these sentiments often overlap. The civil rights movement is often a story of appreciable gains accompanied by disappointments so that many "liberal" interpretations are secular adaptations of the religious narrative conventions of the movement. In an American Egypt, the struggle for racial equality is the yardstick for liberal goals. The idealistic, if at times platitudinous abstractions of the Declaration of Independence, particularly the notion of "equality" (as historically conditioned and contested as it may be) govern this interpretation of the movement.[33] In the case of the

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[33] This "equality" reading is a liberal convention that in some ways transgresses the actual language used by most grassroots movement participants themselves. Richard H. King notes that "There was surprisingly little talk about equality as such in the civil rights movement. Indeed, it may be that equality concerned whites more than blacks since the argument about racial equality was (and essentially is) an argument among white people. Black people assume equality to be the case, by and large; perhaps the relative paucity of references to the term among movement participants or leaders may have derived from a sense that it was demeaning for black people to argue the case at all." *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom*, 14. It bears mentioning here that liberalism in a terribly problematic term used to indicate any number of things. On liberalism in American political life along these lines, Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *The American Historical Review*, 99, no. 4 (October 1994): 1042-1073. A good survey of the American notion of liberalism that acknowledges its apparent contradictions and its historical instability as a concept is James Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Kloppenberg describes American liberalism as a set of virtues

former, emphasizing a generally progressive drift in American history, the civil rights

movement was revolutionary, and conditions modern political and social life in a positive

way. According to this reading, because of its basically liberal, universal (read:

integrationist) principles, the movement still contains valuable lessons. Robert J. Norrell,

in his study of Tuskegee, Alabama, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, maintains that

> "Those [in Tuskegee] unhappy with the aftermath of the civil rights
> movement failed to see the importance of the political changes…it was true
> that political power had not imparted the control over their destiny that many
> had expected, but now the use of power, whatever its limitations, would be
> the province of all…No one could say with certainty at the end of the 1970s
> what political equality would mean…but certainly Macon County had moved
> much closer to fulfilling American ideals of equality and individual liberty.[34]

While Norrell's subjects are rightly concerned about the limitations of democracy, he

notes a general drift or direction, a hesitant teleology, where "equality and individual

liberty" are things "moved much closer to" or "fulfilled." Similarly, Branch's, *Parting

the Waters* and *Pillar of Fire* are especially well-written and engaging examples of this

sense of liberal or progressive trajectory. In the preface to each, Branch contends that the

life of Martin Luther King, Jr. "is the best and most important metaphor for American

history in the watershed postwar years."[35] When asked to explain this in February of

1998, Branch offered the following:

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complicated by values that seem "incommensurable in theory," and characterized by unresolved yet
productive tensions such as:
> "the deliberate and delicate balancing of freedom against responsibility…the desire of the
> individual for wealth and security against the importance of social equality, and…the genuinely
> constitutive commitments to religious traditions or other cultural ideals against the awareness of
> the sometimes incompatible values of other Americans" (7).
For my purposes, "liberalism" exemplifies the tensions that Kloppenberg describes, but more
importantly, the civil rights movement is crucial to the equation. In this sense, the health of American
liberalism was and is often measured by the political, social, and economic status of African
Americans.

[34] Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York:Knopf, 1985): 211.

[35] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, xii, and *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years: 1963-65* (New York: Touchstone, 1998): xiv.

we had fought a world war about lessons of freedom, and the very searing nature of that war made us once again wonder whether we practiced that much freedom here at home. And, as usual, when there's a crisis like that in American history, as before in the Civil War, race is at the center of that: *are we really treating people according to our creed, you know, that all people are created equal.* And this is a great period of testing about that, and it did change the country in ways that are far more dramatic, I think, than we think. And I personally, looking on this historically now, think that our objective reality of the way we treat each other is far, far--all you have to do is look back at that period--far, far better. Hope is much easier now. Our problem now is that we've lost the memory of how to talk to one another and have the kind of hope and the conversion and the language about race that these people had then [italics added].[36]

Here Branch renders classic notions of progress, and in (Gunnar) Myrdalian tones, the transcendent American creed. Yet, true to his penchant for the tragic, Branch's liberal reading attempts to resurrect prophetic aspects of the movement's language as a declension ("we've lost the memory of how to talk to one another and have the kind of hope and the conversion…") while preserving the liberal faith in progress (I…think that our objective reality of the way we treat each other is far, far--all you have to do is look back at that period--far, far better.)

So this liberal mode of historical writing brings a declension model to bear on the United States *writ large*. Any sense of accomplishment always supposes a decline of some kind. This reading of the modern civil rights movement echoes some of the peaks and valleys in the movement's ritual recapitulation of Exodus, but with some important changes. For example, liberal-minded historians often describe the civil rights movement as a "Second Reconstruction," indicating the completion of the first failed effort at Reconstruction, arguably the new locus of what John Higham called (in the 1950s) the "liberal consensus." By the mid-1960s, images of Bull Connor or Jim Clark's brutality

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[36] Taylor Branch, "King's Legacy" interview by David Gergen, (PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, 2 February 1998) *Online NewsHour*, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/gergen/february98/branch_2-2.html

repulsed a very broad audience—overt and obvious racism became politically

unacceptable, and the civil rights era, construed as the Second Reconstruction, in many

ways resolved the embarrassing and paradoxical dissonance in the American democratic

strain. Yet, for many, the rise of Black Power signaled an end to the liberal universalism

of the civil rights movement, marking the coming of a form of racial particularism

anathema to cherished liberal goals.[37] The Promised Land briefly appeared to be in sight,

but illiberal ideas intervened, and in a supreme bit of irony, black nationalists sometimes

made common cause with white conservatives. C. Vann Woodward, for example, ended

the 1973 edition of *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* with a near elegy for the interracial,

integrationist goals of the civil rights era:

> After the legal end of Jim Crow, the emancipated were expected to shed not only such distinctions as they abhorred but those distinctions they cherished as essential to their identity. They found they were unable to rid themselves fully of the former and unable wholly to abandon the latter. Under these circumstances the promise of integration took on a different aspect. So long as it had been truculently withheld, it had seemed infinitely more desirable that when it was grudgingly proffered at prices that seemed too high. Discontent could therefore continue to take both the form of a demand for integration and a demand for separation. Both demands would likely be heard for a long time, for the means of satisfying neither seemed yet at hand.[38]

As the American Israel squabbled in the desert, the distance to the Promised Land

seemed as far away as ever. Woodward's observations, made amidst the racial turmoil of

the late 1960s and early 70s, continue to have an impact. Robert Weisbrot's survey of the

movement, *Freedom Bound*, interprets this declension as a failure of what he terms a

"liberal coalition," something that Woodward sensed in the early 1970s. In Weisbrot's

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[37] For a more thorough discussion of liberalism and its character during the 1950s and 1960s, see the next chapter.

[38]C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: A Commemorative Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 220.

reading, the alliance between black and white liberals fell apart after the movement transitioned from a concern with political equality to one of equality of condition where freedom from poverty became a civil right. In this sense, white liberals were not willing to radically change the existing social order, "The liberal coalition of the 1960s thus wrought, in effect, a self-limiting revolution that abolished formal barriers to equality while leaving intact the basic features of a system in which blacks had played a subordinate, marginal role." For Weisbrot, writing in 1990, it was clear that "the more expansive hopes for civil rights progress were markedly inflated."[39] Nonetheless, Weisbrot tempers this pessimism with an acknowledgment of progress. For many reasons, a firmly rooted sense of pluralism, modern global pressures, and cultural changes (for example the Martin Luther King. Jr. Holiday), "Despite the unsettling parallels with the aftermath of Reconstruction, the modern civil rights movement should prove better able to resist the undoing of black gains. A salient difference is the greater reluctance in recent times to risk convulsing society by spurning the ideal of equality."[40]

Much more recently, legal historians have used the concept of reconstruction as a basis for comparison of these two periods in history, in this case with respect to their trajectories, tracing similar patterns of "progress" followed by conservative retrenchment in the judicial arena. The notion of a continuing "liberal consensus" in this reading is certainly passé. For example, J. Morgan Kousser's *Colorblind Injustice* shows how the reconfiguration of voting districts in the South, ultimately upheld by the courts,

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[39] Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Norton, 1990): xiii, and 305. Weisbrot also sees the transition from "religious nonviolence and interracial coalition…a reminder of an earlier, more naïve time." (196). Historical accounts of this sort of declension model are numerous. Among the many are Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, Adam Fairclough, esp. "Struggle Without End" in *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana*, 1915-1972 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995): 463-477. Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000): 4.
[40] Ibid., 314.

undermined minority voting rights, a process remarkably similar to the events leading up to and including the *Plessy* decision. For Kousser, neither cycle was necessarily or only racist in its purpose, but often involved the exigencies of partisan politics, interests which inevitably involved race. (That is, race is a practical consideration or variable lawmakers or politicians deploy to pursue power, which is always the end in mind. Power politics always muddies up idealism in the end, which belongs to a cyclical or declension model.)[41]

But Woodward's elegiac statement begs some closer scrutiny. It indicated a central tension within the civil rights movement, between universalist secular and religious assumptions (human qua human, or humans made in God's image) and particularist tendencies (the psychological liberation of individual personalities later exemplified by Black Power, or by broad-reaching efforts to defeat black poverty.) Contrary to the contentions of many liberal historians, there was no archimedean point where the movement clearly transitioned from universalist to particularist *psychological* goals; this tension was there from the very beginning.[42] Segregation and exclusion from white-dominated institutions required that black folk create and foster their own institutions. Once created, they would not be easily or willingly discarded. In fact, the grassroots movement emanated from these very institutions. The African American Exodus narrative, in other words, inevitably indicated particularity as a necessary condition for survival. Black Power was the secular apotheosis of the survival impulse integral to much

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[41] J. Morgan Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice: Minority Voting Rights and the Undoing of the Second Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[42] To qualify this statement, it is safe to say that a transition did occur in tactics and strategy during the mid 1960s, particularly after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That said, my argument is that the movement originated with a psychological and intellectual tension between the universalist and particularist tendencies described here. For more on transition or rupture, see chapter four.

of the movement's religious language (whether Black Power thinkers were aware of it or not.) So this is the point at which many liberal-minded thinkers and many black activists, despite shared monumental historical consciousness, tended to part ways.[43]

Thus, as a corrective to some liberal interpretations, some more radically minded thinkers contended that a reconstruction of another sort occurred alongside the cycles of progress and retrenchment described above. In this sense, "reconstruction" described a conscious effort, in clear therapeutic/prophetic and Exodus mode, to redefine the black self in the aftermath of the political developments of the Second Reconstruction. More specifically, this redefinition considered blackness in its singularity, apart from whiteness, emboldened by the possibility of a revolutionary release from the bondage of the Hegelian master-slave relationship.[44] In the past, whites, working within the context of the master-slave relationship, constructed the "negro" according to their needs (needs which blacks reciprocated). In order to break this cycle, blacks were to reconstruct their very selves, and effect what Manning Marable, for example, has called a "Third Reconstruction." While describing a cycle of retrenchment where the court system undermined the gains of the Second Reconstruction, Marable updated the prophetic voice

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[43] It should be noted here that another aspect of Black Power that qualifies my interpretation in this case is the willingness on the part of black radicals to work within "the system" or within existing legal and constitutional channels. Many civil rights historians make note of this. For example Carson, *In Struggle*, notes that early in the sit-in movement "few students would have disagreed with the view that they were motivated by conventional American values" (13). Also Chafe, *Civilities,* "The initial sit-in demonstrators had believed profoundly in the goodness of America. They trusted white people…they had been convinced of the intrinsic workability of the system. The new generation believed none of these things. Betrayal, subterfuge, and frustration constituted their perceived experience" (244).

[44] A theological example is James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

of the movement and offered an alternative to the liberal declension model according to a reinvigorated sense of black consciousness.[45]

So the word "reconstruction" (with the appropriate ordinal descriptor added) inevitably refers to the initial Reconstruction (roughly 1865 to 1877) because it inaugurated an historical process where those in positions of power actively questioned and considered the status of free African-Americans in the United States. The First Reconstruction was also the historical moment during which the term "civil rights" came into broad national usage, now specifically referring to a species of rights that people could claim protection for from the national government against the states or private parties, a development intimately tied to the fortunes of the newly free African Americans. If the First Reconstruction witnessed a failure, in constitutional terms, of incorporation, the Second showed that legal measures were still inadequate for the purposes of racial integration and social equality. Both were signal moments of possibility in the history of American race relations, and both showed the need for further experiment.

As Second Reconstruction the civil rights movement acts as a signpost, a central attribute of the metaphorical Mississippi in many scholars' heads. In the vague liberal, universal language of equality it informs the progress of America toward the idealistic goals set forth in the Declaration of Independence. For others, "Reconstruction" charts the historical cycles of race relations in America, indicating the uneven progress of

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[45]Manning Marable, "The Third Reconstruction: Black Nationalism and Race in a Revolutionary America" *Social Text* 0 (Autumn, 1981): 3-27.

African-Americans toward freedom (however defined) and self-definition, seemingly "struggles without end."[46]

The Language of "Movement" and Local Study Antiquarianism

To overcome some of these restrictive narrative conventions of civil rights scholarship, a recent tendency involves stretching the time period of the movement beyond the familiar boundaries, which commonly start with the *Brown v. Board* decision in 1954 or the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, and end with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, or the Selma March of the same year. However one chooses to assign dates for the civil rights movement, whether further back in the past or closer to the present, this decision is often made in light of certain ethical considerations. First, on a somewhat deeper level of inquiry, this debate functions as part of a very basic difficulty with language.[47] In particular, the word "movement" troubles historians because it demonstrates our apparent inability to recreate the past fully from diverse sources. Our only recourse is narrative. (This is a problem exacerbated by one's memories of a particular set of historical events, which appear to us as ephemeral smatterings of images, rather like single frames in the motion picture of the mind.)

Moreover, the word "movement" when considered in a more elemental sense indicates a peculiar quality of objects that have extension in space. It denotes the

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[46] Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana*, 1915-1972 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995): 463.

[47] An approximation of my intent here is Wittgenstein's use of the following metaphor: "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this is surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* second ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001 [1958]): 8.

existence of force exerted on or emanating from an object, which allows that object to occupy different positions and/or places in space. More importantly, a thing that lives must demonstrate this force, it must move in time and space, from one moment to the next. So movement can describe not only an outward, visible property of existence (the exertion of force on objects with extension), but also an inner tension or force unseen by the outside observer. It describes something that is always going on within an object that is alive. In this sense, if something rests (stops moving completely within and without) it ceases to live. Conceptually, life, movement, and time are inextricably bound together.

In the case of the civil rights movement, the word "movement" almost always accompanies "the struggle"—the continuous, sustained efforts of African-Americans and their diverse supporters to attain racial equality in all phases of American life. Precisely because this "movement" constitutes a part of this larger, organic sense of "struggle," it is not atomistic, but connected at multiple levels with a common past. As a result, many historians' accounts of the civil rights era cogently demonstrate the arbitrary quality of assigned dates and the ethical importance of the broad reaching ambiguity implied by the term "movement"—a specific designation of dates might indicate a separation, a death. With this in mind historians who stretch the periodization of the movement must emphasize that the "struggle" never ceased to exist—nor should it ever do so. A typical example of this phenomenon is Adam Fairclough's study of Louisiana, *Race and Democracy*. After discovering the beginnings the movement in Louisiana in the early twentieth century, Fairclough closes by contending that the quest for racial equality is "a

struggle without end."[48] The imperative to expand the scope of the civil rights movement

unavoidably conflates "the movement" with the larger black freedom "struggle," rather

than situating the former within the latter. The former usage inexorably reaches for its

more primary existential meaning.[49] Historians bump up against the inadequacies of the

term "movement" to describe the many discrete bits of historical data with which they

deal. Everything must be important.

For scholars of civil rights, this inadequacy of language is especially acute. In

particular, the deep search for pockets of resistance in localities in a manner one might

label "antiquarian" shows the startling imprecision with which historians conceptualize

"the movement."[50] The investigation of a particular locale inevitably pushes back the

origins of the civil rights movement before 1954 (for example). Historians increasingly

discover that some courageous "local people," to use John Dittmer's apt phrase, resisted

or fought against oppression for some time.[51] By focusing on individual cases, it becomes

difficult to discern generalities in the civil rights movement's approach, and indeed to

offer even a preliminary definition of what the movement was, which only reinforces its

essential fluidity. In more practical terms, by moving away from narratives that have

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[48] Fairclough, *Race and Democracy.* In Fairclough's defense, he is careful to recognize the uniqueness of something called the "civil rights movement," beginning around 1955; yet, he insists that explicit linkages exist before 1955.

[49] This may also be at the root of the difficulties inherent in defining any social movement. The word "movement" cannot escape its more primary meaning, or to use a Wittgensteinian analogy, its place closer to the center of the ancient city.

[50] In "Uses and Abuses" Nietzsche describes antiquarianism as the "sense of veneration [that] has its greatest worth when it infuses the modest, rough, even wretched conditions in which a human being or a people live with a simple, stirring sense of joy and satisfaction." On the downside, it "views too closely and in isolation; it is unable to gauge anything, and as a result regards everything to be equally important, and consequently the individual thing to be too important" (105). This may be the source of the periodization problem. Every form of resistance to oppression assumes exaggerated significance so that all of these forms constitute a "movement."

[51] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

Martin Luther King Jr. and the handful of organizations in his orbit (especially the SCLC and SNCC) at their center, local studies have a centrifugal effect. The "movement" can only be described by way of necessary abstraction: countless local organizations and institutions enter into the analysis so that "the movement" exhibits a headless, dispersed quality, and resistance takes on a multiplicity of meanings. Robert J. Norrell's study of Tuskegee, *Reaping the Whirlwind,* offers a fascinating example:

> The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s made its way to every community in the South. In Montgomery, Albany, Birmingham, Selma, and a few others, it arrived with fanfare and occupied the limelight for much of its stay. It slipped into other towns and lay low for a while before making its presence known. It had a different experience in every place, and no place was the same after it left. Each community has a story to tell about the movement, and only when most of those stories are told will the South's great social upheaval be understood.[52]

This is certainly a tall order. Nonetheless, Norrell's use of language in the above passage reveals a great deal. By anthropomorphizing the movement ("It…lay low," etc.) Norrell obviates the need to conceptualize its meaning definitively, effectively showing that it is too elusive to be disciplined or isolated in any foundational way. The "movement" has the multiple and even unpredictable aspects of human character.

To be fair, social historians who study the facets of local movements do make earnest attempts to deal with the disconnect between the civil rights movement *writ large* and the multiplicity of meanings at the local level. J. Mills Thornton's *Dividing Lines*, an account of three localities—Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham—deals explicitly with this problem. Thornton attempts to understand how the very broad, liberal goals of the movement toward "ideals of individual liberty: equality of rights, equality of opportunity,

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[52]Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, ix.

equal justice under the law" might be reconciled with the intricacies of municipal struggles, which are most often about power and influence. For Thornton, these can be "two side of the same coin," resolved, at least momentarily, by federalism. Local power relations can violate or suspend the imperatives of "national norms of justice" exemplified in guaranteed rights put forth in the Constitution of the United States.[53] Lest this seem too narrow (which it is), Thornton acknowledges that Martin Luther King, Jr. as a central symbol of the movement, was able to combine "movement and movements" by putting these constitutional issues in explicit moral and personal terms.[54] Inevitably though, Thornton's account has its multilayered coherence due to the fact that King and the SCLC were active in all three Alabama cities.

While the local approach fails to satisfy the need of some for conceptual precision or clarity, it offers a complex depiction much more congenial to the fluid concept of the movement imagined in this study. If movement activists cannot recognize their experiences in the mythic narratives of the monumentalists, they certainly can in the detailed rendering of a good local study. Yet the tendency of many local studies to stretch the periodization of movement (even to the point of absurdity) indicates the need to find something like a tradition of resistance in a coherent form. Again, struggle and movement become indistinguishable. Ultimately, this search for forms of resistance precipitates what some philosophers of science call the "Rosenthal Effect;" if one hopes or expects to find a certain result, then that expectation will inevitably influence the

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[53] J. Mills Thornton III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002): 565-66.

[54] Ibid., 569-571. Thornton's description of these moral and personal aspects of King's ideas roughly correspond to the prophetic/therapeutic mode detailed above.

outcome of the investigation. (Is it a great surprise that an oppressed people often resisted their oppressors? Why is this resistance necessarily "the movement?") Even local study advocates cannot escape the Mississippi in their heads.

"Rosa Parks" and the Present-Day Dimensions of the Civil Rights Movement

Uncovering a few of the presuppositions that underlie many narratives of civil rights is only one side of the equation. Something must be done with these insights. To revisit a previous point, Charles Eagles, in his recent contribution to civil rights historiography, contended that a "more objective view" of the movement was necessary. Of course, "objectivity" has purposes of its own, specifically the hope that historical narratives might correspond more closely to some universally valid version of the past, or follow specific ethical procedures called "objective" or "scientific." But by the same token, understanding the civil rights movement as an idea or way of knowing is also a resolutely ethical choice, one that asks more pragmatic or functional questions. Among the foremost is: do the current narrative conventions of civil rights described above serve a purpose?

Simply put, yes they do. Nonetheless, the monumentalist lessons they offer may be too familiar to excite much interest for upcoming generations. By integrating the movement into broader schemes of American thought, and by understanding how prominent thinkers put it to use, we can discourage even further a type of segregation described by the philosopher John Dewey (which, not surprisingly, had nothing to do with racial segregation), as "the segregation that kills the vitality of history…divorce

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from the present modes and concerns of social life."[55] Currently, the standard approaches

limit opportunities for meaningful dialogue about such topics as the possibility for future

social movements, or the nature and scope of current American racial politics, often by

reducing debate about these issues to an argument over whether or not one or another

approach to a problem is the proper heir to the movement (or whether or not Martin

Luther King, Jr., would have approved, etc.) Certainly, by exploring how some of the

common narrative conventions of the movement developed, we might move past them as

a way of recognizing, with John Dewey, that "the true starting point of history is always

some present situation with its problems."[56]

So to be fair, Americans still need the civil rights movement as scholars currently

tell it. As Eagles indicates, the movement's commitments were noble, and in that

abstract, monumental sense, have a sort of *ipso facto* relevance. Nonetheless,

controversies in the realm of popular culture seem to indicate that the civil rights

movement in its monumental or triumphal mode has worn thin or at least has begun to

invite satire.[57] In an accompanying development, interesting trends have emerged in the

marketing of the movement.[58] Both developments invite a reappraisal of some kind. For

that purpose, and to illuminate the approach taken here, an extreme case may give the

necessary contrast to draw things out a bit more: namely a controversy that developed a

few years ago involving the hip-hop group Outkast's use of Rosa Parks' name.

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[55] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916): 250.

[56] Ibid., 251.

[57] For example, the character Eddie, played by Cedric the Entertainer in the 2002 movie *Barbershop* challenges the iconography of Rosa Parks, reasoning that her status as an NAACP secretary won her publicity for something several others had done many times before.

[58] See Leigh Raiford and Renee Christine Romano, eds. *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory,* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

Outkast's song, "Rosa Parks," was at best peripherally related to Rosa Parks the human being. The result was that the popular musical duo found themselves embroiled in a legal battle against representatives for Mrs. Parks. (Her guardians filed suit in court.) Mrs. Parks' lawyers argued that the group had defamed and potentially damaged the image of the civil rights icon in the crass pursuit of profit. While Outkast did not mention Parks explicitly in the lyrics of the song, only in the title, the plaintiffs found its chorus especially troubling. In it, the artists touted their supremacy in the rap business by playfully claiming or inverting (it was unclear) Parks' famous role in movement lore: "Ah ha, hush that fuss/everybody move to the back of the bus." Whatever pieties one holds (and acknowledging that music has certainly changed since the 1955 Bus Boycott) the civil rights movement, in a rather perverse turn, had become the establishment. (The very name of the musical group in question indicates playful subversion; moreover, their style is often unorthodox, and their Southern origins challenge the traditional East coast - West coast polarity of rap music. At least to that extent, Outkast may have some superficial relation to the grassroots movement.)

The difficult questions that the case raised, among others, were: if the movement should retain its widely acceptable status, then who should or should not be allowed to claim its iconography? And, if this status requires some contracting, does this more disciplined form act as a barrier to creativity? Obviously, it serves a useful purpose as an "establishment." As this study will make clear, the civil rights movement largely determined the form that mainstream racial politics in the United States took: the discourse it generated and the images that accompanied it now regulate American political behavior. It has made forthright, public declarations of racial prejudice

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unacceptable, rendering racism sometimes hidden and subtle, though no less insidious or systemic. Yet, the Outkast dilemma speaks to the success but also to an apparent shortcoming of the commonly conceived civil rights protest. Most Americans now agree that the movement was important or good, certainly a triumph given contemporary disagreements about its wisdom (most Americans favored more gradual approaches in the 1960s). Still, the meaning of that success is a subject of disagreement and it remains terribly unclear. Simply put, the precise legacy of the movement is essentially contested.

More than a few observers have interrogated at least the first half of this problem, reasoning that the movement proved inclusive and widely acceptable because it never threatened the economic status of whites, which a more systematic attempt to eliminate black poverty might have done.[59] But the problems lie deeper than that common criticism. Ironically enough, the rap group in question chose perhaps the central figure of a local movement that *did* deal with working people and economics (the boycott of a bus system by the class of folk who used that system) to make a rather insightful jibe against the mainstream rap industry, certainly a brutally competitive business, where success is often fleeting, and artists, at least in the hip-hop world's pervasive and peculiar take on the Horatio Alger myth, tend to rise from impoverished circumstances.

The second verse of "Rosa Parks," partly the retelling of a person's experiences, has a "gypsy" who "hipped" the main character "to some life game" comment, "Said baby boy you only funky as your last cut/You focus on the past your ass'll be a has what."[60] Ironically invoking the past of the black freedom struggle, claiming status as the Rosa Parks' of the rap industry, thus whimsically appropriating that past while

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[59] A contemporary example was James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial, 1962): 72.
[60] Outkast, "Rosa Parks" *Aquemini* La Face Records, 1998.

simultaneously lamenting and rejecting it for the ephemeral, future-obsessed nature of the

recording industry, Outkast presumed themselves icons in a struggle very different from

that of most civil rights histories. The contrasts here are obvious: an immensely dignified,

dedicated and disciplined figure (Rosa Parks) performed a function as symbol of success

in an oftentimes hedonistic, misogynistic, and crassly commercial musical genre;

nonetheless, the historical complexities of such contrasts contained a far more interesting

and provocative question: how does the exploitation of African American rap artists by

the recording industry relate to the civil rights movement? Even more telling, to what

extent, if at all, do Outkast (or any other rap group for that matter) inhabit ground that the

movement cleared? Or, put another way, can they claim Rosa Parks? It seems that this

present day controversy raises interesting questions unrelated to abstractions like the

historians' sense of detachment, or a set of standards and requirements for historical

inquiry. Recognizing that the movement is widely available for appropriation by just

about anyone should give us pause; it may make us less inclined to discipline the

movement, shape it as a unique political possession, or pursue the type of objectivity that

would fix its meaning more firmly in the past. Like it or not, this case exposes some of

the popular residue of the integration of the American mind.

Of course, social movement theory indicates that one measure of the success of

movements (outside of the overthrow of an existing governmental system) is the extent to

which they reshape and are absorbed by the existing system. In the United States, this

inevitably manifests itself in our robust culture industry. Simply put, Rosa Parks'

achievements made her available for use in a cultural (or commercial) enterprise. And

however much it may pain a few of us, we cannot stifle the marketplace of ideas; in this expansive sense, Outkast does inhabit ground that the movement cleared.[61]

Mrs. Parks' lawyers disagreed. The suit filed against the rap duo concerned their ostensible appropriation of Parks' "identity," which, they claimed, should be protected, because, as a "celebrity," she had a "commercial interest" in that identity.[62] They recognized, in other words, that her name had (and still has) marketable value. More broadly put, the civil rights movement, like any other product in the marketplace, had a resale value, and therefore those who took part should retain rights to their image insofar as any monetary profit could be made from it. The contrary claim sought to protect free expression in a democratic society; the use of the name Rosa Parks, if taken as an act of artistic expression, was protected by the First Amendment. Thus the crux of the case concerned whether or not Outkast's song was a work of art or a strictly a commercial enterprise.

This is impossible to disentangle in the United States. Given the history of the much of the American recording industry, and of contemporary rap music in particular, this might appear a distinction without a difference, or maybe a moot question in favor of the latter point of view, but it offered some troubling routes of inquiry. Had the court ruled in Ms. Parks' favor (despite great misgivings it did not), presumably any commercial artistic product sold in the American marketplace could be subject to suit by any civil rights "celebrity." Certainly, this should hardly give pause to academic historians, whose book sales don't appear to represent a crass pursuit of profit, but it did indicate that the movement was in some sense "for sale." Just as a telling aside, one

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[61] See Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[62] Rosa Parks v. LaFace Records, 76 F. Supp. 2d. 775 (1999) LEXIS 18097

might consider the variety of goods available for purchase at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee: "I Am a Man" t-shirts, "We Shall Overcome" necklaces, and Martin Luther King, Jr. shot glasses.

At least the resolution of the Parks versus Outkast controversy appeared salutary. The lawsuit was finally settled in April of 2005. The defendants (Outkast, their record label and various producers), did not admit fault, but agreed to work with the Raymond and Rosa Parks Institute to develop educational programs, and to contribute to a tribute CD and an educational television show detailing Mrs. Parks' historical importance and legacy.[63] While the form these various enterprises might take remains to be seen, the settlement did invite the possibility that a new generation of young people will learn something about the struggles of the past, but it won't do much for Outkast in the voracious territory of the rap game. The imbroglio also guaranteed that the movement would, at least for the moment, retain its generally sacrosanct status (though the "Barbershop" phenomenon seemed to show that it will have to withstand a few more pot shots.) In some measure, the establishment triumphed, but it also conceded that its ability to control how people make use of the movement was on the wane. While Outkast may not "play blue" on their tribute album in deference to the Parks' estate, what emerges should bear the imprint and thus characteristic style of a generation almost completely removed from the events of the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s.

The Outkast episode also showed that a great deal is at stake in how historians and most anyone else accounts for the movement. As much as many academics may like to keep the movement safe from unfortunate appropriations, it may be too late to do that entirely—therefore it is definitely too late to ignore the ways in which the grassroots

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[63] 'Rosa Parks and Rap Duo Settle Lawsuit', *Jet,* 2 May 2005, p.17

movement was actively used, abused, and interpreted by those who did not support it originally or who were only peripherally associated with it, if at all. What this discussion of a rap group begs, then, is some sort of answer or account of how the movement became this increasingly intricate set of references in the symbolic worlds we create and inhabit (or language games, etc.). As historians, it might be valuable in some cases to move beyond the attempt to isolate some "truer" foundational "movement" and instead try to understand how it took on and takes on the shape that it did and does.[64] Some effort must be made to account for the Mississippi in the heads of so many Americans who claim the movement today. (This is, after all, what histories of the civil rights movement do, and what those who use its language and symbols do—they *claim* it in some way— for themselves, for some people, or for some end.) Given that ideas are disseminated widely from countless sources, intellectual history seems as good a place as any to start.

So, historians will continue to argue that certain groups distorted and continue to distort the ideas of civil rights activists and educators; among many others, Northerners, Southerners, conservatives, liberals, white and black folk put their particular versions of the movement to use, garnering legitimacy for their causes in the process. They should. Yet it may be that these distortions are more important than we realize. Not merely examples of political opportunism, these distortions are what the movement means for many people, and they reveal how political and cultural ways of knowing develop in concert with historical events. And in the preliminary analysis, they constitute the confusing, complex, and essentially contested legacy of the civil rights movement.

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[64] "Truer" movement is invoked by Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," 1243.

CHAPTER III

LIBERALISM, THE CULT OF COMPLEXITY AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT

In a highly influential group of essays, which appeared in 1950 under the title *The*

Liberal Imagination, the literary critic and sometime novelist Lionel Trilling included a

piece on Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. The collection offered a nice sense of

Trilling's dialectical imagination (as well as some maddening analytical imprecision).

For example, according to the critic, Twain's Huck was the "servant" of a "river god,"

the Mississippi: benevolent, yet at the same time random and menacing. The river and

human society did not exist in "absolute opposition," but rather Huck's surroundings

invested his idyll with certain facts; he experienced the river, a mostly natural

environment, as a microcosm of human society—on a raft with his surrogate father Jim

(what Trilling deemed a "community of saints," an ideal society of sorts.) Well tutored in

the lessons of the fickle Mississippi, Huck was also acutely aware of human beings'

capacity for evildoing, which lent him a special sensitivity and empathy for even the most

flawed people.

Trilling also explained something of Huck's relation to Jim, which in turn illuminated

the greater truths and narrower historical context of the relation between these two

fictional characters—the white boy, the black man—and the person who wrote about

them (Twain, the novelist with a history of his own). The profound moral dilemma that

revealed this relation and tested the protagonist's sensitivity involved whether or not he

should expose Jim as an escaped slave. "The satiric brilliance of the episode" wrote

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Trilling, "lies…in Huck's solving his problem not by doing 'right' but by doing 'wrong.'" Following the critic's argument, at first, Huck experienced "all of the warmly gratifying emotions of conscious virtue" by deciding to tell on Jim. In other words, he salved his conscience by complying with the dominant moral codes of his historical position; an antebellum Southern white boy, after all, shouldn't harbor a fugitive slave. Like his white kith and kin, Huck emphatically rejected abolitionism, but in the end chose to lie for Jim because of his devotion to him, out of friendship or a kind of filial loyalty. While this sense of devotion made it clear that Huck was no passive subject to the normative beliefs of his era, he was no less troubled for having made the decision that history would eventually prove the "right" one. Thus Huck redeemed himself by choosing an antebellum form of sin, replete with all the ethical anxieties such a Hell implied.

Twain's attention to the peculiar tyrannies in human relationships also showed a broader truth of a kind that appeared to transcend the underlying moral attitudes characterizing a specific time and place. For example, after cruelly deceiving Jim, Huck decided he must apologize. By doing so, Trilling contended, "Huck's one last dim vestige of pride of status, his sense of his position as a white man, wholly vanishes." Whatever the pieties of the antebellum moral universe, Huck realized he had to make amends for hurting his friend's feelings.

For Trilling, Huck's anxiety and the dialectical nature of it—produced by the interaction between a historically conditioned ethical sensibility and the more essential ethics of friendship—showed that Twain's novel was both a product of the period in which the writer created it and a demonstration of much greater, unquestionably human

insights. It was, in other words, both "universal" and "local and particular."[1] While it is

easy to argue that interpersonal relationships always pique the moral sensibility—a

"universal" truth of a sort—by emphasizing the "particular," Trilling meant to show that

Huck's moral universe, in many ways explained by his relation to the river, acted as a

lament for a more innocent time, before the Gilded Age triumph of machines and

impersonal schemes of human organization, which rendered Huck's love for Jim a type

of nostalgia. In other words, the historical scene in which Twain found himself allowed

the writer access to "the truth of moral passion…the virtue and depravity of man's heart,"

which for him resided in an earlier, less confusing period in history, namely, Huck's

antebellum world.[2] (Of course, Trilling was far too discerning a critic to let pass as a

form of insight the notion that the past might be a more innocent time than the present,

but he believed that the Civil War and the similar observations of more than a few of

Twain's artistic contemporaries occasioned the cliché.) The sensitivity to truth that so

defined Huckleberry Finn for Trilling was rather ironic: the boy shared the moral virtues

of his age but chose to violate them in favor of the more transcendent virtues of

friendship, which, the critic explained, were made possible only because Twain felt

dislocated in his own time and nostalgic for Huck's.

This brand of criticism – with its subtly layered dialectical relations designed to bring

out a fictional work's human, truth-telling function – typified a larger group of American

intellectuals at mid-century. Either implicitly or explicitly, they brought this sensibility

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[1] Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Viking, 1950), 107, 108, 112, 111, 113.

[2] Ibid., 110. This demonstrates Trilling's pragmatic, historicist effort to save literature from the New Critics as well as the older historical school of thought, which sought some degree of scientific certainty: "To suppose that we can think like men of another time is as much of an illusion as to suppose that we can think in a wholly different way." (187)

to their responses to the civil rights movement. Many scholars have since lamented the
United States of the period as a bygone era when the words "public" and "intellectual,"
when written consecutively or uttered in the same breath carried some cultural weight—
presumably a good bit heavier than today's inspired absurdity. Of course, American
intellectuals have always puzzled over their role in a popular democracy ("popular" in
terms of culture if not always politics). That a group of thinkers who came of age at mid-
century should complain and long for the good old days comes as no surprise, but that
their sense of loss was most acute during the high tide of the civil rights era speaks in
interesting ways to Trilling's dialectic of the universal and particular, and to the ways in
which the movement both conflicted with and, less obviously, complemented what I have
chosen to call the postwar liberal *cult of complexity*. Like Trilling's Twain, this group felt
dislocated by the movement and by the 1960s more broadly, and were nostalgic for an
earlier, seemingly less morally confused time, however misguided that time was.[3]

More generally, liberals during the middle of the last century conceived of the civil
rights movement as a cause concerning a specific group of people, African Americans,
who sought the affirmation of their basic constitutional rights, essentially universal
national goals traveling under the universal assumption that all people were entitled to
certain rights by the virtue of being human. The true meaning of democracy in the United
States demanded that no Americans, whatever their race, be excluded from civil society.
The goal of racial integration (conceived of in a number of different ways, achieved
through a number of different strategies) represented the potential resolution of

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[3] The declining status of intellectuals was noted in 1960, for example, by Loren Baritz, *The Servants of Power: A History of the Use of Social Scientists in American Industry* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1960).

America's great dilemma, the incompatibility of the nation's creedal virtues with its social and political practices.

Yet liberalism, like the civil rights movement, was and is an idea with a plastic meaning. The notion of a unified or coherent liberal tradition in the United States apart from nineteenth century, "classical" conceptions of it involving the protection of individual rights against the interference of the state, came together only in the generation previous to the one in question here, particularly through the influence of John Dewey.[4] Different groups with different agendas adapted its meaning to meet the needs of their particular historical situations. As historian Gary Gerstle notes, "Far from being a Hartzian creed etched in Lockean stone, liberalism in twentieth-century America has emerged as a variable, somewhat tractable, political philosophy."[5] In any case, the group of thinkers described here rate the name liberal, however tenuously, primarily for their emphasis on individual rights and freedom of conscience. In particular, they defended individual personality against totalizing philosophies and dogmatisms, whether from political ideology or the seductions of mass culture, thus this form of liberalism often took the form of a dissent against orthodoxies of dissent. They could also be very critical of liberalism as they saw it, for ironic or irenic purposes. Respectively, they lamented the decline of its creative powers or sought to toughen it to meet the requirements of the Cold War.

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[4]John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*. This follows the analysis of Rogers M. Smith, "Liberalism and Racism: The Problem of Analyzing Traditions" in *The Liberal Tradition in American Politics: Reassessing the Legacy of American Liberalism*, David Ericson and Louisa Bertch Green, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1999): 9-27. Smith argues that even the laissez faire conception of liberalism is a product of twentieth century thinkers. The peculiar American liberalism, then, arises in *response* to an older liberal tradition stemming from Protestantism and developing through Hobbes and Locke, the Enlightenment, American revolutionary thinkers, Utilitarians and Social Darwininsts like Herbert Spencer, which had only recently been identified as such.

[5] Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism." *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (October 1994): 1045.

By 1945, American liberalism more generally also had racial connotations. In the aftermath of the Second World War, struck by the realization that the outcome of racially based nationalism could only be holocaust and horrific crimes against humanity, American liberals came to embrace notions of racial and ethnic equality. Empirical evidence gave succor to these beliefs, as a new mainstream in the social sciences made clear that racial distinctions had limited, if any, real biological support. As for the application of this idea to the realities of American life, Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* (1944) explained the generative power of the paradoxical relation between the nation's founding abstractions and its prejudicial practices. Americans liberals found themselves engaged in a constant struggle to fulfill the ideals of their egalitarian creed. This transition in thinking among liberals sometimes gave rise to naïve formulations of a common humanity, for example, Kenneth Stampp's contention in *The Peculiar Institution*, that black folk were merely white people with black skins.[6]

Unlike their more idealistic liberal peers, however, the members of the cult of complexity at mid-century struggled, like Huck Finn, with their own moral quandaries and personal devotions. And, like Twain's lament, peculiar historical circumstances embedded these struggles, which were characterized by feelings of dislocation and confusion. By describing the problems of their times, many of them concluded that their unique devotions captured greater, ineradicably human, truths, such as (to revisit the previous quote by Trilling) "the virtue and depravity of man's heart." Among the ranks of this group, four are perhaps most representative of its general approach to problems: Trilling, the writer Ralph Ellison, the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and the

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[6] Richard H. King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals*, 1940-1970, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2004) maps this transition in a good deal more detail and with much more complexity.

theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. When attempting to account for (or in the case of Ellison explain) the persistence of racial and ethnic distinctions in national discussions about what America should be and look like, their persistent calls for moral sensitivity at times made them misunderstand the urgency and intricacy of many African Americans' very real grievances. Ironically, they substituted their peculiar concept of complexity: a refined, putatively universal, (read "Western") aesthetic or ethical sensibility, including the attempt to create a critical culture, for a full appreciation of the particularities of racial politics in the United States.[7] Rejecting fixed systems of thought in favor of the irreducible pluralism and value of individual personality, they nonetheless tended to universalize something called "human," whether in service of critical aesthetic standards or of political realism, which left their thinking flavored with monumental historical consciousness.

However, to acknowledge that some intellectuals could be tone deaf to the depth of black people's concerns in the United States is not to contend that they completely misunderstood, or were entirely ill-equipped to grasp, the civil rights movement, nor were they wholly removed from its intellectual currents.[8] If we take seriously the suggestion of this study, that the movement refers to a way of ordering the world

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[7] Richard H. King, in *Ibid.*, points out that universalism and particularism are incoherent positions when considered in an analytically "pure" sense. His solution is that such notions should be treated as "tendencies" rather than "fixed mutually exclusive positions within the West generally and within individual thinkers and movements." (11) Thus the common criticism that universality often acts as a mask for a "Western" perspective.

[8] David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004) shows that liberals suffered from "pulpit envy;" they were never able to find a suitable secular replacement for the discipline religious belief provided, nor did enough of them include a realistic appraisal of human nature (fallen, sinful) in their push for social reform. So the Civil Rights Movement was a surprise to many liberals, and by implication the movement acts as a measuring stick for the viability of their ideas, particularly with regard to racial justice. This is a valuable historical argument, but it tends to obscure the fact that liberalism proved flexible enough to incorporate civil rights as one of its leading issues, which is my concern here. In Professor Chappell's defense, he does acknowledge that liberal language and ideas were present in the movement; he is far more concerned with those ideas that made it truly "move": those that made people risk life and limb for the cause.

politically, the manner of which was and is in a state of constant growth and change, then

the ambiguous type of liberalism and liberal intellectuals discussed here are crucial to

understanding and even re-imagining its import, the persuasion or way of encountering

the world that Americans mean when they write or talk about "the civil rights

movement." Liberals helped to create, and in turn, were recreated by the movement. (In a

somewhat different context, it is little surprise that one group called "the movement" and

another named "liberals" is not always clearly distinguishable today, even though

grassroots activists and liberal thinkers could have considerable differences of opinion.)

So what follows is not an effort to "make civil rights harder" in the historian Jacqueline

Dowd Hall's phrase, but an attempt to tell at least a part of the story of how it became so

soft, and in the process evaluate this story for both its limitations and potential insights.[9]

All of this requires some sense of what liberalism meant to these thinkers at mid-

century, and of how this group imagined or re-imagined themselves and the movement

during the first twenty years or so of the postwar era. What follows is a partial story of a

very specific variety of political thought, one that made claims for a far more discerning

type of liberalism than other varieties then available. This group espoused a kind of

culture and politics fit for the needs of the Cold War, thereby contributing an embattled

way of thinking that made them believe, like Trilling did of Huck Finn, that they grasped

greater truths than the narrow pieties of their age permitted.[10] Thus, putting these

intellectuals in conversation with one another on issues of race and civil rights also means

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[9] Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" *The Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005).

[10] There is some precedent for my approach. Kevin Mattson, for example, *When American Was Great: The Fighting Faith of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2004) takes a similar approach in that he describes liberalism as a certain "worldview" shared by a number of thinkers related to his primary liberal subjects, Reinhold Niebuhr, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Kenneth Galbraith and James Wechsler.

dealing with perennial problems—the relationship between politics and art, the responsibilities of the intellectual, and the search for unity and standards of cultural merit in a democratic, pluralistic society.

In the interests of clarity, two categories of the intellectuals of the cult of complexity merit discussion here: those most dedicated to aesthetic and cultural concerns, and those with more traditionally political interests. As representative figures, Trilling and, it is argued here, Ralph Ellison fell into the former camp, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Reinhold Niebuhr into the latter. In the first case, Trilling acts as a foil for Ellison's reading of the civil rights movement. Both writers were suspicious of liberalism's ability to sustain a creative critical mode of literary analysis. While the Negro American writer shared many of the concerns of his Jewish counterpart, he proved far more able in his interpretation of race and the struggle for civil rights. In contrast, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. considered Reinhold Niebuhr a mentor of sorts. Though the historian diluted the theologian's more tough-minded insights, the ultimate commensurability of their respective readings of the movement revealed points of similarity in their thinking.

In both cases, it is clear that these thinkers contributed in creative ways to our present day understanding of the movement. Rather than the simple, whiggish, triumphal rendering of the movement so popular today, where the good guys and the bad guys emerge with sparkling, if exaggerated clarity, these thinkers instead lent the movement a certain amount of difficulty, whether a sense of irony (Niebuhr, and Schlesinger) or, in Ellison's unique case, tragi-comedy, aesthetic meaning and possibility. If the movement proved surprising to many liberals, as scholars increasingly contend, their attempts to

explain it should reveal a great deal about the nature of their ideas.[11] In turn, their responses to it should cast needed light on how the movement came to acquire the very fluid meaning it has today, and of how it indicates seemingly irreducible complexity when considered as an approach to political problems.

Liberal Aesthetics: Trilling, Ellison, and the Problem of Engagement

Not all racial universalisms were as flat-footed as Kenneth Stampp's normative whiteness. Historian David Hollinger, for one, contends that intellectuals, especially those of a literary or artistic bent who came of age as left-wing radicals in the 1930s (later abandoning their Marxist persuasion for liberal anticommunism in the 1940s) had a "cosmopolitan sensibility," namely:

> the desire to transcend particularisms in order to achieve more complete human experience and a more complete understanding of experience. The ideal is decidedly counter to the eradication of cultural differences, but counter also to their preservation in parochial form. Rather, particular cultures and subcultures are viewed as repositories for insights and experiences that can be drawn upon in the interests of a more comprehensive outlook on the world. Insofar as a particular ethnic heritage or tradition is an avenue toward the expansion of experience and understanding, access to it is to be preserved[12]

The common criticism of this group that Hollinger describes ("New York Intellectuals" like Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Dwight MacDonald and Philip Rahv) is that they understood this cosmopolitanism as a "peculiar possession" and did not feel it necessary to make their values radically egalitarian in any sense.[13] In carving out a critical liberal/Left culture, they remained vigilant against Tocqueville's dire conclusions

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[11] This notion of surprise is a recent refrain. Among the first here was Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1996 [1992]): 37-38.

[12] David Hollinger, "Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia," *American Quarterly*, 27 (May 1975): 135.

[13] Ibid., 151.

about the inevitable mediocrity of a democratic mass culture. In the process, they surrendered to a pernicious sort of elitism. Abandoning racial and ethnic parochialism for a complex sense of cosmopolitan, universalist Western aesthetics, they gloried in the particularity of their position as persecuted, or at least misunderstood, intellectuals. In the case of some of these thinkers (especially Jewish ones as this interpretation goes) the stance of the persecuted intellectual acted as a sort of proxy for largely discarded, corrosively provincial ethnic identities. "Anti-intellectualism," Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. observed in 1953, "has long been the anti-Semitism of the businessman."[14] Meanwhile, social realities, and with it the intricacies of the black freedom struggle, passed most of them by; the subsequent rise of black nationalism/Black Power and the New Left in the late 1960s would disillusion or confuse them as it would many postwar intellectuals, so that a prominent handful, especially Trilling, would later come to be identified as neo-conservatives.

Cornel West reads his own mid-century "pragmatic" liberals in very much the same way, suggesting that they were apt to "distrust" lower and working class people because of their stubborn insistence upon what he calls "critical intelligence." "This obsession," according to West,

> assumes that bourgeois culture—its professors, writers, and artists—has a monopoly on critical intelligence. Furthermore, this obsession is motivated by a desire to get out from under the smoldering parochial anti-intellectualism of the various ethnic, racial, class, and regional groups in American society.[15]

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[14] Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Highbrow in Politics," *Partisan Review* 20 (March-April 1953), quoted in Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1970 [1963]): 4.

[15] Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989): 179.

For West, Trilling was perhaps the best (or worst) example of this sort of tendency, as the philosopher shrewdly names him, the "Godfather of Neo-Conservatism" (a label usually reserved for Irving Kristol).[16]

Even a preliminary reading of *The Liberal Imagination* makes West's conclusions all too clear. Trilling's insistence that politics be made conceptually broad enough to encompass artistic considerations was something far different from what we consider the traditional business of the liberal project, or of social movements. Liberalism, when dedicated in its more practical manifestations to rationality, or to planning, (those aspects we might deem "material") always met with his disapproving eye. For example, criticism that enshrined Theodore Dreiser as a good "liberal" model, while it might acknowledge the novelist's infelicities of style, too frequently ignored his limited conceptual sophistication for a supposed proletarian or "peasant" appeal.[17]

Adapting somewhat Hollinger and West's interpretations, in my reading "complexity" emerges as the linchpin term in a fuller discourse on liberalism at mid-century; its fussy dialectical imagination, often interposed with heavy doses of Freud and affiliated with what the novelist Henry James called the "complex fate" of Americans.[18] For Lionel Trilling, beyond liberalism's traditional, programmatic manifestations and its penchant for ordering the world, what demanded revealing were its liberating aspirations—the desires that drove such yearning, and the complex relation of those desires to the impulse for rational control of them.

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[16] For West on Trilling, Ibid.; also "Lionel Trilling: God Father of Neo-Conservatism," in *Lionel Trilling and the Critics: Opposing Selves,* John Rodden, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999): 395-403.

[17] Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 15-16.

[18] For example, Ibid., 14-16; Ted Solotaroff, "Introduction" in *Alfred Kazin's America: Critical and Personal Writings*, Ted Solotaroff, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2003): xvi; Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, John Callahan, ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1995[1964]): 189-209.

> The lively sense of contingency and possibility, and of those exceptions to
> the rule which may be the beginning of the end of the rule—this sense
> does not suit well with the impulse to organization. So that when we come
> to look at liberalism in a critical spirit, we have to expect that there will be
> a discrepancy between what I have called the primal imagination of
> liberalism and its present particular manifestations. The job of criticism
> would seem to be, then, to recall liberalism to its first essential
> imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of
> complexity and difficulty.[19]

This version of liberation was a far cry from the language of freedom that dominated

the civil rights movement, yet it would be far too easy to dismiss Trilling and those like

him with artistic sensibilities as merely narrow aesthetes with nothing important to

contribute to our understanding of the cultural dynamics of the civil rights era.

Obviously, the rarified territory of mid-century New York literary criticism was far-

removed from the movement on the streets, but this shouldn't preclude a basic question:

what type or style of thinking contributed to this absence, and should it have?[20]

Moreover, could an aesthetic of the type articulated by Trilling in the *Liberal

Imagination* be used to describe and understand the civil rights movement? With this in

mind, the fact that Trilling and others never saw fit to comment on racial matters with

any sophistication or consistency remained a gnawing problem. In a footnote tucked

away in *The Liberal Imagination*, for example, Trilling showed a remarkable lack of

sensitivity. Referring to the viability of conflicts between "minorities…particularly

Negroes and Jews" and the majority group as material for the novel, the critic reasoned,

> It involves no real cultural struggle, no significant conflict of ideals, for
> the excluded group has the same notion of life and the same aspirations as

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[19] Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*., xv.

[20] This is meant to act as a corrective to approaches that discuss intellectuals and their activities, but leave their actual ideas strangely missing. For example, Carol Polsgrove, *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Norton, 2001) paraphrases Irving Howe's criticism of Trilling's *Liberal Imagination* as "a rationale for pulling away from engagement," but makes no effort whatsoever to explain the style and content of the thought that created this problem. (44-45)

the excluding group, although the novelist who attempts the subject naturally uses the tactic of showing that the excluded group has a different and better ethos; and it is impossible to suppose that the novelist who chooses this particular subject will be able to muster the satirical ambivalence toward both groups which marks the good novel even when it has a social *parti pris*. [21]

Rather flippantly, Trilling chose not to dismiss the possibility of a meretricious protest novel, but he argued here that minority protest novels could never be "good" because in essence the stakes were too high. Even worse, he assumed that self-conscious minority perspectives, in all likelihood, could *never* ascend to the level of "good" art. It was a delusion to contend that minority perspectives were somehow different or unique from those of the majority. This strange conception of the function of liberal literary criticism, so tenaciously exclusive in its aesthetic judgments, leveled a large share of its prickly attack upon lack of intelligence in-house. Thus advocacy by or on the behalf of minorities was a bad manifestation of liberal aesthetics. So while Trilling sought to define politics more expansively in order to encompass artistic considerations, he chose to suspend imaginative possibilities for minority novelists. The naïve liberal faith in the common, which he found lacking in stylistic and conceptual merit, presumably came at the expense of the individual's creative freedom, yet some topics appeared out of bounds for novelists. Intelligence was a moral imperative that made "satirical ambivalence" a necessity.[22] Trilling, while critical of idealism or guiding metaphysical assumptions in

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[21] Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 261n; Also see Hollinger, "Ethnic Diversity," 143.

[22] See Trilling, 205-222; Maybe this was most clearly stated by another New York intellectual, Dwight MacDonald, *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962[1952]), "For some reason, objections to the giving-to-the-public-what-it-wants line are often attacked as undemocratic and snobbish. Yet it is precisely because I do believe in the potentialities of ordinary people that I criticize Masscult. For the masses are not people, they are not The Man in Street or The Average Man, they are not even that figment of liberal condescension, The Common Man." (11)

This emphasis on complexity differs somewhat from David Chappell's notion of "Hungry Liberals" in *A Stone of Hope.* For example, in an earlier article, Chappell's reading that Trilling's critical enterprise was designed to "leaven liberalism—thus extend and protest its triumph—with a quasi-spiritual discipline"

criticism or in novels, nonetheless essentialized something universally human as the measure of the good. Command of the novelist's métier meant the ability to understand and therefore suspend historical contingencies and political needs in the service of art.

Of course, the last few decades of American literature and literary criticism have shown that Trilling was dead wrong on this score. Some two years after the appearance of *The Liberal Imagination*, Ralph Ellison published a novel, *Invisible Man*, with a deft sense of "satirical ambivalence" for its subjects, whatever their race. And perhaps more than any of the men covered here, Ralph Ellison revealed that a "complex" perspective like that of Trilling could include the civil rights movement and its interests. By reading Ellison on the movement, one gets some sense of its *aesthetic* meaning and potential, rarely understood or commented on by anyone with any frequency at all.[23] Moreover, there exists some cause for including Ellison in this group of intellectuals.[24] While Ellison certainly had a unique and original literary vision, the trajectory of his political and artistic development mirrors that of many Anglo and Jewish liberal/Left thinkers. He began writing in New York in the 1930s, had some association with radical politics, and then came to embrace a form of liberal anticommunism in the postwar era. So if we read

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is accurate. However, that "Trilling's sad tone suggested that the squaring of this circle would be difficult as it was desirable" doesn't appear to capture the project entirely. Certainly, the tone of the introduction to the *Liberal Imagination* is proscriptive, but the remainder of Trilling's essays (to which Chappell does not refer) might be more accurately read as an object lesson for just this type of complex liberal criticism, which revealed a certain stubborn "satirical ambivalence" that characterized his thinking—a discipline that ineluctably celebrated a degree of conceptual messiness. In short, it's unclear to me whether or not Trilling thought the "squaring of the circle" entirely "desirable"—that would be giving in. Chappell, "Niebuhrisms and Myrdaleries: The Intellectual Roots of the Civil Rights Movement Reconsidered" in *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South,* Ted Ownby, ed. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 7.

[23] The last chapter of this study might be considered a modest effort at addressing this problem.

[24] In a limited sense, this interpretation follows that of James Seaton, *Cultural Conservatism. Political Liberalism: From Criticism to Cultural Studies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press). Seaton puts Trilling and Ellison in a tradition of criticism reaching back to English writers Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold:
"Connecting literature to politics without diminishing either, this tradition's commitment to the language of public discourse fosters democracy even when the opinions of its practitioners are unapologetically elitist."(1)

Ellison as a member of the mid-century cult of complexity, his comments about race and its role in contemporary politics show what the civil rights movement, broadly conceived of as an idea, might have meant in relation to the program of creating a liberal culture and form of criticism.

Like other literary critics active during the Civil Rights Era, Ellison used the key term "complexity" a great deal; it was the necessary ingredient in any description of American democracy. Given this insistence, he proved a bristling critic of those who, in his estimation, lacked this essential prerequisite for creating art. Among the many exchanges that show Ellison's affinity with Trilling and other artistically-minded liberal intellectuals, one is the most prominent, his response to Irving Howe's 1963 essay, "Black Boys and Native Sons," namely, "The World and the Jug." Howe, the socialist critic and longtime editor of *Dissent*, turned his pen against the novelist James Baldwin along with Ellison, both of whom, he argued, had departed from the protest-oriented vision of Richard Wright.[25] Baldwin and Ellison, by claiming that Wright's black characters expressed only the narrowest of impulses, substituting anger or fear for the richness of African American life, abandoned the older novelist's trenchant social critique. Given the pervasive, often brutal character of American racism, Howe reserved special praise for Wright's *Native Son;* it had achieved a level of authenticity and gritty naturalism that few novels could aspire to capture.[26] By criticizing Wright, Baldwin and

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[25] Interestingly enough, Alfred Kazin's criticism of *Native Son* also makes the cut as an object of Howe's animus, however briefly. Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons" in *Twenty-five Years of Dissent: an American Tradition*, Irving Howe, ed. (New York: Methuen, 1979 [1963]): 124-5.

[26] In an interesting coincidence that evokes Trilling, Howe also compared Wright to Dreiser, and in doing so indulged in just the sort of mistaken interpretation that Trilling pilloried over a decade previous. In Howe's estimation, *Native Son* was a great novel despite "grave faults…the language is often coarse, flat in rhythm, syntactically overburdened, heavy with journalistic slag." Ibid., 123. Note Trilling on Dreiser in *The Liberal Imagination*:

Ellison made not only the wrong political choice, but also even more damaging, they made the wrong aesthetic choice.

To grossly oversimplify, Howe attempted to show that Ellison and Baldwin had "sold out" in favor of a self-consciously "literary" style. By insisting upon the "infinite possibilities" for his freedom of self-expression (which echoed Trilling's use of the idea of possibility), Ellison, especially, "violat[ed] the reality of social life, the interplay between external conditions and personal will":

> The unfortunate fact remains that to define one's individuality is to stumble upon social barriers which stand in the way, all too much in the way, of "infinite possibilities." Freedom can be fought for, but it cannot always be willed or asserted into existence. And it seems hardly an accident that even as Ellison's hero [in *Invisible Man*] asserts the "infinite possibilities" he makes no attempt to specify them.[27]

For Howe, one of the functions of the novel was to depict extremes, so that the subtlety insisted upon by writers like Ellison and Baldwin would deny Wright the reality of his experiences with racism. Thus Bigger Thomas' inarticulate rage was the product of Wright's damage: "Is Bigger an authentic projection of a social reality, or is he symptom of Wright's 'dependence on violence and shock'? Obviously both; and it could not be otherwise."[28]

Ellison's oft-quoted reply to Howe's line of argument, (combating what Daryl Scott has lately and aptly called "damage imagery") asserted the humanity and intelligence of Wright set against the character Bigger Thomas: "Wright could imagine Bigger, but

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Everyone is aware that Dreiser's prose style is full of roughness and ungainliness, and the critics who admire Dreiser tell us it does not matter. Of course it does not matter. No reader with a right sense of style would suppose that it does matter, and he might even find it a virtue. But it has been taken for granted that the ungainliness of Dreiser's style is the only possible objection to be made to it, and that whoever finds any fault at all wants a prettified genteel style (and is objecting to the ungainliness of reality itself.) (15)

[27] Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons,"131-2.

[28] Ibid., 125.

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Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright." In other words, "he [Wright] was himself a better argument for my approach than Bigger was for his."[29] This was a pretty tall order for a fictional character. And in Howe's defense, the socialist critic did emphasize that humanity could be won through protest. So while a "sociological" perspective arguably limited Wright and presumably Howe's depiction of black life, Ellison's comment that "Irving Howe would designate the role which Negro writers are to play more rigidly than any Southern politician," was, on its face, terrifically unfair.[30]

It was not without some larger purpose, however. Ellison was supplying liberalism with the potential materials for its recreation during and after the civil rights movement. Having got the better of Howe in what could best be called an intellectual's variation on the dozens, Ellison would add in a rejoinder later in the exchange: "I am sorry that Irving Howe got the impression that I was throwing bean-balls when I only meant to pitch him a hyperbole."[31] Ellison wanted to make clear that the result of oppression was not merely rage, anger, fear or violence, but the widest range of emotions imaginable, most importantly channeled in creative ways as cultural forms. By "pitching a hyperbole" Ellison made this point stylistically clear by engaging in the sort of playful one-upsmanship found in jazz music or in games of verbal jousting in the black oral tradition. Like the content of these traditions, the catholicity of Richard Wright's intellect was as much and certainly even more the product of searing oppression than anything Bigger

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[29] Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, John Callahan, ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1995[1963]): 162. Curiously enough, in an uncharacteristic misreading, Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), puts Ellison on the side of those who emphasize damage. In effect, Scott reads Ellison exclusively in an earlier phase of his thinking, circa 1945-46 and his essays "Richard Wright's Blues," and "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity."

[30] Ellison, "The World and the Jug," 167.

[31] Ibid., 168.

Thomas could articulate. The novelist's mind would remain a far more complete

expression of protest in *cultural* terms. Ellison offered an in-house critique of a simplistic

version of liberalism, what he called "Northern white liberalism." Identifying with the

South (which, given his Oklahoma upbringing, was an intricate affair) he accused Howe

(as a socialist who shared this tendency) of making the error of believing in the "absolute

separation of the races."[32] So he reminded Howe that "whatever the efficiency of

segregation as sociopolitical arrangement, it has been far from absolute on the level of

culture."[33] Playing the critic of criticism (in a vein similar to Trilling's treatment of

Vernon Parrington in *The Liberal Imagination*), Ellison sought to expose not Howe's

political limitations, but his conceptual ones.[34]

In using the word "complexity," Ellison invested the term with the meaning

Trilling may have attributed to it, this time with a unique twist. He adapted the inimitable

style of the classic 1940s and 1950s liberal/Left literary intellectual to fit the prompting

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[32] Ibid., 163. Of course, Ellison was aware that Howe was a socialist rather than a liberal. This Southern identification was an interesting facet of Ellison's thought. As a native of Oklahoma (as he repeatedly liked to point out, a "frontier" state), he encountered the South from a sort of émigré perspective. One might say that his relation to the South, steeped as it was in memory (and in his brief time at Tuskegee), had something of the flavor of the immigrant's ambivalent relation to the Old World, which merely reinforces his cosmopolitanism. Perhaps a more forthright statement of Ellison's position *vis a vis* "Northern liberals" and "intellectuals" was made in 1968, when he defended Lyndon Johnson, "The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner," Ibid., 553. He recalls Henry James' "complex fate" yet again, contending:

> for all the values that I shared and still share, with my fellow intellectuals, there are nevertheless certain basic perspectives and attitudes toward art and politics, cultural affairs and politicians, which we are far from sharing. I had to accept the fact that if I tried to adapt to their point of view, I would not only be dishonest but would violate disastrously that sense of complexity, historical and cultural, political and personal, out of which it is my fate and privilege to write.

[33] Ibid., 163.

[34] Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*: "This is the liberal criticism, in direct line of Parrington, which establishes the social responsibility of the writer and then goes on to say that, apart from his duty to resemble reality as much as possible, he is not really responsible for anything, not even for his ideas." (21); And Ellison,

> If I am to recognize those aspects of my role as writer which do not depend primarily upon racial identity, if I am to fulfill the writer's basic responsibility to his craft, then surely I must insist upon the maintenance of a certain level of precision in language, a maximum correspondence between the form of a piece of writing and its content, between words and ideas and the things and processes of this world. Ibid., 172.

of his own artistic needs as a Negro American. More than merely a tool used to separate

oneself from the ingenuous blandishments of mass culture, Ellison used the notion to

render the lives of common black folk (what he often called "the vernacular") as a form

of art. In good cosmopolitan fashion, this was done with a clear debt to Western culture,

and to the idea that not skin color but culture made Negroes (to use Ellison's

terminology) a distinctive "subdivision" in a pluralistic, tangled American skein.[35]

According to this approach, the civil rights movement, construed as an idea by Ellison,

served to support the cause of complexity because it revealed something precious about

the lives of black people in America.

In 1961, when asked if he would ever write stories without African American

characters, Ellison responded in the negative, in effect transgressing the boundaries that

Trilling had set down over a decade earlier. Anticipating his debate with Howe, he

castigated the narrowness of the "sociological approach," reinforced the function of the

moral imagination in fiction, and claimed the movement as representative of and an ally

in his own artistic project:

> Too many of us have accepted a statistical interpretation of our lives, and
> thus much of that which makes us a source of moral strength to America
> goes unappreciated and undefined. Now, when you try to trace American
> values as they find expression in the Negro community, where do you
> begin? To what books do you go? How do you account for Little Rock and
> the sit-ins? How do you account for the strength of those kids? You can
> find sociological descriptions of the conditions under which they live but
> few indications of their morale.[36]

The liberal artist, because of her responsibility to complexity, could uncover the

sources of the courage that civil rights activists summoned in the face of so much

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[35] Ibid., 177. Ellison was always very clear about the fact that American Negroes were products of Western culture. See esp. Ralph Ellison, "Some Questions and Some Answers," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, John Callahan, ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1995[1958]): 292-293.
[36] Ellison, "That Same Pain," in Ibid.,75.

oppression and the threat of violence, in Little Rock or in Greensboro. Fiction would reveal what sociology could not.

There was something faintly Romantic and volkish about Ellison's use of the civil rights movement in that the memory of past struggle, and the adaptation to those struggles, formed a crucial aspect of his project. "[T]imes change," he insisted, "but these possessions must endure forever."[37] The movement was an historical instance that showed the relevance and consistency of the peculiar traditions of an identifiable group of people—a familiar use of the specific to explain presumably trans-historical, "human" truths. Thus the civil rights movement had universal meaning, for the persistent lessons of the struggle, emphasized the novelist, "must endure forever—not simply because they define us as a group, but because they represent a further instance of man's triumph over chaos." It served this tension in Ellison's thought: "the skins of those thin-legged girls who faced the mob in Little Rock marked them as Negro, but the spirit which directed their feet is the old universal urge toward freedom."[38] Ellison found a complex fate as an artist by theorizing about and creating art in the context of the dialectical relation between *e pluribus* and *unum*, like and yet unlike Trilling, at the space in liberalism where complexity lay, "in its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility," an approach and (to employ another of Ellison's favorite words) a "discipline" that the civil rights movement signified.[39]

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[37] Ibid., 79.

[38] Ibid., 80. The sentence continues: "For better or worse, whatever there is of value in Negro life is an American heritage, and as such it must be preserved."

[39] Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, xv. Ellison would later (in 1978) use the word "mystery" to describe this notion. "The Little Man at Chehaw Station: The American Artist and His Audience,"in Ibid., 508. The struggle for civil rights could also provide the impetus for artistic creation. Writing in 1956 in reaction to the Southern Manifesto (later edited and published in *The Nation* in 1965) Ellison's "Tell it Like it is, Baby," drifts into a bizarre, absurd dream sequence in which the body of Abraham Lincoln is defiled (among other things). Ibid., 29-46.

Of course, this is all very limiting if measured by the traditional standards for engaged, activist bona fides. Ellison never marched with the movement, and Trilling certainly never deigned to do so. There is also another nagging difficulty: this approach potentially ignored or excluded the absolutely central *religious* concerns of civil rights activists, the black church sources of the universally human and moral impulses that liberal aesthetes would attempt to portray. In at least one instance, Ellison went so far as to downplay the significance of the "moral" in considerations of the movement.[40] But apart from commonplace interpretations offered by those scholars who dismiss liberal literary criticism as having little, if anything at all, to do with cause of civil rights because of its lack of engagement (a perfectly valid complaint), the preceding analysis offers the possibility that the movement could be put to use in the service of a certain variation on the liberal aesthetic sensibility. By reading truly complex and rewarding fiction about the lives of African American people we might more fully understand the deepest impulses that inspired the activists of the civil rights movement, the tragic-comic sensibility they mastered during a long history of endurance in a racist society, an inquiry that would illumine "man's triumph over chaos." Without Ellison, the prominent mode of historical thinking and literary criticism that locates forms of resistance in the cultural practices of African Americans at the level of the "folk," or what the writer preferred to call "the vernacular," would not be possible.

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[40] Ralph Ellison, "If the Twain Shall Meet," originally a review for *Book Week* in the New York *Herald Tribune* (November 8, 1964) in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*.

Liberal Political Ideas: Niebuhr, Schlesinger, and the Adaptability of Complexity

Like Trilling and Ellison's criticism of unreflective forms of liberalism, a group of liberal political thinkers, with mixed results, would attempt to describe a critical national culture. The civil rights movement would complicate this effort, but it also proved instructive in that it cast the pragmatic (in the philosophical as well as commonplace usage) character of mid-century liberal thought in stark relief, in that complexity proved a remarkably adaptable way of thinking.

According to a handful of highly influential recent studies of the movement, liberal intellectuals who engaged in politics fare badly; namely, the movement surprised them, they misunderstood it, or, as the most penetrating of these studies argues, the content and style of their thinking proved inadequate to deal with the great dilemma of American democracy. Actively seeking or in some cases identifying the sources for a more critical, intelligent liberalism, most missed the fact that the next great, epoch-making event in the history of American democracy would emanate from sources in the African American church. Many intellectuals, as the story goes, enjoying a new found status as relatively well-compensated members in a complex postwar society that actually found some need for them, settled into a type of complacency that blinded them to the possibility for radical social change. As a result, leading liberal figures either colluded with the CIA (for example) or, more importantly, missed the urgency of African American calls for justice, counseling patience or gradualism when "massive resistance" was made manifest at Little Rock in 1957, and when, in the years that followed, movement demonstrations triggered the violent responses of segregationists. The nation's racial problem, while pressing, was

not precisely central to a group of thinkers nicely fattened on the spoils of academia and the military industrial complex.[41]

Some solid evidence backs this perspective, but reasons exist to consider some of these thinkers in a little more detail, in a manner closer to the spirit of their own inquiry. Those liberals who exemplified the tendencies of the postwar cult of complexity, rhetorically at least eschewed conformity in all its forms, emphasized the importance of individual personality, a holdover (with some significant departures) from the older, Jamesean pragmatic tradition of voluntarism. While this was not a neat fit with all of the ideas that drove civil rights activists, the groups shared some significant values in common, among others: a respect for human personality; a realistic, if not negative, conception of human nature; and a resulting effect of that conception, the belief that the active use of political power was necessary to achieve moral ends. In terms more specific to the American scene and political thinkers, this meant a commitment to New Deal strong state interventions in the economy as both a practical and principled alternative to state socialism of the Soviet variety.

The two intellectuals who best represented this approach were the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. For Schlesinger and Niebuhr, the civil rights movement was merely a plank in a broader platform of Cold War concerns. In

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[41] Keeping in mind the intricacies of each of the following, the latest of these are Chappell*, Stone of Hope*, and "Niebuhrisms and Myrdaleries," Polsgrove, *Divided Minds*; also Tony Badger, "Fatalism, Not Gradualism: Race and the Crisis of Southern Liberalism, 1945-1965" and Walter Jackson, "White Liberal Intellectuals, Civil Rights, and Gradualism, 1954-1960" in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, Tony Badger and Brian Ward, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 1996); the classic statement of CIA collusion is Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Knopf, 1969). The one scholar that I have found who takes issue with this reading is Kevin Mattson, who argues that with respect to the Civil Rights Movement, many factors contributed to its victories, but, he reminds, "the anticommunist nationalism expounded by liberal intellectuals cannot be dismissed by historians so easily." *When America Was Great*, 136-138. Point taken. However, Mattson's contention that liberals made "racial equality central to their political arguments for national reform" is probably an exaggeration. (114)

the 1950s at least, neither thinker tended to view the emerging movement or the problem

of race as the overriding issue of their day, but when the movement experienced its

greatest successes and its greatest notoriety, after Birmingham in 1963 and during the

fight over and then success of the Civil Rights Act, each thinker managed to change,

making it inclusive of their central concerns as liberals. In the process, they adapted the

civil rights movement to fit into their larger sense of history, claiming it by interpreting

its meaning for their own ends.

Complexity as Transcendent and Contingent: Niebuhrian Tragedy and Social Action

In the immediate postwar era, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was a very public

man, commenting on a range of issues, writing for a range of publications. His most

prominent and popular works, especially *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *Children of*

Darkness Children of Light, and *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, were widely read by

students in universities, including many of the leading intellectuals of the civil rights

movement. The theologian was also a touchstone for many liberals who sought to ready

their thinking for battle against totalitarianism, specifically Soviet style communism,

which necessitated tough tactics that the traditional liberal faith in progress and the

perfectibility of man failed to deliver. As one of the highest profile members of

Americans for Democratic Action, (ADA) established in early 1947, Niebuhr, the living

embodiment of tough-minded mid-century liberalism, lent that organization its realistic

edginess in the emerging battle against communism.

Moreover, grudgingly or enthusiastically, scholars now acknowledge that Niebuhr

had an impact on the civil rights movement, and on Martin Luther King, Jr., in particular,

as a prophetic voice: one that called for a type of Christian engagement in political and

social problems that acknowledged and dealt realistically with the baser aspects of power

politics. But despite this important influence, Niebuhr sometimes appeared hesitant to

embrace the movement as it emerged in the 1950s, a fact that scholars have reacted to

with puzzlement or by noting a transition in his thought after 1944, which translated to a

more moderate political orientation, one in conflict with his earlier socialist or Marxist

leanings.[42] More compelling is the suggestion that his devotion to complexity made this

reaction to the movement possible and plausible, and for this reason, I have chosen to

treat his ideas as of a piece, in that numerous characteristic themes and problems recur

throughout his many published writings, including those written after 1944. [43]

In Niebuhr's case, the term "complexity" described the trans-historical, "ultra-

rational" nature of human "personality," "spirit," or "self." (He alternately used all three

terms to describe a similar idea.) In other words, the human self, as construed in

Niebuhr's reading of the Bible, erased the traditional philosophical distinctions between

the knowing subject and the putatively objective world known by that subject. It also

defied purely deterministic and rationalistic constructions of human will. The human

spirit existed in the world, and because God had created it, it had the capability to view

its predicament from a perspective beyond the limitations of the natural world and those

of the world-ordering mind. Thus, the self transcended but was nonetheless implicated in

both the mind (reason) and the body (biological imperative or nature.) Therefore a clear

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[42] Also cited is his health, which worsened after a 1952 stroke left him partially paralyzed on his left side. See Richard Fox Wightman, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

[43] My account of Niebuhr's ideas comes primarily from three sources: *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932); *The Nature and Destiny of Man* 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951 [1941, 1943]); and *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955).

distinction between rationalism and naturalism was incorrect. In Niebuhr's reading, the

Bible verified this "in but not entirely of" status: "The Biblical view regards man's reason

as only a part of his unique endowment, which it defines as the 'image of God' and which

it describes as a radical form of freedom in the human person. It is the total person, the

unity of will, memory, and understanding, which bears 'the image of God.'"[44] Against a

purely rationalist viewpoint, Niebuhr concluded, "We are involved as *total personalities*

in the affairs of history. Our mind is never a pure and abstract intelligence when it

functions amidst the complexities of human relations."[45] Against a naturalist viewpoint,

even the most sophisticated one, namely that articulated by John Dewey, Niebuhr

believed that history, as the sum of human relations, and nature, the biological "will" or

imperative of human beings, should not be conflated. Thus Dewey's philosophy, in

which an intelligent, adaptive mind, as a purely biological entity illuminated a process

called nature within which it operated, limited or failed to express the complexities of the

Christian, human "self":

> The self has, in fact, a mysterious identity and integrity transcending its
> functions of mind, memory, and the will. It must be observed that the
> transcendent freedom of this self, including its capacity to defy any
> rational or natural system into which someone may seek to coordinate it
> (its capacity for evil) makes it difficult for any philosophy, whether
> ancient or modern, to comprehend its true dimension.[46]

Like Trilling and Ellison, Niebuhr's idea of complexity obviated the need for a

detailed epistemology or ontology that resembled anything systematic—human beings

were ultimately "mysterious." Of course, one should not be too quick to fault the former

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[44] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics: His Political Philosophy and Its Application to Our Age as Expressed in His Writings* Harry David and Robert Good, eds. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960): 71.

[45] Ibid, 48

[46] Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953): 125. See also *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1 *Human Nature*, 1-4; 12-16.

for failing to deal with problems of the philosophical or what historians might call

"technical" sort—for Trilling as with Ellison, the creative act could reveal how humans

knew and of what their being in the world consisted. Truly meaningful fiction (in their

aesthetic judgment) could make the self's "mysterious identity" known in that flash of

recognition or communion with the universal truths of great art. In Niebuhr's case,

however, it seemed a limitation, one that he struggled with, and one that his fellow

theologians, Paul Tillich, in particular, were quick to point out.[47] Niebuhr started, like the

pragmatist philosopher William James in his *Principles of Psychology*, in *media res,* in

midstream, with the fact that thinking of some sort went on.[48] The essential sources of

that thinking, or the basic character of it, were not his concerns, and in that narrow sense,

one can call him a pragmatic or anti-philosophical theologian. These pragmatic

tendencies left him in a bit of a bind: he would never do the heavy metaphysical lifting

required of a more systematic theologian in order to account fully for his transcendent

human spirit; nor would he abandon the idea of transcendence, which a thoroughgoing

form of pragmatic naturalism would rule out altogether.

     This bind forced him into the cult of complexity. While Niebuhr sometimes felt his

own shortcomings as a thinker acutely, if one takes his point of view seriously, a certain

divine inscrutability ("mystery" or "complexity") drove his insistence upon the dangers

of human pride. Arguably, this tendency made Niebuhr the theologian of choice for many

agnostic or secular thinkers; on balance, his thinking dealt with human shortcomings, not

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[47] See esp. Paul Tillich, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Knowledge," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* Charles W. Kegley and Robert Bretall, eds. (New York: Macmillan, 1956): 36-43. On James and Niebuhr, see Martin Halliwell*, Reinhold Neibuhr and American Intellectual Culture* (Roman and Littlefield, 2005): 29-53.

[48] Niebuhr makes this pragmatic choice because modern culture has in some sense fatally confused the transcendent unity provided by Christianity in its "uncorrupted" form, which did not privilege rationality in the way that modern Christianity had. In this sense, "spirit" was conflated with reason, which resulted in tragedy. *Human Nature*, 26-33.

with the specific character of the divine.[49] (Perhaps an attempt to account for the more formal or technical aspects of systematic theology may have meant indulgence in a form of human vanity for Niebuhr, and therefore sin.)[50] So what made this sense of complexity compelling were not its philosophical shortcomings, but Niebuhr's radical insistence upon the finitude of human beings, which the human spirit because of its capacities as a trans-historical, ultra-rational self, was able to recognize. Pragmatic uncertainty, interestingly enough, resulted in human transcendence. In other words, because our inquiry into the meaning of our lives inevitably revealed finitude and historical contingency, human beings revealed their ultimately spiritual makeup, which potentially stood outside those contingencies. Humans' quest for certainty "obscure[d] a darkly felt consciousness" of the futility of their pretensions to knowledge, thus proving their status as creations in the image of God: their complexity.[51]

Of course, there was something existentialist about this contention, in that the discovery of purposelessness in our vain yet persistent efforts to find purpose was an apparent vehicle to the knowledge of self—a type of knowledge that Niebuhr found terribly problematic and misleading. One might claim some bit of self-knowledge only in the sense that we were aware and properly pious of the fact that God revealed himself in human history when we recognized the failure of certainties of any sort. Yet this could be dangerous. Lest one think that Biblical faith might be the sort of residue of our fruitless efforts to know or order the world completely, a way out, Niebuhr warned against human

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[49] For example, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2000): 511-12.

[50] For example, "Obviously a view which depends upon an ultra-rational presupposition is immediately endangered when rationally explicated; for reason which seeks all things in terms of rational coherence is tempted to make one known thing the principle of explanation and to derive all other things from it. Its most natural inclination is to make itself the ultimate principle, and thus in effect declare itself God." *Human Nature*, 13.

[51] Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 185.

pride. One should never be confident even in one's own faith that we cannot ultimately know the world or ourselves, this led to sin. (In this sense, it would also be foolish to give up and surrender entirely to God's will because that would involve the certainty that somehow God will out, absolving us of responsibility for what happens in history, which we helped shape.)

Thus, Niebuhr's sense of contingency was so radical that it was potentially devastating and humbling in its conclusions. Any pretensions at all to ordering the world rationally or intelligently or to being in possession of self-knowledge were fraught with danger. The circularity of our frame of self-reference, the ultimate incommensurability between our rational concepts and our biological necessities within nature, gave rise to anxiety *not* knowledge, and all roads led to pride. Because we were free (in the sense that we had the capability to recognize our finitude, to feel this sense of anxiety), we would potentially do either good or evil. But history (again, as the sum of human relations) being always tragic, demonstrated the much greater likelihood and inevitability of the latter.

Even John Dewey's insistence upon critical intelligence of the type that was radically empirical enough to test the very bases of its own hypotheses, thereby improving the world by more rigor, potentially clearing away prejudices and dogmas, was not radical enough. As fallen creatures, we implicated even the methods of our science in sinfulness, which, given human freedom, was always a possibility at the source of our very being. Scientific methods or impartiality would not make better people; therefore, to act effectively one could never believe that the selfish impulses of humans could be eliminated or restrained; to do so would deny human complexity and freedom.

Impartiality was a good thing insofar as one recognized its moral component; the fact that human beings always acted with self-interest in mind should form the basis for disinterested inquiry of any sort. So Niebuhr posited a somewhat intractable view of human nature—unlike mainstream pragmatists, who would have considered human beings just as plastic as the always evolving natural world of which they were a part.

Niebuhr was hewn from tough stuff. The tragedy of history was humans' belief that they could somehow direct or understand the historical process, and when the methods of this direction came into conflict or crisis (which they inevitably would) humans invariably resorted to the use of those same methods to extricate themselves from it, often not realizing that the methods chosen to find release from the crisis were the very ones that got them in trouble in the first place. Because of their pride and sinfulness, human beings did not recognize the sources of their predicament, always adding fuel to the fire. The only option was to act in the world with this sobering acknowledgment in mind— people, being complex and sinful, would act in their own self-interest, and create tragedy:

> Historically we live in a world in which evil and good are embattled in such a way as to illumine the terrible depths and the awful heights of human enterprise. Because man in his grandeur and in his misery, in his high aspirations and in their egoistic corruption, is and always will be a more complex creature than modern culture has understood, his history is more tragic and his redemption from self-seeking, whether individual or collective, more difficult and less final than we have assumed. The dimension of this whole scene is so great that only the judgment and grace of God can give it a frame of meaning.[52]

"Terrible depths and awful heights" was a classic Niebuhrism: nothing could come easy; there were no observable points of rest, no real certainties, aside from the all too elusive and potentially sin-inducing truth that our uncertainty made God's presence possible in our lives. That Niebuhr could find hope, or encourage and advocate action in the

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[52] *Niebuhr on Politics*, 63.

uncompromising sweep of modern history that he surveyed, remains perhaps his greatest contribution to political thought in the twentieth century, and the most frustrating. He carved out a liberalism that rejected the utopianism of earlier thinkers who based their actions and policies on their belief in the perfectibility of man, and one that rejected worldly and other-worldly eschatologies of any sort. The modern world proved that there were no easy exits. If the nineteenth century lent us an acute sense of history, the twentieth proved the folly of any sort of faith in its outcomes.

Of course, this perspective, with its Augustinian, omnipresent vanity tincturing all the various aspects of human events, articulated the anxieties of the Cold War, and a true coming to grips with the radical evil of the Second World War. Against Augustine, Niebuhr believed it behooved us to fight evil by realistic means, to engage it and the problems of this world, despite our shortcomings. A statesman, for example, should never suppose that a more rigorous, rational foreign policy might eradicate human selfishness. Preserving what precarious good there was in human life required the recognition of and responsibility for the fact that we would do evil in the process. Only through God's grace, through love, did good triumph, and this appeared only in brief interludes during a generally tragic, meaningless, and incomprehensible (to us) whole. (It comes as little surprise that Neibuhr found Abraham Lincoln's potentially conflicting combination of persistent melancholy and resolute action a model example. Lincoln embodied the necessary equation for engaged political activity—"moral resoluteness about immediate issues with a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning and judgment."[53]) Limited as we were, action for moral ends was an imperative because it was the only

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[53] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952): 172.

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possibility, however ephemeral and incomplete, of some release from the terrible contingency of our self-interestedness.

This point of view verified Niebuhr's contention that human beings, when organized into groups, had a greater capacity for evil than individuals. Concluded Niebuhr: "Collective pride is thus man's last, and in some respects most pathetic, effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence. The very essence of human sin is in it."[54] Because groups necessarily employed apparently universal, shared terms to make sense of their activities, they expressed a false and dishonest certainty that such terms articulated individual interests. No such certainties existed, and individuals who acted in groups arrogantly placed these shared values in conflict with the values of others. One's sense of belonging invariably occurred at the expense of other perspectives, a variation on William James' "certain blindness." When pursuing some end with a definitive cause in mind, groups reduced the complexity of individual personalities to a set of all too simplistic formulae. The larger the group, the more acute and necessary the use of simplifying mechanisms became to express its collective will. The largest manifestation of group activity, the state, embodied the worst aspects of this problem. Nations, if they were to display even the palest imitation of moral rightness (conceived of here as the contrite recognition of self-love and need for grace), needed the persistent challenge of a "prophetic minority." Totalitarian states proved the most arrogant and dangerous, and democracies, with their respect for minority rights, the better approximation of the elusive possibility of a just state (however improbable).

In keeping with his general mode of thinking, one cannot stress enough the fact that Niebuhr was none to sanguine about the possibilities for democracy to momentarily stave

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[54] *Human Nature*, 213.

off human sin. It could and would not. This impossibility, though, was the engine that drove the political action of groups, which could not be ethical, involved as they were in with the pursuit of power. This uncompromising attitude led Niebuhr to conclude that even nonviolent direct action of the Gandhian type (which he was considerably more positive about than Tolstoyan forms of pacifism), while a useful political tactic did not entirely absolve the actor from self-interested motives, whatever the supposed ego-extinguishing character of soul force. Whenever one acted in a group in the interests of justice, in order for that act to be open to the possibility of God's grace, one could not assume absolute moral righteousness nor believe in the perfect altruism of any aspect of one's own cause.[55]

When applied to American race relations, Niebuhr's pessimism, with its refined sense of human uncertainty and complexity, at times made him counsel caution rather than forthright engagement. In the wake of *Brown v. Board* in 1954, Niebuhr argued that delaying the application of the decision showed wisdom in that "The court seems quite conscious of the fact that no law can be enforced if it is not generally accepted by the people. When local recalcitrance becomes armed with the sense of moral rightness of its cause, the case is lost."[56]   Like many other observers, Niebuhr believed that gradually the South would comply with the ruling (this was of course, before "massive resistance" revealed itself.) The assumption of "moral rightness" by groups of Southerners would prove a consistent refrain for Niebuhr throughout the last half of the 1950s, particularly when massive resistance did take shape and the White Citizens' Councils formed. Fearing that Southerners would find comfort in their group identity at the exclusion of

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[55] Gandhi comment in *Ibid*., vol.2 *Human Destiny*, 261n.
[56] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools," *Christianity and Crisis,* 14 (14 June 1954): 75.

other groups and at the expense of an honest confrontation with their own limitations and sinfulness, Niebuhr entreated his Northern audience to be sensitive to their concerns. In his estimation, the Southern position was obviously ill-founded in at least two ways: notions of the biological inferiority of black people had no basis, and white fears that the cultural "backwardness" of black pupils would lower educational standards generally, thereby negatively influencing white students, made for an ironic situation: the very "backwardness" whites feared was caused by the inequality of separate institutions that white Southerners had established and maintained, including the damaging effects such separation engendered. Typical of human beings and their history, Southerners now protested the very thing they played an integral role in mucking up. Though he found both these points of view untenable, Niebuhr nonetheless proved sensitive to the second part of the Southern argument: "Any criticisms of southern communities would be totally unfair if they did not take account of the difficulties of school integration caused by the different cultural standards of the two races."[57] And, in concert with much of the compromised universalist thinking of his era, Niebuhr contended, "It is not easy to equalize cultural opportunities within such a short time after slavery." In effect Niebuhr, like many others (as well as the historians and psychologists who were crucial to the court's decision), shifted focus to the victims of historic racism, and at least partially away from the perpetrators of it.[58]

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[57] Niebuhr, "The Race Problem in America," *Christianity and Crisis*, 15 (26 December 1955): 170; a similar perspective can be found in Niebuhr, "School, Church, and the Ordeals of Integration," *Christianity and Crisis* 16 (1 October, 1956): 121-122.

[58] This insight belongs to Richard H. King, "Race, Equality, and Hearts and Minds," *Journal of Southern History* 70 (May 2004): 309. King makes a crucial further point about Brown: "My contention…is not that Brown consciously intended to encourage groups' consciousness of injury, but rather that it reflected an ambiguity in the universalist position that later allowed a particularist emphasis to emerge, one that was at odds with some aspects of universalism."

So the constant in Niebuhr's thinking about the racial politics of the 1950s was a concern that Southerners would become increasingly united in their group identity, which could only be made worse by Northern interference, particularly given the fact that in his estimation, race prejudice, as a form of "group pride…is almost always an extension of the survival impulse of the group."[59] Forced integration revived the specter of miscegenation for all too many Southerners, the potential death of the white race. If recalcitrant Southerners (especially those in the Deep South) felt their survival threatened by compliance to the national norms, which Niebuhr believed were clearly in favor of desegregation, an uphill climb would be made only harder. Thus, President Eisenhower, by summoning federal troops to quell mob violence during the Little Rock Crisis in 1957, failed to realize that his action was as "dangerous" as it was "helpful." Eisenhower's "symbolic action symbolized not the majesty of the law but the triumph of the North over the South." In keeping with his realistic view of human nature, Niebuhr did not believe that Eisenhower created the crisis at Little Rock. While the president may have botched things, or should have shown better moral leadership, "the ineradicable tendency of men to build integral communities upon the sense of ethnic kinship and to exclude from that kinship any race which diverges too obviously from type" was at the source of the problem.[60] Eisenhower failed to understand the inevitable selfishness of human beings, particularly in group settings. Even those who insisted that Eisenhower clearly proclaim a national principle over state defiance failed to recognize this tendency.

This reaction was not strange or uncharacteristic; rather, it showed the potential political limitations of a philosophy that made human pride and mystery the dynamic

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[59] Niebuhr, "A Theologian's Comments On the Negro in America," *The Reporter* 15 (29 November 1956): 24.

[60] Niebuhr, "The States Rights Crisis," *New Leader* 41 (29 September 1958): 6-7.

force in its prescriptions. Complexity trumped decisive action because Niebuhr feared the evil of racial violence more than evil of segregation. The former was radically unpredictable and dangerous, the latter banal. At least momentarily, he failed to recognize the righteous impulse that would compel activists to incite violence in the name of racial justice. For example, among Niebuhr's contemporaries in the 1940s and 1950s were African American religious thinkers like Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, George Kelsey, and Mordecai Johnson, all of whom denounced segregation as an unpardonable sin, often clearly advocating Gandhian direct action methods. According to Mays (a mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the longtime president of Morehouse College), segregation was a "sin against God," because it "violated the moral order of the universe"—an order dependent upon the assumption of the basic oneness of humanity.[61] While Niebuhr shared elements of Mays' and others' belief in a shared, basic humanity, his pragmatic tendencies would not allow him to assume an absolute, transparent moral order stemming from such beliefs. For Niebuhr, this confidence in the righteousness of one's cause lent its advocates a sense of finality that would lead inevitably to tragedy. So while there was room for Niebuhr to support civil rights activists and even nonviolent direct action, precisely the kind of moral confidence that Niebuhr feared proved powerful inspiration for some African American religious thinkers. Unfortunately, Niebuhr and his black church contemporaries never worked out the details of their differences. The conversation never took place.[62]

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[61] Benjamin Mays in Mark Chapman, "Of One Blood: Mays and the Theology of Race Relations," in *Walking Integrity: Benjamin Elijah Mays, Mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Lawrence Edward Carter, Jr., ed. (Macon Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998): 236, 248. On this generation of black clergy more generally, see Dennis C. Dickerson, "African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930-55," *Church History* 74 (June 2005): 217-235.

[62] Why these people never had a conversation is a question that doesn't appear to admit an easy answer. Earlier in his life, Niebuhr worked rather closely with African Americans, but appears to have

As the civil rights movement hit full stride, starting with the student-centered movements of 1960, Niebuhr revised his thinking. Previously, the theologian lamented the congregationalism of so many Protestant churches in the South, contrasting it with the hierarchical orientation of Catholicism. Ironically, it was the democratic structure of the Protestant church that made action in the cause of integration so problematic. For example, while the leadership of national denominations could advocate desegregation, local church communities continued to conform to parochial prejudices, oftentimes using universal language while reinforcing segregationist practices. Catholic leadership, on the other hand, could coerce their flock into compliance with the threat of excommunication. The moral heroism required of local Protestant clergy in the face of so much lay community resistance was perhaps too great in this situation.[63] After 1960, however, Niebuhr chastised churches more openly, giving up far less ground:

> If the church fails to become an instrument of justice in the complicated issues of economic justice in an industrial society, it is always possible to understand…But there is no such excuse in the realm of racial justice. There the issue is crystal clear. The question is simply whether we are prepared to treat our fellow man with the respect that his innate dignity as a human being requires and deserves. That the church should have failed to meet this primary test of its moral vitality is a fact of grave concern. Could it be that the Protestant church in America has sunk to the insignificant status of a white middle-class conventicler, where man's pride is nurtured rather than disciplined?[64]

` Niebuhr had learned from the civil rights movement. The leadership of the black church inspired this criticism; it made the inconsequentiality of the white church all too plain. Yet, the content of his education meant that he would stray the farthest from the

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parted ways by the 1940s. See Martin Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr and American Intellectual Culture* (New York and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005): 216-245.

[63] See Niebuhr, "The Effect of the Supreme Court Decision," *Christianity and Crisis* 27 (2 February 1957): 3; also "A Theologian's Comments," "School, and the Ordeals of Integration," and "The Race Problem in America."

[64] Niebuhr, "The Montgomery Savagery," *Christianity and Crisis* 21 (12 June 1961): 102-3.

basic aspects of his realist position. For example, he expressed some hope that American

democracy was a far better environment for racial justice than closed societies. (He cited

South Africa with some frequency.) Writing in 1963, he admitted rather restrained

confidence that an "open society" would gradually "encroach upon the boundaries of the

enclave." Here Niebuhr surrendered further to faith in gradualism, expressing a chastened

but troubling Myrdalian optimism that the paradoxical existence of a "closed enclave,"

namely the unjust communities of segregation, within a democratic or "open" society

created the necessary tension for desegregation to occur. The apparent success of the joint

interracial committee created to end the Birmingham crisis in 1963 provided some

proof.[65]

Just over a year later, Niebuhr revised his position yet again, this time admitting

that he had shown far too much confidence in national laws and supposed national norms.

The reality of African American life in the North exposed the errors in his thinking:

> [S]ome of us are beginning to realize that the struggle for justice
> for our Negro citizens is a long and hard one; that even the enactment into
> law of the civil rights bill will not solve all our problems. We are in for not
> only a long hard summer but for decades of social revolution.
> The first important index is the despair and hopelessness of the
> Northern Negro youth, manifested in subway and other violence. The
> reason for this despair is obvious, but I, for one, was slow to gauge its
> import. The source of the despair is to be found in the fact that none of the
> provisions of the bill seriously affects the status of unemployed Negroes in
> Northern ghettoes. They already have all the rights which the bill seeks to
> secure for the Negroes of the South.

Outlining plans for desegregation in the North, Niebuhr reached only pessimistic

conclusions; the quest for equal justice in school integration yielded only "obdurate

complexities." Efforts to force Southern compliance with the law met only further

resistance. Race prejudices were even more stubborn than class prejudices, and American

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[65] Niebuhr, "Revolution in an Open Society," *The New Leader* 46 (27 May 1963): 7-8.

cultural institutions, particularly the church, were "tainted" by this racial prejudice.

Boycotts, while effective for the purposes of moral suasion, as in Birmingham, had little

effectiveness on a large scale when used by a minority with a general lack of power in

"the realm of production."[66]

Nearing the end of his life, then, Niebuhr returned to pessimism with a vengeance,

reevaluating his previous position with respect to Gunnar Myrdal's *An American*

Dilemma: "The dilemma is actually wider than our national life; it is the dilemma of

validating the humanity of man despite the strong tribal impulses in his nature."[67] Given

his relation to the cult of complexity, one can conclude that the only apparently aberrant

aspect of his thinking on racial matters was his intermittent Myrdalian hope that

democracy would reconcile the problems of racial prejudice. More importantly, the

"obdurate complexities" the movement uncovered witnessed the return in purer form, of

his realistic perspective. Reaffirming the pessimism of his earlier career later in his life,

Niebuhr anticipated a frequent liberal reading of the movement as jeremiad, a central

narrative device designed to expose the irony of American democracy, particularly when

confronted with the seeming futility of government solutions to insidious racial divisions,

which, for the theologian, were the product of human complexity in all of its sinfulness.

Imagining Civil Rights as the Vital Center: The Case of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

In his famous manifesto for liberal anticommunism, *The Vital Center*, which

appeared less than a year before Trilling's *Liberal Imagination*, and some five years after

Niebuhr's *Nature and Destiny of Man*, Arthur Schlesinger offered a stirring indictment of

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[66] Niebuhr, "The Struggle for Justice," *The New Leader* 47 (6 July 1964): 10-11.
[67] Ibid., 11.

totalitarianism in all its forms, defining a pragmatic, critical liberal politics and culture by

identifying it in an American historical tradition. *The Vital Center* was, on its surface, a

wonderfully idiosyncratic Cold War work; it crackled with a mix of tract-like

breathlessness, playful historical insight ("Lodge was a man without juices"),

provocative, quasi-Hobbesian nightmare (to save mankind…to drive anxiety from the

world…they [the Politburo] are prepared to assume the awful burden of freedom

themselves"), all of which finally culminated in a chastened declaration of freedom's

"fighting faith."[68]

It was also a meditation on power, particularly at the highest reaches of national

politics—American presidents merited the greatest share of Schlesinger's attention. In a

manner echoed nearly fifty years later by Richard Rorty, but without the philosopher's

much more diverse tastes, the historian revivified the (William) Jamesean emphasis on

humans' capacity for moral heroism, leavening it somewhat with Reinhold Niebuhr's

realism.[69] The Second World War made clear that the capacity for compromise and for

deliberative solutions, while a valuable liberal attitude, demanded an awareness of the

constant tension between the need for rigor and discipline and the fact of humans'

capacity for evil. The challenges of an immediate postwar era dominated by "anxiety"

made this tension more acute; the impersonality of corporate, bureaucratic forms of life

left individuals adrift and alienated. Because the technologies of organization had

outstripped the capacity of traditional loyalties (things like religion or community) to

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[68] Arthur Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962[1949]): 21, 88. Another riotous intervention of stylistic courage is Schlesinger's insight that "Roosevelt hated socialists, whom he associated with pacifism, dogoodism and other forms of mollycoddle flapdoodle, when he did not associate them with the Terror and the guillotine." (22)
[69] Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2003 [1998]).

order society, humans were more susceptible than ever to the promptings of their basest

moral instincts. Schlesinger showed all of Henry Adams' horror, during the turn of the

previous century, at the accelerating multiverse, careening toward chaos. Unlike Adams,

his ironic resignation led him not to the doors of Chartres, but toward an insistent

"politics of hope" (and later the Kennedy White House). Totalitarianism and the bomb, it

turned out, levied more requirements on the intellectual than the Gilded Age and the

dynamo had for Adams. Assailing the naiveté of "doctrinaire" or "Doughface"

progressivism, its inadequacy to the task of organizing social life, he offered "usable

traditions":

> the progressive, by refusing to make room in his philosophy for the
> discipline of responsibility or for the danger of power, has cut himself off
> from the usable traditions of American radical democracy. He has rejected
> the pragmatic tradition of the men who, from the Jacksonians to the New
> Dealers, learned the facts of life through the exercise of power under
> conditions of accountability. He has rejected the pessimistic traditions of
> those who, from Hawthorne to Reinhold Niebuhr, warned that power,
> unless checked by accountability, would corrupt its possessor.[70]

Operating in a mode of historical explanation that would characterize nearly all of

his later scholarship, Schlesinger pinpointed the constructive conflict in American

thought between conservatives and liberals of the more complex, morally attuned

variety—those with a sense of responsibility to the nation—and charted it in cyclical

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[70] Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 36. One can argue that Schlesinger compromised Niebuhrian realism as David Chappell does in *Stone of Hope*. It's more likely that Schlesinger managed to include it in a broader set of influences, which included some rather sentimental Jamesean moments. While Schlesinger maintained that James shared a realistic regard for evil, James' confrontation with the problem differed a bit from Niebuhrian pessimism. James believed that evil existed, but also believed that to act with that realization consistently in mind was to surrender to a certain subjectivity that might deny other possibilities. In other words, James was concerned that the tendency to act with the expectation of evil was to surrender to it as an impersonal force rather than a contingent aspect of human experience. Thus, he tended to emphasize struggle and strenuousness rather than evil. For example, William James, "What Makes a Life Significant" in *The Writings of William James*, John J. McDermott, ed. (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1977): 645-659. It is also worth mentioning again that the horrors of Hitler and holocaust had a very profound effect on Schlesinger and many others. See Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Era: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985): 130-8.

fashion. Equality, with all of the intricacies that statement implied in a modern democracy (logically insoluble conflicts between majority and minority rights, the perquisites of the Lockean social contract), was the engine that drove American democracy; the Constitution modified the idea of equality by insuring "on the one hand the freedom of the individual, and, on the other, the right of the people to control the political and economic life of the nation."[71] Jeffersonians and Hamiltonians represented each of these positions, liberal and conservative respectively. What emerged after this golden era of politics were "failures" of the left: persistent utopian notions of human perfectibility that would eventually lead to fellow traveling with communists (embodied in the 1948 Wallace campaign); and of the right: the irresponsibility of plutocrats, whose greatest concern was personal economic gain at the expense of national moral interests (as shown by the America Firsters and the Neville Chamberlains of the world).[72] The New Deal represented a pragmatic (rather than utopian) confrontation with the impersonality of the new economic order. FDR understood that limited state power had to be wielded to protect the individual from the privations of the plutocrats, and in the process he operated at alternate times in the spirit of the best of the earlier Roosevelt's New Nationalism and of Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom.[73] This "Vital Center," or "new radicalism" then, was a program that took a disciplined approach to the use of power; government intervention would be patterned after the historian's ebb and flow

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[71] *Vital Center,* 158.
[72] Ibid., 11-50.
[73] Ibid., 176-179.

reading of American history: "Keynes, not Marx," intoned Schlesinger, "is the prophet of the new radicalism."[74]

As to the depth of racial prejudice in the United States, one can safely say that Schlesinger was largely mistaken in much the same way as Niebuhr was early on. Evaluating the national mood with respect to the Truman administration's positive record on race and the report that made clear the problems and proposed a platform, "To Secure These Rights," Schlesinger wrote, "Most Americans accept, at least in principle, the obligations spelled out in the Civil Rights Report." Moreover, his argument that the Dixiecrat defeat in the South in 1948 "suggests that the South on the whole accepts the objectives of the civil rights program as legitimate, even though it may have serious and intelligible reservations about timing and method," would certainly take some rethinking in light of Massive Resistance in the wake of the *Brown* decision.[75] Nonetheless, the historian did make clear the urgency of the problem; employing the term "sin," he reasoned,

> The sin of racial pride still represents the most basic challenge to the American conscience. We cannot dodge the challenge without renouncing our highest moral pretensions…We have freed the slaves; but we have not freed Negroes, Jews, and Asiatics of the stigmata of slavery. While we may not be able to repeal prejudice by law, yet law is an essential part of

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[74] Ibid., 183. Schlesinger also made aesthetic judgments that put him squarely in the cult of complexity, but with a more refined sense of historical judgment. A few examples should suffice. First, Vernon Parrington's contention that Hawthorne's work was "thin and unreal" reflected the utopian limitations of his times, before the rise of Totalitarianism (163). Second: "Complexity in art further suggests the whole wicked view of cosmopolitanism summed up for the Communists in the conception of Europe…The conclusion is clear. Let the artists turn their back on Europe. Let them eschew mystery, deny anxiety, and avoid complexity."(80) Finally,

> The Writer, it is clear, must have social perspectives—but they must be his own. The susceptibility to programs corrupts the artist by distorting and eventually superseding the personal truths by which he is nourished. Hence Balzac and Stendhal, whatever their politics, were more truly revolutionary than Victor Hugo or Eugene Sue; Henry James than a party line G.A. Henty like Howard Fast (124).

[75] Ibid., 190. In a review, Gary Gerstle punctures this myth convincingly in light of relatively recent work on the Northern, urban component of the Civil Rights Movement. "Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus," *The Journal of American History,* 82 (Sep. 1995): 579-586.

the enterprise of education which alone can end prejudice. It may be foolish to think that we can transform folkways and eradicate bigotry overnight. But it is fatal not to maintain an unrelenting attack on all forms of racial discrimination.[76]

No doubt Schlesinger showed his alliance here with the findings of Truman's Committee on Civil Rights, and for its legislative prescriptions (federal antilynching legislation, and an end to discrimination at the ballot box, the abolition of the poll tax, and the desegregation of the military, among others). The "unrelenting attack" that Schlesinger insisted upon focused power not at the grassroots, but at the level of national government and law. Yet it would be foolish to suggest that this perspective wasn't important to the success of the movement. The civil rights movement, whatever the recent scholarly tendency to privilege its local character as an ostensibly more authentic manifestation of its goals, gained crucial reinforcement in the arena of national power politics and law.

Still, the methodology of his pragmatic liberalism, so thoroughly Deweyean (whatever Schlesinger's later denial of his influence) in its commitment to rigor, complexity, and gradualism, would prove less than appealing for many who struggled under the yoke of Jim Crow.[77] And unlike the prophetic *religious* faith of many civil rights activists (which Schlesinger felt relatively sure could no longer compel the traditional devotion), a sense of unity between increasingly atomized modern individuals would occur in the context of the struggle against totalitarianism abroad and oppression at home. There were no easy solutions here, nor an inspiring, if vague, political eschatology like Martin Luther King's "beloved community." Wrote Schlesinger: "A

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[76] *Vital Center*, 190-191.

[77] Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2000): 250.

liberalism which purports to shape the real world must first accept the limitations and possibilities of that world. It must reconcile itself to a tedious study of detail." "The commitment," the historian concluded, "is complex and rigorous. When has it not been so? If democracy cannot produce the large resolute breed of men capable of the climactic effort, it will founder. Out of the effort, out of the struggle alone, can come the high courage and faith which will preserve freedom."[78]

Schlesinger continued to emphasize these heroic capacities in human beings into the 1950s and 1960s, enjoining new historical circumstances. He also used the word "radicalism" far less to describe his thinking, and was more susceptible than ever to an extreme regard for individual heroism, often lapsing, however grudgingly, into a sentimental form of voluntarism (grudging in the sense that he often followed his more excessive praise of human capacities with references to Niebuhr's realism). Schlesinger's praise of leadership and the practical uses of power at the highest levels of politics would come to their ultimate fruition during his years with the Kennedy administration, which he served as an advisor. John F. Kennedy and his style of leadership would embody all the virtues of complexity, which Schlesinger now located squarely in the individual.

In keeping with at least a portion of the Vital Center, throughout the 1950s and in the first years of the 1960s, Schlesinger emphasized the importance of struggle, and a pragmatic rejection of finality or certainty in a world of intractable, "fundamental" problems. Like Niebuhr, he pointed out the irony of democracy in America, but in his hands this irony came to mean the political content of Tocqueville's description of the inevitable slide toward democratic mediocrity. In a handful of essays in popular

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[78]Ibid., 160, 256.

publications (later published in 1963 under the title *The Politics of Hope*) Schlesinger decried the pressures of homogeneity in American life (a pretty common refrain among intellectuals in the 1950s) and extolled the virtues of individual greatness. According to the historian, democracy bore some blame for the general decline in national appreciation for greatness. Great men were in vogue for the mid-century cult of complexity, and Schlesinger indulged in a sort of hero worship that threatened quaintness. Alluding to William James' 1880 essay "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and Their Environment," and revisiting James' admiration for Carlyle, he lamented democratic envy, the result of which was a general lack of individual initiative and leadership. Recycling James' argument, Schlesinger contended that as the basic "unit of history" individuals proved historical fatalism wrong ("fatalism" meaning the instantiation of the impersonal forces of history in the foreground, as a determinant of human affairs rather than the product of them.) Pragmatically speaking, he argued, for the time being, free will existed, at least until one could depend upon an accurate prediction of the future.

This was popular history as a type of moral reflection, and it was also the worst of Jamesean excess, and philosophy of history at its most banal. Because individuals ultimately determined the historical process, heroic figures were necessary lest society become deterministic in its attitudes, mired, at the mercy of history. Invoking Prometheus, he concluded that while democracy produced great leaders (a sort of Jeffersonian natural *aristoi*) it also placed far too much faith in the common folk to make

decisions for the whole. The masses would never completely appreciate greatness, and the great man would inevitably pay a price for his heroism.[79]

Not surprisingly, Schlesinger took this commonsensical variety of pragmatic hero worship into his service in the White House under John F. Kennedy, at least if his memoir, *A Thousand Days,* is any indication. This Promethean excess also contributed to his reading of the civil rights movement, lending shape to a popular narrative of the movement that would emerge in the years that followed. Emerging from the moribund 1950s, and in keeping with his cyclical view of history inherited from his father, he forecasted that the 1960s would witness a renewal of public interest, and Kennedy was at the center of the vigorous leadership this new spirit demanded.[80] In light of more recent interpretations of the Kennedy White House, both the scholarly and the salacious, it has become customary, of course, to take Schlesinger to task for his hagiographic rendering of Kennedy in *A Thousand Days*. Yet, this portrayal lingers on in American popular imagination. More often than not, John F. Kennedy and the civil rights movement tend to occupy the same territory in American national memory; Martin Luther King, Jr. and the president emerge as well-intentioned allies in a turbulent era.

JFK, a "historian manqué," in Schlesinger's estimation, embodied the spirit of the new era of politics, and awoke the nation from the anti-intellectual slumber of the Eisenhower years. A well read student of history and intellectually curious, Kennedy was also a pragmatist:

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[79] This analysis is derived from two essays in particular. Schlesinger, "On Heroic Leadership (1960)" and "The Decline of Greatness (1958)" in *The Politics of Hope* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963): 3-33. Reference to William James is in "The Decline."

[80] The 1960s as renewal in Ibid., ix-xii; 81-93. Also explained in *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965): 17-18.

[Kennedy] was pragmatic in the sense that he tested the meaning of a proposition by its consequences; he was also pragmatic in the sense of being free from metaphysics. In his response too, to the notion of a pluralist universe, Kennedy was a pragmatist—if one may make sensible use of this word, which came into political vogue in the first years of the Kennedy administration and then was oddly revived in the first years of the Johnson administration with the implication that the Kennedy years had not, after all, been pragmatic but were somehow ideological. They were not ideological, though they could perhaps be termed intellectual.[81]

In Schlesinger's reading of Kennedy the one constant was the idea that untold depths lay beneath the surface of a cool, ironic exterior—"a complexity of mind and emotion," or in the case of the president's famous call to a pregnant Coretta Scott King on the occasion of her husband's imprisonment in 1960, "the grace and force of feeling which lay beneath the supposedly cool façade."[82] This gushing praise inevitably elicits the suggestion that Kennedy managed to hoodwink Schlesinger, who of course, managed to read the best characteristics of the Vital Center (and presumably of himself) on to Kennedy. For example, the historian read JFK's Catholicism as a type of Niebuhrian orthodoxy. If upper middle class parents in the United States raised their children in such a way as to insulate them from mortality and death, Kennedy's "orthodox faith" precluded such niceties.[83] Thus in foreign policy, "he saw not a final battle between democratic good and communist evil but an obscure and intricate drama, where men, institutions and ideals, all bedeviled by the sin of self-righteousness, threatened to rush humanity to the edge of destruction, and where salvation lay in man's liberation from myth, stereotype, and fanaticism."[84]

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[81] *A Thousand Days*, 111.
[82] Ibid., 78, 74.
[83] Ibid., 87.
[84] Ibid., 299.

Against the take of insiders like Schlesinger and the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, the literary critic Alfred Kazin's insights on the subject of Kennedy's apparent intellectualism can offer needed counterpoint. Writing in 1961, Kazin reasoned that this preoccupation with the president as intellectual was part of a general tendency then popular among many Americans during the period to appreciate executive style—the sort of flair or ability to digest lots of complex information and relate it in a palatable sort of form, with a kind of nodding familiarity. It was unclear whether or not Kennedy was an intellectual. What was clear was that the president appreciated intellectuals, liked having them around, and cultivated them. His bookishness was carefully calculated, his appreciation and curiosity for ideas unrestrained if superfluous. Kennedy seemed to care what intellectuals thought, Kazin reasoned, and this seeming was enough to make many conclude that he was one of their own. Coming out of a long period of neglect by those in power (and even derision for the "egghead"), thinkers were easily seduced by someone who actually listened to what they had to say, someone who appreciated their style.[85] Perhaps, then, Schlesinger fell under the spell of a very skillful politician. (For his part, Schlesinger interpreted Kazin's misgivings as part of a general tendency of some liberal intellectuals to always be suspicious of those in power.)[86]

Schlesinger's reading of Kennedy and the civil rights movement followed this general tendency. Putting the origins of a new sense of black militancy in FDR's national recognition of the problem (presumably the executive order creating the Fair

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[85] Alfred Kazin, "President Kennedy and other Intellectuals" in *Alfred Kazin's America: Critical and Personal Writings* Ted Solotaroff, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2003 [1961]: 229-244.

[86] *A Thousand Days,* 743-744. Schlesinger responded in a practical way, making the point for engagement. The logic is familiar: mistrust of power is reasonable, however when intellectuals exclude themselves from the processes of governing because they believe that power corrupts, they should understand their hypocrisy when the anti-intellectuals in power don't run things the way they would like.

Employment Practices Commission), he contended that African Americans benefited from the fact that the late president "threw open the gate of hope."[87] Gunnar Myrdal articulated the dilemma in 1944, and the nation, starting with Truman's Commission on Civil Rights and continuing with the Brown decision and early civil rights legislation (especially the Civil Rights Act of 1957) seemed to fulfill the Swedish sociologist's prediction that American democratic ideals would gradually erode custom and folkway. Yet, in practice these steps forward appeared to be stalled by the late 1950s. So it was not from despair but from increased hope that African Americans pursued their cause, and increasingly refused to countenance gradual solutions. The emergence of Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, the student-led sit-ins starting in Greensboro in 1960, and the subsequent formation of the SCLC and SNCC made nonviolent direct action a new force to be reckoned with; joined by veteran groups and activists, a highly effective and capable African American movement took shape. By 1960, wrote Schlesinger, borrowing from Ralph Ellison, "the Negro was no longer the invisible man."[88]

In Schlesinger's top-down account of the civil rights movement, all the familiar dramatis personae are present; the Kennedys (John and Robert) and Martin Luther King, Jr. inhabit the lead roles, and play off one another, each attempting to maneuver or

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[87] Ibid., 925. A few pages later, (928) Schlesinger does give A. Philip Randolph some measure of credit for FDR's creation of the FEPC.

[88] Ibid.,928. Schlesinger's narrative, now the standard one, was among the first outlining the emergence of the movement, and it showed sympathy with its intentions, yet one can conclude that he misunderstood, or at least misused Ellison's concept of invisibility. For Ellison, "invisibility" was more than whites' strange practice of, in Schlesinger's choice of words, "virtuously…cutting the Negro out of conscience." It was a certain blindness, but not to the apparent *plight* of African Americans, but rather an entire way of seeing, or in epistemological terms, of knowing. At the risk of oversimplification, invisibility meant an inability to understand the complexity of black life and of the individual minds that made up that life and culture. Contra Schlesinger's suggestion, by 1960, one can argue that the Negro remained largely invisible for most Americans.

control the pace of the "Negro Revolution." As the drama unfolds in the historian's

narrative, JFK shows command of a wider field of interest than that of the civil rights

leader, and at least briefly appeared able to control or mollify an increasingly militant

group of black protesters. This included not only the other aspects of his presidency,

foreign policy and the like, but also the intricacies of African Americans' needs. (When

the President was distracted by foreign policy, the attorney general assumed a role as

point man on the issue.) Three interpretive moves are most telling. First, JFK felt limited

by the influence of Southern Democrats in the Senate, and though he believed they were

morally wrong, thought it unwise to raise their hackles on civil rights if he were to pass

other types of badly sought after legislation. This wasn't an entirely self-serving, cynical

position in Schlesinger's estimation, but a realistic one; it also had a moral component in

that the economic measures the President sought to pass were also civil rights measures

that would benefit African Americans (education, minimum wage increases, etc.). This

kept with Schlesinger's evaluation of Kennedy's mind, that the President consistently

found the relation between political means and ends troubling, rather than seeing, as more

opportunistic or crass politicians were wont to do, an easy continuum between means and

ends, where staying in power was the end. In other words, Kennedy, like a good tragic

Niebuhrian (rather than say, a Machiavellian), recognized that at times one would commit

evil in order to do justice.[89]

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[89] Ibid., 930, 939, 101. This idea of Schlesinger's is not without its problems, especially when one considers that *A Thousand Days* is a memoir. Was Kennedy truly perturbed by the relation between means and ends? In other words, did he consider the moral implications of the means he chose to effect certain ends at the time he engaged in the act, or did he rationalize or adapt the ends of an action to fit the means chosen? That is, was JFK actually a consummate politician who had mastered the Machiavellian art of seeming? If so, was his apparent moral pique a demonstration for Arthur Schlesinger? Finally, if Kennedy was a pragmatist in a Jamesean sense, if the ends of an act worked, that is, they accomplished the task at hand (and given the social universe of one's moral sensibilities one could stomach them, could feel the rightness of them) they proved the truth of the particular means one employed. So working with racists was

Second, according to Schlesinger, JFK was in some ways more in touch with the people, which included most African Americans, pursuing a course that while considered too cautious for many in the black leadership, was broadly approved of by the constituency such leaders felt they commanded. By upholding national law in the face of Southern recalcitrance, Kennedy won the approval of African Americans. For example, though the President appeared reluctant to issue a promised executive order on housing, "despite the discontent of the [black] leadership, the Negro community on the whole seemed well satisfied, and Kennedy's personal popularity was obviously increasing." After the infamous Battle of Oxford that resulted from the attempt of James Meredith to enroll at the University of Mississippi in 1961, "some American Negroes felt Kennedy might have acted sooner…this was quickly forgotten in the memory of the dispatch of the Army and the admission of Meredith." It followed that in a 1963 poll, the African American "rank and file" believed that those who had done the most for Negro rights, in order, were the NAACP, Martin Luther King, Jr., and President Kennedy. By early 1963, civil rights leaders who were pushing hard for legislative measures "watched the success of the president's strategy with understandable frustration." Kennedy, rejecting fatalism, had dictated the pace of change and still had the approval of the black masses, at least for the moment. [90]

Finally, writing in 1965, Schlesinger's narrative of the events of 1962-63 evinced the uncomfortable fact that the movement's accomplishments seemed narrow given the

true, at least in a preliminary way. The problem here of course, is that one could understand how it was probable for most any politician to be a pragmatist, particularly if Arthur Schlesinger liked them (for example, FDR was a pragmatist as well). Arguably, Schlesinger was among the main offenders in something of a movement of mid-century thinkers who valorized pragmatism as an indigenous American philosophy or the defining aspect of a generalize-able American character, all of which diluted pragmatic thought in such a way as to make it mean anything unsystematic or un-dogmatic.
[90] Ibid., 939, 948, 949, 950.

many problems that remained. Many in the civil rights community sensed this, and were becoming radicalized in a dangerously emotional way. Like Niebuhr, Schlesinger saw countless "obdurate complexities." In keeping with his variety of Niebuhrian realism, the civil rights movement lent itself to an ironic narrative rather than the triumphal one that others would assemble some years later. Events that initially appeared fortuitous only led to the realization that more effort revealed only more problems. In Schlesinger's reading, even before Birmingham, Robert Kennedy, in particular, found the Department of Justice impotent to intervene in Southern affairs given the America system of federalism; inequality was so embedded in the very nature of Southern local legal practices that it proved impossible to effectively prosecute all cases in which local authorities violated a person's constitutional rights. The upshot was that while many whites sensed that a profound change in race relations was occurring, many African Americans disagreed, particularly those who lived under conditions proving conclusively that such changes were largely cosmetic. Increasingly, African Americans thought that the national government, and with it the Kennedys, could not and would not protect their interests. Even if the Jim Crow system in the South toppled, countless Northern blacks faced dire economic circumstances and lacked the communal spirit provided by the black church in the South. After Birmingham in particular, with the conscience of white America piqued, an emerging group of prominent African Americans (especially James Baldwin) revealed their radical stripes, and the Kennedys bore the brunt of their outrage.[91] By the same

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[91] Discussion largely from Ibid., 951-977. On Baldwin and Robert Kennedy, 960-3.

token, nonviolence increasingly became discredited. King and the Kennedys now inhabited similar terrain: Promethean figures who paid for their heroism. [92]

Niebuhr and Schlesinger's observations in the mid 1960s anticipated an important liberal interpretation of the civil rights movement that would emerge from that era, one that bears the imprint of the cult of complexity and its concerns. Emphasizing the unfinished quality of American democracy, the civil rights movement now acts as a measuring stick for liberal goals. The movement exists in this sense as irony: the more civil rights advocates accomplished, the more they revealed the intransigence of white racism; the more government intervened to remedy existing inequalities the more it turned up intractable, historically complex racial problems. Yet one did not give up the ghost. Liberalism was a tough business that only struggle could illuminate. The process by which American democracy incorporated minority perspectives in policy and in practice never came easy.[93] Yet, for Schlesinger, even though the road ahead appeared daunting, Kennedy gave the nation hope, and the Vital Center held, for if "Roosevelt had absorbed the energy and hope of the labor revolution into the New Deal…Kennedy moved to incorporate the Negro revolution into the democratic coalition and help it serve

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[92] For example, Schlesinger notes:
> In a week when Negroes threw eggs at Martin Luther King, Jr., in Harlem and a Negro meeting in Chicago booed not only Mayor Daley but even James Meredith, the President observed gloomily that the progress since Birmingham had been made possible by the awakening of the middle class white conscience and the belated rallying to the civil rights cause; now the mindless radicalism of the Negro militant might well drive this new middle class support away and postpone hope of progress. Ibid., 968.

[93] See chapter two for historians in more detail; some examples of this tendency are C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: A Commemorative Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 220; Taylor Branch, "King's Legacy" interview by David Gergen, (PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, 2 February 1998) *Online NewsHour*, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/gergen/february98/branch_2-2.html; Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Norton, 1990), xiii, and 305. William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, Adam Fairclough, esp. "Struggle Without End" in *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana*, 1915-1972 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 463-477. Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 4.

the future of American freedom."[94] The civil rights movement, for good or ill, was now

an integral part of a story of American democracy writ large.

The cult of complexity would have a difficult time of it in the years that

followed, especially as the New Left asserted itself. (Niebuhr fell victim to illness and

would fade from national prominence.) Ellison endured withering criticism first from a

handful of Harlem intellectuals and then from the radicals of the Black Arts Movement

for his apparent lack of political engagement. Schlesinger was largely dismissed by the

Left as an establishmentarian, Trilling as an inconsequential conservative aesthete. The

extent to which this group proved more discerning than other intellectuals of this period

is difficult to surmise. However, they did contribute to our modern understanding of the

civil rights movement as a continuing struggle inherent to American democracy rather

than a clear victory. They understood the movement as an indicator of their general

approach to problems, one that shaped, but primarily reinforced, their respective

positions. For Ellison, the movement meant a rich vernacular culture, the tragic-comic

results of black history in the United States, the expression of a long history of endurance

in a democratic society that continually refused to properly acknowledge the central,

manifold contribution black folk made to the character of American life. Ironically,

culture (always fluid, changing, and nearly inscrutable in its complexity) would

persistently reveal what sociology would not. For Schlesinger and Niebuhr the movement

represented another instance in a long struggle with freedom vaguely construed as the

practical end constantly in mind, in which historical events proved the folly of naïve

idealism and the tragic consequences of moral heroism. With flawed human beings at the

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[94] Ibid., 977.

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controls, the ultimate outcome of the practice of American democracy was too tenuous to predict with any assurance.

These, however, are but snapshots of an era ending in the middle of the 1960s. The rise of Black Power and the New Left would precipitate a further, decisive change in the meaning of civil rights movement, one that would be even more prominent than the unfinished movement the cult of complexity offered. Bothered by enduring problems that seemed intrinsic to American democracy, several intellectuals would interpret a decisive split in the black freedom struggle, between an earlier, mainstream movement distinguished for its accomplishments, and a later one brought on by increasingly urgent national requirements and badly in need of new methods.

CHAPTER IV

CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE INTEGRATION OF HISTORICAL RUPTURE

The tortuous negotiations of intellectuals like Ellison, Niebuhr, and Schlesinger

with the moral, political, and aesthetic crisis that the civil rights movement inspired

reinforced and energized their deeply held convictions about the nature of human life and

art. Politics in the United States meant complexity; the movement eventually challenged

them to think harder about that potentially discomfiting but necessary truth. In doing so,

they articulated a line of thinking that many other American intellectuals would

increasingly attempt to verify about race relations in the mid and late 1960s.

As a matter of intellectual principle, this aforementioned cult of complexity

insisted that their obsession had long been around; it was a characteristic intrinsic to

human life, but one that often avoided more thorough, systematic perspectives. Today's

received wisdom about the mid 1960s appears to show that their insistence was

submerged in a flood of more strident voices, as these years generally mark a transitional

period in the civil rights movement, and with it American society, usually understood as a

break from a simpler time to a more complex one, or from postwar consensus to conflict.

Artists like Ralph Ellison, for one, would have been especially unreceptive to the idea

that a loss of innocence greeted the last half of the decade, yet there are solid reasons to

respect this idea of transition, not the least of which is the fact that certain events, if

described as decisive turns or historical ruptures, would make for compelling storytelling.

At the risk oversimplifying the difference between the cult of complexity and the

intellectuals who make up this portion of the story, the former saw complexity as an

aesthetic standard intrinsic to an intellectually honest account of human life, while the

group treated here were far more immersed in initiatives one might narrowly call

political, whether in the formulation of public policy or in the pursuit of radical activism.

For thinkers like the psychologist Kenneth Clark, the social scientists Nathan Glazer and

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and radical activists and polemicists like Harold Cruse, race

and racism were persistent and immediate national problems, ones that necessitated a

type of historical understanding governed by the assumption of rupture or crisis.

Understanding the intricacies of their position requires at least a preliminary

account of the events they attempted to make comprehensible. This can be hard to do.

When attempting to explain what happened to the movement in the mid 1960s, it

becomes difficult to prioritize one narrative break or new phase for another, or to separate

one event from the others, given that they are most often cited as combining or

overlapping factors, and are connected in various ways according to the vagaries of

narrative choice or subject matter. Suffice it to say that most scholars believe that things

came apart in the mid 1960s in the United States, and there are numerous narrative

threads one might pull to do the unraveling.[1]

In no particular order, the most widely cited of these interpretations are, first, the

passage of monumental civil rights legislation: the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965

Voting Rights Act. In effect, these acts completed or affirmed the meaning of the First

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[1] Other arenas of intellectual and artistic life are suggestive. Perhaps the civil rights movement
paralleled or influenced a broader mid 1960s American historical sensibility. Consider that minimalism
emerged in the American visual arts and avant garde music. For example, the composer Steve Reich's tape
loops took apart the seemingly infinite elements in the human voice, rupturing them in pieces, putting those
pieces back together into forms where the sediment of the pieces was intimately felt by the listener in the
finally emergent whole, strangely familiar yet unfamiliar to the original spoken words. Thus, Reich's use,
in the 1966 composition "Come" for example, of a young black murderer's voice, speaks to this uneasy
synthesis of integration and disintegration against a backdrop of long hot summers.

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Reconstruction, recognizing, in the arena of national law, the civil and political rights of African Americans. In this reading, the passage of this legislation meant that movement activists and their allies in the legislature would come to concentrate on, with mixed results, more enduring problems that separated Americans, ones with deeper and more complex meaning than the end of legalized segregation in the South. One could *desegregate* various institutions through protest and legislation, but the full meaning of racial *integration* was far from settled. In a turn of events so effective and telling that few scholars of the civil rights era can resist drawing conclusions from it, shortly after President Lyndon Johnson signed the historic Voting Rights Act, the Watts section of Los Angeles erupted in violence between black residents and white authorities. Somewhat less dramatically, this interpretation includes the attempted move by Martin Luther King, Jr., the SCLC, and their various allies from an explicitly southern theater of operations to a northern one, which meant a new concentration on economic issues and rights, apart from the earlier constitutional and legal focus of civil rights efforts, a change symbolized by burning inner city ghettos like Watts over a series of "long, hot summers" that followed the legislation.

Second, the movement itself began to splinter. An older generation of activists, willing to recognize the nature of power politics, thus showing an ability to compromise with those in power, proved more (though not always) amenable to working within the traditional modes of American political activity. They sought to move, in Bayard Rustin's phrase, "From Protest to Politics." On the other hand, a younger, more radical group of activists evinced less faith in these processes, believing that considerations of traditional power politics sullied their cause, or meant the compromise of the revolutionary potential

of their movement. Several events or developments led to this split. First, the increasing

national prominence of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the political and oratorical modes of

activism he represented, with its roots in the Black Church tradition, was considered by

some a form of showmanship or rhetorical excess with self-aggrandizing motives, at odds

with the grassroots or proletarian character of the movement. These sorts of stylistic

considerations made clear the differences between, for example, the religious leadership

of many in the older group and the secular character of many activists newer to the

movement. [2]

Second, a series of confrontations aggravated this division. Particularly telling

was the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, when Mississippi

activists, in a movement born of the Freedom Summer project earlier that year, founded

the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), challenging the legitimacy of the

lily-white delegation of segregationist Mississippi regulars, arguing that the MFDP

delegation was the rightful representative for the magnolia state at the convention. The

willingness of King to reach a compromise with vice president Hubert Humphrey and

President Lyndon Johnson to seat only two of the delegates of the MFDP, rather than

replace the lily-white delegation entirely, marked the moment where grassroots

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[2] Examples are too numerous to mention completely. A sampling is as follows: The classic statement of need of a shift in tactics from South to North is by the civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics," *Commentary*, 39 (February 1965): 25-31; A contemporary survey of the political landscape is Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1967): 2-16; Tom Kahn, "Why the Poor People's Campaign Failed" Commentary 46 no. 3 (September 1968): 50-51. More recent, general surveys: Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York: Viking, 2001): 301-2; for the Watts incident in juxtaposition with the Voting Rights Act, see Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965*, (New York: Touchstone, 1998): Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights*, *Race and the Image of American Democracy,* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2000): 239; Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960-1972*, (New York : Oxford University Press, 1990): 174-5.

democracy, embodied by the MFDP challenge, was defeated in the interest of the traditional processes of partisan politics.[3]

Less than a year later, the mettle of King and the older, more "mainstream" activists of the movement was tested yet again and failed to pass muster. Following "Bloody Sunday" on the Edmund J. Pettus bridge in Selma Alabama, where Sheriff Jim Clark and a group of armed, mounted policemen brutalized nonviolent activists for a national audience, refusing to let them embark on a planned march to Montgomery to demonstrate at the state capitol in the name of voting rights, King and the SCLC led another march, in which the civil rights icon, respecting a previous agreement, turned the marchers around to avoid another conflict with Clark and his minions. Though a final, nationally prominent, and celebrity-laden march to Montgomery would be successful, King's refusal to face down Clark appeared to show at worst a lack of courage, or hardly less damaging, some willingness to compromise his commitment to nonviolent direct action.

Third, this splintering of the movement eventually alienated many white and black people, including supporters, members, and sympathizers. The end result was its diffusion or disintegration. Many activists, under the spell of thinkers and polemicists such as Robert F. Williams, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon, seriously questioned the value and implications of nonviolent direct action, particularly as a vehicle for self-

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[3] Some examples are: Rustin, who made this argument in "From Protest to Politics"; David Garrow details the sense of betrayal felt by the MFDP in *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986): 350-51; Charles Payne and John Dittmer argue that the movement's successes contributed to its diffusion especially after 1964 as new groups sought involvement. Dittmer in particular gives a great deal of credence to the Atlantic City betrayal in 1964. Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 340-41, and John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana/Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994): 297-302; also Fairclough, *Better Day Coming,* 288.

realization through the practice of political protest. Increasingly suspicious of the ability

of nonviolence to effect truly radical, revolutionary changes that would seriously

challenge white supremacy, many activists embraced self-defense or entertained the

possibility of therapeutic violence as a means not only to challenge the American

political system, but also to inculcate racial and cultural pride. The slogan sometimes (not

always) proffered for this point of view was Black Power. In a theatrical display, in 1966

Stokely Carmichael dramatized these divisions by invoking the term in the presence of

Martin Luther King, Jr. during James Meredith's march across Mississippi, and it

subsequently captured the national imagination. Black Power, a highly contested and

confused concept (by reading the term as contested, one indicates the complexity of the

period in which it came into widespread use) meant either that African Americans

assume control of their own political destiny independent of whites, and/or that whites be

excluded from the struggle altogether. For many white Americans, young black radicals

were at the very least unreasonable and intransigent, and at worst racial separatists or

supremacists, a far cry from the apparent integrationist sentiments and intentions of the

original movement. Among the telling events here were the purges of formerly interracial

organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and, ironically, their abandonment of

exclusive affiliation with nonviolent forms of protest.[4]

    Finally, the movement lost focus as the United States escalated its involvement in

Vietnam, which moved attention away from civil rights as an exclusively domestic

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[4] Again, this is the standard interpretation with numerous adherents, one that appears in most history survey textbooks. The standard is Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981): esp. 235-6; For more detailed intellectual roots, see Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996 [1992]).

problem, forcing many activists to make a choice: support the war effort or broaden their field of interest to accommodate criticisms of American foreign policy. The Great Society rent to pieces by the Vietnam War, new people and arguably a new movement came to national prominence, so that civil rights became lost in a more inclusive and yet less focused set of concerns, a "New Left" none too sanguine about the prospects of a unified, democratic American future.[5]

Undoubtedly, this overwhelming evidence suggests that any effort to deny that the movement transitioned or experienced a break or a change of phase would be pretty foolhardy. This has yet to stop scholars from trying. The idea that the "truth" is different from received opinion makes for a tantalizing challenge, and always has. The recent proliferation of local studies has been the most convincing perspective from which to argue against a break or change in phase of the movement. The view from the grassroots ultimately shows that the movement was something rather ephemeral, indescribable as exclusively southern or northern, religious or secular, nonviolent or oriented toward self-defense.[6]

But this type of iconoclasm can obscure deeper questions, ones that may explain why this idea of a change of phase or notion of a break became so compelling for so many people. What follows is not terribly concerned with selecting or rejecting one event or another for its ultimate significance, but with unpacking the deeper intellectual motivations that inspired a type of historical imagination peculiar to the mid 1960s, eventually making a transition or a rupture in the civil rights movement necessary for

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[5] A succinct statement here is Michael Harrington, "The Politics of Tightrope" *Dissent* 20 (Spring 1973): 183.

[6] See chapter two. For example, Christopher Strain, *Pure Fire*: *Self Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

many Americans' approach to political problems. While the thinkers described here disagreed, sometimes vigorously, about how politics should be practiced, they shared a more basic mytho-historical imperative, especially prominent in the mid 1960s, to order the present to their liking. In effect, these intellectuals, in dealing with some enduring philosophical and political questions, provided the materials for the reading of the 1960s as a more complex or transitory period. The intellectual activity that the national prominence of the civil rights movement inspired, resurrected, with increased scrutiny, some presumably "obdurate complexities" that a socially concerned observer like Reinhold Niebuhr admitted he had misunderstood before 1964. Chief among such questions were: what should the role of the national government be in the pursuit of racial equality? Can the national government and in turn, the American political system, effectively deal with this pursuit and all that it implies? What is the meaning of the idea of racial equality and its necessary accompaniment, racial inequality? What are the responsibilities of American citizens in light of all of these problems, and a related, deeper problem, what does "American democracy" mean?

One should not forget, however, that such questions or problems had long been there in all of the complexity that American life implied; intellectuals merely shepherded them into the public arena. By uttering and giving shape to these persistent questions in their chosen way of expressing themselves, intellectuals did not give birth to these problems, rather they articulated them in such a way that made the civil rights movement coterminous with them. Nearly simultaneously, these questions came to signify the trajectory of the movement as their ideas or explanations of them were disseminated. Unfolding events supplemented and enhanced these understandings. So the thinkers

described here did not necessarily create the notion of a split from an earlier to a later movement *ex nihilo*, but they provided the ideas and interpretations that made the integration of the American mind dependent upon the assumption of historic rupture in the civil rights movement, often imagined as a transition from the innocence of racial universalism or integrationism to the exhaustion invited by seemingly intractable social conflict and increasing racial and ethnic particularism.

<div align="center">Moments of Transition and Necessary Fictions</div>

There are times, states, in which we lie under and feel the awful volume of cumulative consciousness, we feel the weight of the world. Not at all funny.[7]

This question of whether or not the civil rights movement disintegrated, changed or became more complex some time in the mid 1960s also evokes those necessary fictions that historians "assume in silence" (to paraphrase Henry Adams).[8] Since the speculative form of philosophy of history fell out of favor some one hundred years ago, the theory of history is perhaps less satisfying in its comprehensiveness, but not without its nagging questions, one of which happens to be: what makes historians perceive breaks or transition points in their narratives when the quotidian character of human life appears to indicate that it is difficult, nigh impossible to tell precisely what makes one thing more important from another (disregarding or downplaying the thorny problem of causation)? Or better yet, what makes human beings interpret their experiences by the use of crucial moments or turning points? Why are historians and other humans selective in this way? The fact that critical turning points and even starting and ending points sometimes differ remarkably between tightly focused local studies of civil rights and those involving civil

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[7] Artur Sammler in Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Penguin, 1996 [1970]): 227.
[8] Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1918]): 319.

rights organizations with national reach offers a critical opening to consider these sorts of questions a bit more carefully. To revisit a previous point: one can certainly argue for one turning point or another, or for one beginning and end or another, but it may be more interesting to consider in more detail what ways of thinking made up these decisive transitions, starts and stops. The meaning of these historical ruptures, and the approach to problems that they represented, proved crucial to the integration of the American mind.

At the risk of truism, ruptures are merely historical phenomena. In philosophical terms, they have no ontological status apart from being forms of historical consciousness. Furthermore, conceptually, ruptures are necessarily embedded in continuities of one sort or another. The easiest explanation for these phenomena is that the assumption of critical moments or ruptures makes us different from, say, Nietszche's herd grazing in the field in a sort of eternal present, released from the peculiar human burden of past-ness. By marking moments we arrest this flow of time, releasing ourselves from this present, opening ourselves up to the inevitability of loss. By remembering, which is a partial (in both senses of that word) process, we assume status as historically aware beings. So those who insist on a mid 1960s transition for the civil rights movement, for example, are merely doing something intrinsically human. Yet, the frequent conflation of complexity with these moments of transition seems paradoxical, because the human insistence on remembering things frees us from the chaotic range of sense inputs that a continuous present implies. We select what is important to order our world in a way that frees us from the full content of the complexity that we experience. This irony or paradox suggests that a rupture, because of its richer, ostensibly more complex experiential

content, can be interpreted, in terms of individual memory, as a type of trauma, and in historical writing, a type of watershed moment.[9]

So a rupture or a sharp transition point in a historical story, whether personal or scholarly, might indicate a point where the perception of complexity momentarily overwhelms the ability of individuals to easily impute meaning to an experience and define its historical status, which is inevitably triggered by some sort of moral crisis. People get confused; the more meaningful the event, the more incomprehensible. In the United States, this is especially true during those moments in our history when intellectuals are faced with the essentially contested character of that handful of metaphysical imponderables that we collectively call "American democracy," sometimes represented by words like "equality" or "freedom." It is the possibility yet implausibility of democracy that inspires confusion, punctuated by the inclusion of breaks in the wider marking of moments that are sometimes collectively called a national historical narrative. The usual, easy solution to this sort of problem in this country is an appeal to some presumably fixed or foundational criteria for understanding the predicament, be it racial or ethnic purity, traditions like religion, or the comfort of kinship and family loyalty: "mother's milk or father's beard" as Ralph Ellison once described it.[10]

So continuing political and moral considerations, especially when connected in the United States by the experience of democracy, are implicated in the instantiation of a break or a watershed, which intensifies our more primary acts of selection, which in turn

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[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life," in *Unfashionable Observations*, Richard T. Gray, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995): 87. For historical consciousness and the significance/structure of historical events, see John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness: Or the Remembered Past* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968): 128-170.

[10] Ralph Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library, 1995 [1978]): 503.

help us make sense of the present. In such situations, people are forced, given the trauma inspired by their experience, to make a difficult choice, or to take a position, which lends the experience mytho-historical status. This specious present, then, to abuse slightly an insight of the political theorist Sheldon Wolin, is "the political organization of existence."[11] In choosing, different people or groups put history in the service of collective meaning, which has mytho-historical status because it begins an effort at social definition and identity, which is inherently political: contested or negotiated.

Charles Taylor considers the problem in a somewhat different, but revealing way:

> To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can determine from case to case what is good, what is valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.
> People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual commitment, say as a Catholic or an anarchist. Or they may define it in part by the nation or tradition they belong to…What they are saying by this is not just that they are strongly attached to this spiritual view or background; rather it is that this provides the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value.[12]

Thus, according to Taylor, there can arise situations in which people feel disoriented from this sense of themselves, what he calls an "identity crisis," when their "frame" or "horizon" is lacking. One feels "at sea," frightened or confused.

For my purposes, the thinkers described in what follows, threatened with disorientation, only intensified their primary acts of selection; they reinforced, to use Taylor's language, their "frame," which often meant clinging to acceptable methods in their field of study, usually social science. Methodologies of one sort or another were

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[11] Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1989): 1.
    [12] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989): 27-28.

rudders that allowed them to navigate events that they found confusing or potentially chaotic.

To use an example from a frequent debate among civil rights scholars, one can argue that some of those who perceived a split between an earlier, nonviolent phase of the civil rights movement and a later, violent one tended to identify with nonviolence. They made a historical judgment that was contingent upon the position with which they most identified. On the other side of that debate, those who identified with self-defense tended to rigorously deny that any such transition had occurred. Self-defense was always the name of the game. In each respective case, the interpreter assumed that because one came before the other it must be the more authentic or better, a strange variation of an *argumentum ad antiquitatem*. Or, it may be a variation on *argumentum ad novitatem*, as the experience of a newer event made for the assumption that this vantage point was superior to those that came before.

To grossly oversimplify, we muster a specific sort of historical understanding in support of the political position with which we identify. Nonviolence or self-defense is better because of the conspicuous appearance of its other alongside it, and the creative tension or confusion that conflict inspires makes one much more aware of the value the choice made, which is inevitably rendered as a type of historical imagination. We put our ideas about a particular historical narrative in the service of political activity, choosing either rupture or continuity. The decision is often intensely moral. The more complex things seem to an individual, the more likely that person is to choose historical rupture or crisis, often ironically.

After the Second World War, given that it was increasingly difficult for social scientists and other intellectuals to find comfort in a traditional recourse to biological essentialism to understand the social world around them, new criteria became necessary. By the 1960s, the civil rights movement forced methodological position-taking for racially interested social scientists in particular, which had its analogous manifestation among other sorts of intellectuals in the form of an epistemological position, or less charitably, racial posturing. To explain what they perceived as the momentary essential contestation and complexity of American democracy, they invoked historical crisis or rupture. As intellectuals, they defended their integrity in doing so, which, for most, also meant a defense of their *methods*. The thinkers accounted for here assumed that structural, historical, or institutional analyses revealed persistent and pernicious problems. The descriptive part of their analysis, in other words, did not suppose remarkable discontinuities, but the prescriptive aspect of their analysis augured the need for a change in approach or in strategy. They were forced to make a choice; to exercise their historical imagination. The conceptual and methodological assumptions that the intellectuals treated here made was a clue to the style of thinking that gave credence to the split in the civil rights movement.

The presumption, then, of a break or a decisive transition in the civil rights movement so commonplace today is a product of a resolute, morally charged brand of intellectual activity, which, interestingly enough, revealed disturbing, continuous, and potentially irresolvable racial misunderstandings seemingly intrinsic to American democracy, problems about which intellectuals often disagreed.

Kenneth Clark and the *Dark Ghetto* of the Fact-Value Dichotomy

"[P]eople are not exposing themselves to dogs and tears gas so they can go on being delivery boys forever"[13]

Is pure intelligence enough to protect man from self-inflicted destruction? Paradox and irony are inherent in this question.[14]

Intensely personal and passionate, the social psychologist Kenneth Clark was a highly influential example of this morally concerned style of intellectual pursuit. Clark, considered by some "the scholar of the civil rights movement," was perhaps best known for providing the psychological study that deeply informed the *Brown* decision of 1954. The popularization and reception of Clark's findings, famously rendered in a study of white and black children's reactions to white and brown dolls (conducted with his wife Mamie), showed that African American children experienced feelings of inferiority: they tended to favor the white dolls over the brown ones. The court, using these studies, concluded that segregated schools stamped black children with a "badge of inferiority." The damage inflicted upon whites was not as much a topic of concern for the court as it would prove to be for Clark; yet, the connections between school segregation and the doll study were largely unclear and ill-defined, and Clark helped to cultivate the confusion. As a result the court's use of psychological insights rather than narrowly legal considerations excited some measure of controversy in the years that followed and continues to do so today.[15]

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[13] Unidentified Harlem interviewee in Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965): 41.

[14] Kenneth Clark, "Social Morality, Scientific Objectivity, and Relevance," in *Pathos of Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970): 31.

[15] The "scholar of the civil rights movement" is from the back jacket of Kenneth B. Clark, ed., *King, Malcolm, Baldwin: Three Interviews by Kenneth B. Clark* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1985 [1983]); *Brown* decision; for the doll study, see Kenneth Clark, *Prejudice and Your Child* (Boston: Beacon, 1955): 17-24. On the controversy and Clark's role in it, see Hadley Arkes, "The Problem of Kenneth Clark" *Commentary* 58 no. 5 (November 1974): 38-42; James Patterson, *Brown v*

The influence and intricacy of this line of thinking, what Daryl Scott has more recently called "damage imagery," cannot be underestimated for its importance, largely because it is a problem that remains unresolved for American racial and political thought. Clark posited that racial thinking was the guiding psychological assumption dominating a pathological, sick American society. He shared this perspective with Gunnar Myrdal and E. Franklin Frazier, and together these three are sometimes considered leading lights in a mid-century liberal orthodoxy among social scientists concerning race. Along with those two men, Clark contributed to the widespread idea that racism was an individual psychological and moral problem, and to the perspective, prevalent among social scientists from the end of World War II to the mid 1960s, that black culture was a distorted reflection of white racist attitudes, a damaged variation of the dominant white culture and thus of little real inherent value. [16]

Some scholars conclude that this "liberal orthodoxy," organized around the idea of social pathology and black damage, was challenged by the civil rights movement, which they failed to anticipate, and which, especially after the triumph of the movement over Jim Crow in the South, exposed deeper structural problems that indicted the nation as a whole. The 1965 Watts uprising, for example, was symptomatic proof that the old paradigm no longer held. Racism was intrinsic to American society and its institutions, a

Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001):42-45. Zora Neale Hurston famously argued in a 1955 letter to the Orlando Sentinel that segregated institutions were improving, and that desegregation would do little to improve self-esteem given the implications of the *Brown* decision, which was that whites must somehow be followed for racial benefit. Zora Neale Hurston, "Court Order Can't Make Races Mix" in Cheryl Wall, ed. *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995 [1955]): 956-58. Of course, Clark would resist this conclusion.

[16] Daryl Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). "Liberal Orthodoxy" in John P. Jackson, Jr., and Nadine M. Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clio, 2004): 177-197.

much more insidious problem, one that the previous emphasis on segregation's effects on the individual psyche was at a loss to explain. The acrimonious debate that followed the appearance, in 1965, of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,* written largely by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the assistant secretary of labor for the Johnson administration (often called simply the Moynihan Report), signaled the demise, or at least the splintering of the liberal social scientific consensus. Racial inequality, when understood as a Northern, urban phenomenon, appeared an intractable problem with deep historical roots. Moynihan's report, which drew from the work of Clark and employed the methods of the established liberal orthodoxy, offered potential aid to racial conservatives who would misuse the study's findings to argue that the solution to the problems of the ghetto lay not with national government programs, but at the doorstep of morally bankrupt black families, who, such charges implied, should behave more like middle class white families. In the wake of Moynihan, scholars increasingly shifted their focus away from black pathology and toward the historical resilience of black communities and families. According to this interpretation, developments in the social sciences paralleled the trajectory of the civil rights movement and with it the mid 1960s rupture in the national historical narrative. In effect, Moynihan and the Johnson administration, by attempting to "leapfrog" the civil rights movement, or take the lead in ameliorating African American poverty, opened a deep and ultimately fatal fissure in both the so-called liberal consensus and in the movement itself.[17]

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[17] For these developments, see Jackson and Weidman, *Race, Racism and Science*, 193-197; Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 145-159; 171-185; "Leapfrog" was the term used by an anonymous government source to describe Johnson's civil rights strategy, in Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, 14.

On the surface at least, there is little to be gained from challenging this interpretation. It seems the proper one. However, it is worth challenging the assumption that Kenneth Clark regarded the dominant white society as the necessary healthy analogue to a pathological black community. Like Gunnar Myrdal, he understood racism as a white problem, but he had more subtle criteria than "white" for what constituted health as distinguished from sickness. I argue here that he shared in some important respects the idea of freedom that dominated the civil rights movement. For these purposes a bit deeper analysis of an enduring problem in the social sciences, the fact-value dichotomy, reveals the subtlety of his thoughts about what freedom might mean, which would mean the realization of a healthy, democratic society. This subtlety or confusion (depending upon one's perspective) was the product of an intellectual trauma that necessitated serious interrogation of the nature of American democracy. With Clark as a sort of intellectual guide then, we might discover how the transition within the civil rights movement and with it the social sciences was experienced as an individual historical phenomenon.

Rather than arid or purely theoretical (in the sense of pondering the extent to which the social sciences could truly be called "scientific"), Clark's investment in the problem of fact and value was very personal, and very much tied to his identity as an African American, including his understanding of the civil rights movement and American race relations. Obviously, social scientists had toiled away at this fact-value issue long before Kenneth Clark decided to take it on, at least from the point that Max Weber decided to articulate it at the turn of the last century, during the years when the social science professions, including Clark's, became formalized. Moral philosophers and

ethicists had considered something very much like this difficulty at least since the late eighteenth century when David Hume, using different language, warned that thinkers should be careful to consider the distinctions between what "is" and what "ought to be." Simply put, Clark managed to latch on to a perennial problem that could admit no easy solution.[18]

For this reason and many others, primary among them the fact that by the 1960s, philosophers of social science were mining this problem in veins much deeper than Clark chose to, it would be tempting conclude that this was nothing new under the sun. Considered against the latest solutions conjured up by philosophers of social science it may not have been, but applied to the specific historical context in which Clark puzzled over the problem, namely the mid 1960s, there was.[19] These years would witness the appearance of some tremendously controversial and influential social scientific studies, in particular Moynihan's infamous *Report* (1965), and the Kerner Commission's *Report on Civil Disorders* (1967), proving that the distinction between fact and value was vital to public policy and to the fortunes of the civil rights movement as intellectuals like Clark would imagine it.

By the 1960s, more than a few social scientists believed that their field was increasingly troubled by a tendency of many among their number to draw a distinct line between fact and value, a potentially pernicious development, one that threatened to render their findings irrelevant to contemporary problems and to their attempted solutions

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[18] Max Weber, *Sociological Writings,* Wolf Heydebrand, ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994); David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Tom L. Beauchamp, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[19] For example, Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds. *Problems in the Philosophy of Science: Proceedings of the International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science, London, 1965*, (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Co, 1968): 377-432.

in concrete policy-making. The widely acknowledged expert on American race relations for the engaged social scientist and the godfather of the liberal orthodoxy on race was the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, whose 1944 study *An American Dilemma* had stirred the liberal imagination to contemplate the uncomfortable reality of American race relations. Myrdal never departed from the latent optimism of that study, congenial to many liberals, that the widely held American Creed, or the basic abstract ideals that informed American life, would eventually resolve the paradoxical relation that those ideals generated, namely the constant tension between the belief in equality and the anti-equalitarian, parochial sentiments that characterized so much of American life.

In 1955, a decade before the appearance of his influential study *Dark Ghetto*, Clark shared much of Myrdal's optimism for the prospects and even inevitability of positive movement toward the fulfillment of the American Creed, especially when bolstered by "objective information." Citing broad, impersonal changes in technology, especially in communication and transportation, Clark believed racism would be proven an anachronism in an increasingly cosmopolitan world. Americans could be brought to believe that racism was a moral wrong, but education was necessary to show *why* racism was wrong. If citizens could have the same information that that Supreme Court had during the *Brown* decision Clark reasoned, they could understand and make the right choices, a process accomplished, ideally, with a "minimum of social conflict." Ten years later, he would not be so optimistic.[20]

Whatever the inexorability of this faith and the accuracy of its predictive capacity, it did not preclude Myrdal, and later Clark, from leading the charge for an evaluative form of social science, the ultimate aim of which was enlightened social policy. The

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[20] Clark, *Prejudice and Your Child*, 5-13.

fulfillment of the Creed required concerned human beings at the controls. Writing nearly

two decades after *Dilemma*, the Swedish national reiterated his confidence that the Creed

"in the long run…will be decisive in the development of policies." To more fully realize

these ideals, though, fact and value could not remain distinct: "the theoretical problems of

ascertaining the facts and the relations among facts—cannot be rationally posited except

in terms of definite, concretized, and explicit value premises."[21]

Myrdal and Clark knew each other very well, so much so that Clark considered

the Swedish economist perhaps his greatest intellectual influence. As a PhD student at

Columbia, Clark had worked with Myrdal on *An American Dilemma*, and the latter

contributed the foreword to Clark's *Dark Ghetto* in 1965. In that capacity, elder social

scientist expressed his admiration for Clark and his work. The African American

psychologist, his "friend," shared his frustration with "objective" social science. Wrote

Myrdal,

> Clark is tired of the false objectivity, the "balanced view" of many
> of his liberal white friends on the other side of the tangible plate glass [of
> race], which is philosophically made possible by the inherited Anglo-
> Saxon naiveté and lack of clarity regarding the value problem…In the
> demand for true objectivity he must, indeed, demand human empathy and
> even compassion on the part of as many as possible of those who can read,
> think, and feel in free, prosperous white America.[22]

Suggestive for its unique negotiation of Myrdal's praise, Clark sometimes cited an

instance that apparently affected him deeply. A type of intellectual trauma, it involved a

meeting of social scientists from the department of a major American university. The

group had recently received some money for the study of race relations, a field to which

they desired to dedicate more time and interest. The discussion resulted in a rather odd

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[21] Gunnar Myrdal, *Challenge to Affluence* (New York: Pantheon, 1963): vi. In his early work, Myrdal supported the idea of a value-free social science.
[22] Gunnar Myrdal, "Foreword" in Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, x.

agreement; the academic who was hired to conduct the research had no experience in race

relations whatsoever, but was a respected scientist in the area of the psychology of visual

perception. The logic of this recommendation was of course perverse and made for a

pathetic bit of irony: the committee showed a profound lack of vision by hiring an expert

in visual perception. Clark related this incident on at least two occasions, once in 1964,

speaking from the audience at a public roundtable sponsored by the journal *Commentary*

on the topic of "Liberalism and the Negro," and again in his study, *Dark Ghetto*,

published the next year.

The differences between these two accounts were immensely revealing. In the

first instance, Clark claimed that the discussion in question had taken place only twenty-

four hours before. With the insult of the incident relatively fresh in his mind, the

psychologist contended:

> I suspected, as a Negro—bitter, distorted, that maybe one reason
> they did not invite anyone who had done work in race relations was that
> they might have had to think of a Negro. If I had said this, I would have
> been accused of bigotry, my liberal white friends would have been unable
> to understand why I had violated the code of affability.[23]

After a bit more consideration and presumably with the added benefit of editing that

comes with the printed word, Clark evaluated the situation rather differently, concluding,

"In the social sciences, the cult of objectivity seems often to be associated with 'not

taking sides.' When carried to its extreme, this type of objectivity could be equated with

ignorance."[24]

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[23] Transcript of Kenneth Clark comments from "Liberalism and the Negro: A Round-Table Discussion: James Baldwin, Nathan Glazer, Sidney Hook, Gunnar Myrdal," *Commentary* 37 (March 1964): 39

[24] Clark, *Dark Ghetto,* 79.

In the first instance, Clark described a personal affront, which he attributed to his own "distorted" point of view, while in the second instance he used the episode to decry the corrosiveness of detachment as a standard of objectivity. The difference in the two accounts indicated a few things: first, on a personal level, the methodological prompting implied by "objectivity" had a sort of redemptive or therapeutic effect for the psychologist: his initial "bitter" reaction was presumably not an objective or healthy one (thus it was "distorted.") Furthermore, the problem, upon further consideration, was that those involved misunderstood the function of objectivity in social sciences, substituting detachment for intellectual honesty. One could also interpret this frustrating instance as an ironic distancing of the black psychologist from the very sentiments that ultimately afforded Gunnar Myrdal his prominence as an expert in the field of race relations. Perhaps the most widely cited work on American race relations to that point, namely *Dilemma*, had been led by a white Swedish social scientist who could attribute his appointment to the fact that the Carnegie Foundation had desired a detached, "objective" perspective on American race relations. Clark was asserting his independence. His larger vision for the role of social science insured that the feelings that had inspired his initially "bitter, distorted" reaction were important for the achievement of some measure of objectivity and truth, and here the fact-value dichotomy came into play.

Clark's *Dark Ghetto* was a study of the phenomenon of the ghetto generally, though much of the research materials for the study came from Clark's work in Harlem three years earlier. Generally considered a classic statement of the damage position among social scientists, the research leading up to its publication provided the inspiration for Moynihan's later infamous phrase used to describe the status of the black family: "the

tangle of pathology." Amidst the rather grim details, Clark periodically and passionately

engaged the problem of objectivity and the fact-value dichotomy. Very early on, he noted

a significant gap in social science research on the ghetto:

> [N]othing anywhere in the training of social scientists, teachers, or social
> workers now prepares them to understand, to cope with, or to change the
> normal chaos of ghetto communities. These are grave lacks which must be
> remedied soon if disciplines are to become relevant to the stability and
> survival of our society.[25]

This sort of "relevance" for Clark meant the purposeful collapse of the distinction

between fact and value. "Fact" for the psychologist was very much the realm that Ralph

Ellison, in proclaiming the inestimable value of fiction for Negro experience, had deemed

a narrow, "sociological" account. Unlike the novelist, Clark did not write fiction, and was

yoked to at least some of the presuppositions of his chosen field of study, particularly the

idea of objectivity.

Clark, like Myrdal, thought it necessary as a social scientist to make clear and

explicit the value assumptions of his chosen inquiry. The immediate end that Clark

sought, namely a study "relevant to the stability and survival of our society," governed

his selection of problems to approach and, however consciously or unconsciously, the

type of facts he (the scientist) would consider significant. A clear distinction between fact

and value was possible, but inadmissible for the purposes of the ends he had in mind.

Clark, unlike others, did not assume that "value-free" inquiry, however plausible or

implausible, was useful even as a heuristic; rather, he considered value-oriented social

science the most useful as an interpretive tool. "Objectivity," in this sense, was not a pre-

suppositionless perspective where the objects of study could only be a sum of empirically

verifiable social facts, but the pursuit of social validity and therefore the "truth":

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[25] Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, xv.

> Truth is more complex, multifaceted and value-determined than is the usual fact. Fact is empirical while truth is interpretative. Fact is, in itself, unrelated to value; it merely *is*. Truth, as the understanding--in the fullest sense--of fact, is related to value and, for that reason, more fully human.[26]

Thus,

> Objectivity, without question essential to the scientific perspective when it warns of the dangers of bias and prejudgment in interfering with the search for truth and in contaminating the understanding of truth, too often becomes a kind of fetish which serves to block the view of truth itself, particularly when painful and difficult moral insights are involved. The question of the nature of objectivity in law, in science, in human relationships, is complex and cannot be resolved by attempts to make it synonymous with the exclusion of feeling and value.[27]

Clark did recognize the reality of a realm of "fact" or what "is" distinguishable from questions of value. As a student of the human condition, presumably he understood, like Max Weber, that the comprehension of meaning in society was an evaluative process whereby historico-cultural understandings (values) presupposed the selection of significant facts from the chaos of human data and its welter of potentially infinite causality. But unlike Weber, Clark did not suppose that a value-neutral science was an inherent good (that is, a type of approach where the scientist sought a measure of interpersonal validity, leaving people to judge and make their own choices about one given system of values or another). Clark would attempt to explicitly influence the choices people made. The stakes were far too high to leave policy-makers to make the choices themselves, particularly in a society in which a white majority made the policy decisions. So Clark's position, which he described as that of an "interested observer" and "a Negro," was at once descriptive, prescriptive, and proscriptive.

The civil rights movement only made the situation more urgent because the publicity of the protests potentially obscured the everyday reality of African American

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[26] Clark's emphasis, Ibid., xxiv; See Gunnar Myrdal, *Value in Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 1958).

[27] Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 79.

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life. Civil Rights leaders, for example, did not speak for black folk generally, nor could

they direct methods of protest for most black people; it was naïve to assume so. Like

Schlesinger and Niebuhr, Clark contended that the achievements and prominence of civil

rights initiatives would only lead to more demands and to more turmoil:

> In the complex turbulence of the Negro ghetto, and consistent with the
> affirmative dynamics of the civil rights thrust, success feeds hope and
> provides strength and the motivation for further activity. This, in turn,
> makes existing barriers even more intolerable. Accelerated impatience and
> the lowering of the threshold of frustration toward remaining inequities,
> paradoxically increase the chances of racial tension and ferment and
> conflict. Failure would reinforce the sense of stagnation and despair and
> establish as fact the sense of personal and group powerlessness. A truly
> hopeless group makes no demands and certainly does not insist upon stark
> social confrontations[28]

Hope would lead to more conflict, and Clark, unlike many white liberals,

especially Arthur Schlesinger Jr., would not conclude that law and order should be

demanded or expected. Any process of social transformation would threaten those in

power; upheaval and conflict were inevitable elements of substantive changes in the

status quo. So in *Dark Ghetto,* the civil rights movement functioned for the formulation

of nomothetic rather than idiographic insights: it revealed the mechanisms of social

change rather than peculiarities of circumstance and case. The more public the

movement's apparent success, the more urgent the ghetto's demands and frustrations, the

more assertive and militant black people became, the more pronounced their racial

identification would become, all of which invited the possibility of increasingly frequent

conflict.[29]

While Clark would conclude that African Americans had been damaged by white

racism, and that their expression of self was contingent upon white understandings--"It is

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[28] Ibid., 15.
[29] Ibid., 15-20.

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still the white man's society that governs the Negro's image of himself"—he insisted that American society as a whole was pathologically dependent upon the race idea. (In this way, the pathology of racism acted as a sort of Weberian ideal type for Clark.) The civil rights movement reduced racism to a more essential category by precipitating the transition from a segregated to a "nonsegregated" society. (Clark's careful choice of the term "nonsegregated" over "integrated" is telling because it exposes the slipperiness of his position, which involved a complex dialectical tension between the necessity of black self-determination on the one hand and the belief that exclusively race-based thinking was a pathological condition on the other.)[30] The political group which best exposed the racism which remained in the absence of legal segregation were white liberals, who struggl[ed] to reconcile [their] affirmation of racial justice with…visceral racism." The ultimate measure of the civil rights movement's success nationally would not be its defeat of the obvious racism of the Jim Crow regime in the South, but its success against the more insidious forms of racism prominent in the North and South—with which white liberals often acquiesced.[31]

Racism remained a very personal type of condition for Clark, it had its social implications, but the psychologist often wrote about it in very intimate terms, reading in it the relationships between human beings, often using anecdotes of one sort or another to uncover apparently more comprehensive truths. Thus the "fetish" of objectivity, the clear

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[30] As a result, I have decided to avoid using the term "integrationist" to describe Clark, because he also avoids it, and because "integrationism" doesn't do justice entirely to the complexity of his position. He was an integrationist in the sense that he envisioned an open society in which racialist ways of knowing no longer mattered, but he was far too hard-minded in practice to be romantic about the possibility, which perhaps the term "integrationist" implied, and which could be misconstrued as a type of colorblind approach to problems that he rejected out of hand. Thus, I've chosen the term "interracialist" to describe Clark's invoking of a "nonsegregated" society, in the sense that integrationist might refer to a "transracialist" perspective.

[31] Ibid., 64, 20.

bifurcation of fact and value, signified in methodological terms the problem of white liberalism, especially the conceit of what Clark called "colorblindness" (a term which would become immensely important in the years that followed). As the civil rights movement picked up pace and national legislation came to pass, white liberals insisted that profound changes were happening, which Clark certainly conceded, but their insistence revealed their limitations. White liberals could insist that race played no role in their decision-making, but their verbal affirmation of racelessness only showed the poverty of their self-identification as colorblind. If, for example, a black person with whom white liberals might associate in one capacity or another indicated that some affront, policy, or idea was racially motivated, these liberals, reflexively and out of a sense of guilt, Clark felt, most often asserted their colorblindness and the insignificance of race in their decision-making. Yet, and this echoed Clark's experiences with the faculty member chosen to research race relations, one could hardly deal honestly with racism if one refused to acknowledge the significance of race altogether. It was a basic epistemological problem, a type of knowing that, while ostensibly sympathetic to black concerns and issues, was remarkably incapable of dealing effectively with the problems at hand.[32]

The civil rights movement was thus an ironic posture for Clark in the sense that it cultivated the possibility of a nonsegregated society, which inspired the terrific lack of understanding that characterized the relationship between white liberals and African Americans. For white liberals, the movement indicated an approach to problems characterized by colorblindness or even a corrosively disinterested objectivity. For social scientists like Clark, and a few "younger radicals" of the novelist James Baldwin's stripe,

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[32] Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 238.

for example, it meant frustration and heightened expectations. And, unlike a decade before, the movement invited social conflict and led to Clark's assumption, in 1965 and presumably before, that a crisis existed.[33]

As an illustration, the social scientist noted that the majority of attendees at the 1963 March on Washington were white people who had absorbed the rhetoric of moral conversion, but lacked the necessary intellectual tools and experiences to make substantive social changes. (It was telling that President Kennedy voiced his support for the event; the rhetoric of colorblindness rendered in classic speeches was comforting, but the stated demand for "jobs" was largely ignored.) The result was misunderstanding, all of which necessitated white patience. Black activists needed white liberals, a potential majority who controlled the purse strings, but African Americans needed to realize that liberals had their own limitations: of understanding and of practical politics (they weren't as powerful as black people tended to assume, in Clark's opinion). Importantly, white liberals had to be patient and take the necessary steps to understand the inevitable anger and bitterness of African Americans. Freedom, which would come through careful and rigorous adaptation of social intelligence to developing problems, could not be found in a purposeful divorce of fact from value, or in a misguided objectivity fetish, but in the cultivation of black solutions to black problems, carried out with white support and patience.[34]

Clark shared the interracialism of many civil rights activists and tempered it with a critical, methodological imperative for value-oriented social inquiry, which demanded substantive policy initiatives to heal the pathology of the ghetto. In other words, freedom

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[33]Ibid., 213-15.
[34]Ibid., 201-3; 50-55.

or health would mean cooperation and open dialogue between white and black people, but not by the dictates of some premature assumption that a putatively colorblind form of objectivity was a possible or plausible approach to the study of racism. The problems of American democracy demanded democratic solutions, thus the people whom government policy would presume to help must take the lead in the process. White liberals were necessary because they could muster the legislative majority necessary to enact social policy (Gunnar Myrdal had convinced him of this). Those to whom this legislation applied, namely African Americans in the ghetto, understood their world on the basis of their racial identification, which for Clark was a pathological but necessary condition to undertake meaningful and effective social policy. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., Clark dreamed of the day when children would live in a nation where they would be judged not by the color of skin but by the content of character, but neither he nor the civil rights leader were ever so naïve as to assume that they should adopt an approach to problems based on the presumption that such a day had already come to pass.[35]

Unlike King and many others, however, Clark failed to consider entirely that the resources for such changes might ultimately reside in *black culture*. King, the product of a liberal black Church tradition, had crafted a powerful language of personal and national moral redemption in the idiom of the black preacher. This was more than a rhetorical veneer. It tapped on wellsprings of belief that made people move for protest. Clark realized this, but in a flawed, incomplete way. He refused, perhaps for his social scientific methods, to countenance the idea that black churches might be instruments of the approach to the problems he appeared to advocate, which revealed the tenuousness of his formula of nonsegregated sentiment and black self-determination. Of course, he was a

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[35]Ibid., 238; 74-80; 50-55.

sophisticated enough thinker to find it of little surprise that the southern arena of the

movement should arise within black churches. As the central, and only exclusively

African American-run institution then extant, the church, "for the Negro," was "his

instrument of escape, his weapon of protest, his protective fortress behind which he seeks

to withstand the assaults of a hostile world and within which he plans his strategies of

defiance, harassment, and at times, his frontal attacks on racial barriers."[36] As an

interracialist, however, Clark thought that black churches, largely segregated from white

houses of worship, while necessary and crucial for black feelings of autonomy and

personal esteem, were also pathological for the tendency of many of their various

members to tenaciously hold on to their independence as a source of social power *within*

black communities. While alluding only briefly to the possibility of a larger, prophetic

role for the black church in American society *writ large,* Clark proved more willing to

emphasize the pathologies that segregation fostered, thus:

> Open competition in religion, as in other areas of life, is always
> hard for Negroes themselves to face. Yet the very satisfactions of
> segregation reinforce it. The transition from a closed society to an open,
> nonsegregated one requires that Negroes and whites both surrender the
> advantages of the closed society for the dangerous but hopefully more
> rewarding open competitive society.[37]

Reasoning in a rather Tocquevillian mode, Clark believed that human freedom

was possible; democracy was on an inevitable trajectory toward fuller historical

realization. In this he shared something of Myrdal's faith in the Creed. A transition would

take place from theory to practice, from verbal affirmation to substantive challenge to

power, yet the pace would be determined by the intelligent, human control of social

processes by democratic means, which, in practical terms, meant legislation supported

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[36]Ibid., 176.
[37]Ibid., 182.

and passed by white and black allies and then carried out by the members of the communities affected by the policy. Conflict would happen as the events unfolded. It should be expected, but it should also be directed down the most constructive paths. Clark also offered the now widely held interpretation that the methods of the civil rights movement, removed from their Jim Crow context, would not be effective for the ghetto, thus a transition was necessary. But Clark was far from dismissive of the movement's accomplishments; it provided a powerful language of moral regeneration to accompany what he perceived as a widespread increase in black militancy. It was up to Americans, white and black, to give that language meaning beyond the experience of periodic catharsis characterized by ritualized demonstrations, which merely let loose social energy every now and again. To paraphrase one of the subjects of Clark's Harlem study: people did not expose themselves to dogs and tear gas to go on being delivery boys forever.[38]

Thus Clark's sense of intellectual crisis, inspired by his experiences as an African American social scientist, showed the poverty of a clear distinction between fact and value, which indicated that the civil rights movement had revealed democracy to be complicated by subtle but insidious forms of racism. His careful articulation of the methodological and political distance between white liberals and African Americans was an attempt to articulate an individual position at a juncture when the *Dark Ghetto* seemed to admit the implausibility of the American Creed, precisely at a moment when the civil rights movement had revealed the possibility of the Creed's fuller realization.

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[38] Ibid., 184-5; 204-6; 240

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Harold Cruse and the Perils of Integrationism

"Which group speaks for America and for the glorification of which ethnic image? Either all group images speak for themselves and for the nation, or American nationality will never be determined."[39]

Kenneth Clark was always an interracialist, if at times a frustrated one. He was also rather slippery or conflicted in the sense that racially determined thinking for him was a type of sickness, yet it was necessary for the creation of enlightened social policy. He was disconcerted by the inability of white people to understand African American grievances because of their white racist preconceptions. Partly for that reason, he understood that it was necessary for black people to play a leading role in their own destiny, and problematically he was often dismissive of the idea that the black community might have cultural resources of any intrinsic value with which to join the fight.

With this logic in tow, Clark tended to resist identification with Black Nationalism, which made his admission that his mother was a follower of Marcus Garvey all the more intriguing. It may have been that this maternal legacy was more important than Clark would have liked to admit. Among his greatest stated influences, the psychologist identified Myrdal's *Dilemma* and Theodor Adorno's *Authoritarian Personality*. Clark's insistence on the pathology of race as an epistemological/methodological position reflected Adorno and the Frankfurt School's attraction to ideas of domination and to the apparent impossibility of individual autonomy and freedom that followed from that attraction. But Clark qualified this sense of domination with a Myrdalian understanding of the power of American democracy and its

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[39] Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York: Quill, 1987 [1967]): 188.

Creed, which would effect eventual freedom and health. Nonetheless, the idea that white racism was pervasive and that African Americans had been damaged by it was a persistent strain in both Clark and many prominent Black Nationalists' thinking, including Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon. In that sense, the social scientist may have found something congenial to his childhood experiences in Adorno's work.[40]

In other words, I want to suggest that Clark, though an interracialist, was not so far removed from the many varieties of Black Nationalism and Black Power that became so prominent in the years following the appearance of *Dark Ghetto*. In a sense, Clark spanned the gap between Black Nationalism and Neo-Conservatism, two impulses at least on the surface virulently opposed to one another. The manner of his impatience with white liberals was telling for that reason. It indicated a growing frustration among a group of like-minded black intellectuals with white liberal understandings of race, which manifested itself at times in methodological intricacy or confusion, depending on one's perspective.

Influential voices would attempt to clear the air. In 1967, some two years after the appearance of *Dark Ghetto*, Harold Cruse published *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, which offered a previously unrealized degree of historical sophistication to the problems of integrationism and nationalism inherited by Clark and many others. *Crisis* was an incisive, insightful, if splenetic, at times conspiratorial and tirelessly polemical work, and it located the sources of Clark and others' uneasiness squarely in their corrupt, "integrationist" methodology. It turned out, in Cruse's interpretation, that Clark's intricate, pained position was the sad result of a pretty thorough hoodwinking. It was a

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[40] Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 96-97, 230.

critique that would inspire a generation of African American intellectuals, one crucial to the creation of Black Studies programs in American universities.

A self-taught, free-floating Harlem intellectual, a World War Two veteran and aspiring playwright who traveled in Harlem's leftwing circles for the nearly two decades leading up to the appearance of his most influential work, Cruse's lack of institutional basis gave him a perspective on the civil rights movement that was unflinching in its historical judgments. The iconoclastic Harold Cruse loomed large in *Crisis'* narrative: it was a story of his own associations and interests, and his numerous frustrations with the handful of black intellectuals then ascendant in Harlem.

But *Crisis* was more than an airing of petty jealousies. Cruse started from the premise that, in "objective" terms, the United States was not unified, but characterized by distinct groupings of people. Borrowing a concept from the sociologist Milton M. Gordon, he reasoned that Americans lived and understood their world in terms of ethnic groups. In Gordon's formula, ethnicity referred to a complex of elements in one's group identity, or sense of "peoplehood": that loose combination of national origin, religion, and race which, whether affirmed or not by a particular individual, was, because of shared historical experience, reified by the institutional structure of a society and the associated social and psychological categories that most Americans used to place one another.[41]

Cruse leavened this idea of ethnic group identification with the insights of V.F. Calverton, an oft-forgotten, independent, literary-minded Marxist of the interwar years, who argued that considerations of class should be updated to reflect twentieth century

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[41] Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964): 23-30.

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"cultural group realities," which necessitated the understanding that people tend to think and act in terms of group imperatives. For Cruse, Calverton missed the opportunity to translate this theoretical perspective into praxis because to do so required the admission that only a nonwhite group could make this workable as a social theory. For Cruse, like Clark, "objectivity" did not mean that one should presume a nonracial approach to problems. This was an *a priori* assumption that refused to take into account existing social arrangements, namely the tendency of people to align themselves into, and act in pursuit of, group rather than individual ends.[42]

But the "American Ideal," which Cruse conflated with the Myrdalian Creed, was a largely ahistorical myth, a specifically white mindset propped up to reinforce the status quo. Cruse had none of Clark and Myrdal's shared faith that American democratic ideals would eventually effect racial equality. Even apparently colorblind constitutionalism could not be depended upon; as it existed, the American Constitution, traditionally interpreted in ways congenial to white interests, failed to reflect group alignments in society. The Constitution and the Creed proclaimed and protected individual prerogatives, and could allow for only individual assimilation, inadequate to the psycho-social facts of group-informed thinking and acting. "Integration" as Cruse interpreted it, was a methodology that assumed this mythical American ideal type, which, historically, merely reflected a retrograde Anglo-Saxon Protestant perspective. More importantly, as Calverton failed to realize entirely, specious "objectivity" or integration, was destined to serve assimilation and the status quo.[43]

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[42] Cruse, Crisis, 160-1. Calverton rejected "objectivity" for epistemological and aesthetic reasons because it did not take into account cultural understandings. In contrast, Cruse treated "objectivity" as an *a posteriori* perspective that dealt in group ethnic "realities."
[43] Cruse conflates the Creed with the "Ideal" in Ibid., 195.

So for Cruse, group dynamics best reflected the different popular conceptions of identity in the United States. Traditionally though, yet another group existed, intellectuals, who, dealing in the realm of ideas, engaged in something best resembling a dialogue about what America would look like and what direction the country would take. Famously, the social critic ascertained that as early as the antebellum period, among black intellectuals this vision manifested itself in a debate between advocates of integration and promoters of varieties of Black Nationalism. Up to that point, neither side had succeeded in articulating a systematic, agreed upon vision that the black masses could adopt with any success.[44]

Judging from the history of the two approaches, integrationists cultivated especially muddled theoretical ground. Integrationism made the purpose of the intellectual sphere confusing for black thinkers; it offered, by appealing to universal aesthetic standards or falsely "objective" social scientific methods, the allure of trans-racial acceptance and appreciation for individual, rather than group, thoughts or creative art. According to Cruse's logic, Kenneth Clark had succumbed to this impulse, and, not surprisingly, he also felt the sting of its inevitable rejection. In decades more recent to the 1960s, this yearning for acceptance translated into some unsatisfactory choices: a problematic humanism which, abiding by speciously unifying truths, made arid aestheticism appealing; a banal sort of contributionism, in which acceptable ("bourgeois") expressions of ethnicity merited largely undeserved praise; or a narrow socialist realism, where Negro art was valued only for its carefully sanitized folk or proletarian character.

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[44]Cruse, *Crisis*, 4-10.

Ironically, at least since the Harlem Renaissance, black intellectuals and artists found their unique measure of this limited acceptance among the white Left, who consistently restricted, commodified, and trivialized their work. If Negro intellectuals were to fulfill their proper role as spokespersons for their group, they had to deal with Negro problems from a Negro perspective, apart from white influence. Historically, whites on the Left, liberals and Communists alike, especially Jewish and WASP ethnic groups, had promoted their own respective agendas, often, but not always, under the guise of transcendent aesthetic and scientific standards. It behooved black intellectuals to do the same, but from the proper methodological perspective, recognizing their group interests. For this reason, Cruse concluded, white criticism of black work could not be "objective:" "For the white, criticism is merely a prerogative which, in any case, would be governed by an Anglo-Saxon or Jewish cultural compulsive thus negating any possible objectivity of a positive nature from a black point of view."[45]

Negro intellectuals had all too often failed to recognize that black America was the best, most vibrant source of information for what American should ultimately become. African American art and culture was the only vital and "original" national form—the consistent cooptation and use of black sources by white artists in their pursuits provided bitter proof enough. In white hands, black art became harmless faddishness, drained of its revolutionary potential. Black intellectuals, seduced by the white image of themselves, desirous of mainstream (read "white") success and acceptance, had abdicated their historical role. So like Clark, Cruse acknowledged certain "pathologies" in African American life, but was convinced, unlike the social scientist, that black culture could and would provide the necessary materials for a comprehensive strategy of racial uplift. As

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[45] Cruse, *Crisis*, 11-285, passim; 182.

the lead element in a combined, triple-front approach that included economics and politics, culture would be the arena where revolutionary activity, if supported and sustained by black-owned and operated institutions, could influence the black masses.[46]

Recalling the *Commentary* roundtable on "Liberalism and the Negro" that Clark and James Baldwin had contributed to, Cruse concluded that the biting criticism of white liberalism then in vogue among the leading group of black intellectuals, while it correctly revealed hypocrisy, was "an unsophisticated display of desperation." It exposed, in other words, how impoverished and compromised their methods were. Critical apparatus established, Cruse used this instance (and numerous others) to conceptualize the meaning of the civil rights movement and, in the process, contribute to his own narrative of historical rupture.

From the perspective of his nationalist/integrationist paradigm, the *Commentary* episode indicated that:

> Time and mass movements are bringing race issues to a head in America and the time-honored crutch of liberalism has been snatched away just as that other crutch—the white radicalism of the Communists—collapsed during the 1950s…One need only be a part-time reader of *Commentary* to know that white liberals have been long aware of their own diminishing role in America. But Baldwin and Clark talked as if all they read about American race problems and liberalism is what they themselves published. Otherwise, we would get from these Negro intellectuals critiques of American liberalism as a creed that would be more enlightening than the complaint that the race issue is the white liberals' responsibility and nobody else's—"So you liberals solve it!" This is what Baldwin and Clark were actually implying.[47]

Negro intellectuals were sadly out of ideas. The civil rights movement, while effective in its southern manifestation, given its appeal to national law, was not theoretically grounded in any "sophisticated" way. With liberal support, the movement had achieved

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[46] Ibid., esp. 189, 271, 413.
[47] Ibid., 195.

substantial legislative goals, but liberals, and with them the Constitution, would not admit further change. Like Clark, Cruse was convinced that southern methods would not prove conducive to northern complexities. Like so many other integrationist efforts, this one, without proper methods, was destined for incorporation by whites, who would pick and choose which of its elements were acceptable and which were not. "Integration" in every instance, history being the proof, would lead to "cultural negation." Anticipating one of the signal ironies of desegregation, especially in a southern context, Cruse reasoned that if pursued to its logical end, integration would undermine and eventually destroy the very sources from which black folk could build sustainable institutions: the segregated community. Bourgeois in orientation, individualistic and "outer-directed," the movement stood for acceptance in the broad stream of American material life. In effect, what Clark and others had failed to realize, and their misdirected anger at white liberals indicated this, was that one could not place any faith whatsoever in a "sham" like the American Creed. The ethical basis of American liberalism found wanting, Negro intellectuals, who represented the group with the most urgent needs, had to come up with their own solutions. [48]

Thus the slogans of the civil rights movement, its insistence upon "Freedom Now" and similar expressions of impatience, evinced naiveté and lack of independence. Like Marxist theoreticians, who offered black thinkers promises of a coming social revolution, civil rights advocates offered vague, intangible ethical abstractions like "freedom" and "human dignity." In one of the very few instances where Cruse even alluded to the existence of African American religion (and in this case he essentially conflated the sentiment with Marxian philosophy of history), he complained that the

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[48] Ibid., "cultural negation" on 85, see also 71, 313, 100, 195, 91, 230, 300, 309, 162.

movement offered promises of deliverance without the rigor of a systematic Negro cultural, political, and economic philosophy. The association of it with anything resembling "revolution" was a perilous overstatement. The civil rights movement signified an "inadequate methodology," the immediate result of the "identity vacuum" left in the wake of the failure of Harlem intellectuals during the 1920s to accompany their cultural gains with a solid institutional basis, coupled with the political and economic consequences of the black intelligentsia's doomed affair with the Popular Front Left in the 1930s. A "grand impasse" had thus been reached in Cruse's estimation in 1967. The meaning of crisis was both descriptive—black thought had historically been characterized by shortcomings and failures—and prescriptive: the appearance of the movement offered an opening for intellectuals to create lasting black institutions independent of white influence.[49]

While Cruse was far more sympathetic than Clark to nationalist strains in black thought, he could be very critical of them—for their lack of focus and especially for the ethnic divisions, West Indian and African American, that had characterized so much of the history of that approach. Contemporary nationalists had inherited the same cultural vacuum that civil rights advocates had. Their bizarre mix of integrationist and nationalist historical heroes provided sad evidence of that (i.e., the widespread omission of W.E.B. DuBois and the odd juxtaposition of Frederick Douglass with Martin Delaney). Moreover, because of his methodological insistence upon the objective nature of ethnic groupings in American society and history, the social critic showed some wariness for "nihilistic" forms of Black Nationalism based in race hatred. His focus on "means"

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[49] Ibid., "freedom" and "human dignity" on 254, "identity vacuum" on 63; "grand impasse" on 404; see also 354, 403, 370, 147-180, 362.

indicated the need for a critical, "objective" approach, which he clarified: "it is important to emphasize…that racial integration is not being criticized as a social philosophy on purely moral or ethical grounds as a human condition. It is being criticized on sociological grounds, because its methodology is open to question."[50]

But Cruse's insistence on means made his lack of attention to ends potentially frustrating. In *Crisis*, one could get the sense of something like anti-liberal (in the classic sense) Burkean suspicion; insistent upon encountering the world in its unvarnished state, acknowledging existing divisions, traditions and hierarchies, Cruse was pervasively impatient with abstractions and vague metaphysical propositions. Unlike Edmund Burke, however, one was always left with the tantalizing promise that all of that criticism had some final, hoped-for destination.[51]

Very late in the text, he dusted off Randolph Bourne's statement of cultural pluralism from 1916, "Transnational America," which he accepted as the as yet unresolved truth of the matter. Certainly, interracial dialogue could not take place on a plane where one minority group (WASPs) set the agenda, but when, if ever and at all, would an open dialogue take place? The social critic argued that Anglo-Saxonism could not be cast off with any ease. It was deeply embedded in the American "national structure." The civil rights movement combated this structure, but again, exhibited a flawed method by proclaiming its Americanism. Inviting absurdity, movement activists fought Anglo-Saxon supremacy using the very social values that the same establishment group had long used to oppress them. America, as a nation of nationalisms, needed to

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[50] Ibid., 431, 355, 365, 85.
[51] Cruse's discussion of means and ends had deep roots in the American left. See John Dewey, "Means and Ends: Their Interdependence, and Leon Trotsky's Essay on 'Their Morals and Ours,'" *The New International* 4 no. 7 (July 1938): 232-233.

cultivate a form of "democratic cultural pluralism" the pursuit of which meant African American leadership. The civil rights movement showed that no other minority group was as dedicated to challenging the dominant WASP minority, and if a "federated ideal" were to come to pass, then other oppressed minorities must adopt a "pro-Negro attitude."[52]

Still, Cruse ignored the sources of Randolph Bourne's cosmopolitanism. It had emanated from the (William) Jamesean version of pragmatic tolerance, which condemned "the certain blindness in human beings." Pragmatic acceptance of a universe in which questions of truth remained open to constantly changing circumstances meant that diverse perspectives deserved respect for their potential contribution to potentially better, future truths. Thus, the true American nation lay in the future, so that Bourne encouraged "an intellectual sympathy which is not satisfied until it has got at the heart of different cultural expressions, and felt as they feel. It may have immense preferences, but it will make understanding and not indignation its end."[53] Cruse at times seemed to suggest this ultimate aim, but his reading of the civil rights movement and its "grand impasse" demanded the recognition of historical crisis, which rendered understanding inseparable from indignation as its necessary mode. Thus, the sort of America the critic envisioned was never entirely clear, though the objects of his critique stayed front and center.

Of course, Cruse was merely trying Bourne on for his own purposes, but the notable omission of African Americans from "Transnational America" made it a

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[52] Ibid., 456-458.
[53] Randolph Bourne, "Transnational America" in David Hollinger and Charles Capper, eds. *The American Intellectual Tradition: A Sourcebook, Volume II: 1865 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 186.

potentially strange choice. While Cruse agreed with Bourne that Anglo-Saxonism was a

narrow, blinkered national perspective and that the "melting –pot" was especially

troubling when considered paradigmatic for American life, Bourne's odd contention that

the South was "culturally sterile because it has no advantage of cross-fertilization like the

Northern states" failed to catch the critic's attention.[54] Far from "culturally sterile," the

South, in spite of attempts by its ruling group to enforce white supremacy, was the site of

a dynamic exchange between white and black people, where African Americans

transformed oppression into forms of art, which included independent political practice.

Cruse insisted, for example, that "jazz music is the basis of the American classical music

tradition," and lamented that "Afro-American folk music became the aesthetic ingredient,

the cultural material, the wealth exploited by white American cultural imperialism" yet

failed to acknowledge the southern origins of such cultural material.[55]

Cruse's exclusive focus on Harlem's intelligentsia, and his conclusion that "The

way Harlem goes (or does not go) so goes all black America" allowed him to interpret the

civil rights movement as thoroughly materialistic and bourgeois in its orientation. More

than anything, Cruse's interpretation of the movement did the work of criticizing the

Harlem Left. For example, the critic argued that despite previous condemnations, many

on the Communist-influenced Harlem Left jumped on the civil rights bandwagon once

Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged, so that for them, he mockingly adduced, the black

church apparently "ceased to be a reactionary institution," which merely exposed the

inevitable meagerness of the Marxist Left when faced with the consuming force of

American capitalism. Treated as an idea by Cruse, the movement acted as a sinecure for

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[54] Ibid., 182.
[55] Cruse, *Crisis*, 457, 105, 108.

all that ailed this Left, unmasking the bourgeois character of the corrupt integrationist protest tradition it had inherited. Liberalism, Marxism and the movement were thus tarred with the same shallow, materialistic integrationist brush.

This made for a few unfortunate missteps. For example, Cruse's contention that the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott "started out as a grassroots affair" only to be "taken over by Martin Luther King, Jr. and his middle class orientation," was far too dismissive of the southern origins of its protagonists and of the multiple sources from which that movement drew its strength. Though relatively new to the city, King was a local pastor selected by the members of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), which attracted mass membership because its leadership appealed to the southern, black church culture and religiosity of the city's African American community.[56]

Dismissive of the South and of black church culture for its middle class virtues, contemptuous of the white liberal/Left, Cruse argued that the movement needed reconceptualizing and reconstructing. The masses must be appealed to on the basis of a carefully crafted cultural nationalism, this time backed by independent black institutions, supported by a rigorously selected black bourgeoisie sympathetic to and supportive of intellectuals and artists, unconstrained by the requirements of white middle class respectability, and cognizant of its revolutionary intentions. With the movement exposed and the crisis explained, the realization of radical racial democracy lay far in the American future; its intellectuals in the lead, black America had to go it alone.

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[56]Ibid., 12, 322, 378; On the MIA and black church culture see Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984): 47-48. Richard H. King offers similar criticism in *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals*, *1940-1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2004): 273-277.

The Rise of Neo-Conservatism

Against the bold requirements of Harold Cruse, Kenneth Clark's passionate advocacy of a value-infused social science involved a delicate negotiation that, loosed from its peculiar methodological moorings, could lead to disastrous and divisive ethical misunderstandings. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *Report on the Negro Family* had precipitated precisely this sort of confusion. The outcome was splintering of the liberal social scientific consensus, which would lead a handful of prominent intellectuals, this time under the aegis of social science rather than literature, to renew elements of the cult of complexity's critique of liberalism, in the process meriting identification as neo-conservatives. In essence, compromised liberals like Moynihan or Nathan Glazer, along with more vocal apostates like Norman Podhoretz or Irving Kristol, could be sensitive to racial and ethnic differences, often against the colorblind thinking that Clark thought so troubling and Cruse found so contemptuous. One can see, in other words, definite points of influence and similarity between the thinking of the black psychologist, the cultural critic, and social scientists like Nathan Glazer and Moynihan, yet important differences remained with respect to their approach to problems. If the outcome of Clark's sense of historical rupture in the civil rights movement was the tenuous reaffirmation of the idea of freedom in a decidedly Myrdalian mode, Daniel Moynihan and Nathan Glazer would use their mytho-historical invocation of crisis or rupture to show that the heightened expectations inspired by the movement had been largely illusory. But they would reject Cruse's revolutionary nationalist methods for the ironic stance that reform efforts more often than not would exacerbate existing problems, especially when accompanied by a romantic, suddenly modish distrust for any existing form of authority. Declaring

disinterestedness, their methods were designed to reveal insuperable, perhaps even unsolvable complexities, particularly where politics and social science crossed paths. Amplifying the pessimistic tendencies of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Reinhold Niebuhr, Moynihan and Glazer finally offered a liberalism so tough and attuned to complexity that some people eventually ceased to call it liberal at all.

This development of neo-conservatism was a rather involved process that encompassed multiple issues, not confined to racial considerations. The history of the term is now so confused that it refers to any number of points of view or people, usually associated, not without a measure of historical amnesia, with a type of hawkish, neo-Wilsonian foreign policy recently subject to a great deal of criticism.[57] More generally, however, neo-conservatives earned the prefix for their status as former liberals or Leftists. This makes a genealogy pretty difficult. It can refer to a group of New York Intellectuals, most of whom were Jewish, and some of whom were Trotskyites rather than Stalinists in the 1930s, who questioned not only the mainstream liberal's faith in rationality and progress, but also their fellow Leftist and liberals' dedication to anticommunism after the Second World War. If neo-conservatism owes its origins to that group, Cornel West is right to conclude that Lionel Trilling was probably a founding influence.

The word can also describe an oft-overlapping group of intellectuals who, disillusioned with the prominence of black radicalism and the New Left in the late 1960s,

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[57] Namely, the pursuit of war in Iraq, which some have argued was advocated by a cadre of "neoconservatives" within the Bush administration, especially individuals like Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz. This often includes the assumption that a neo-conservative group within the Bush administration, influenced by the political thought of philosopher Leo Strauss and his followers (the Straussians), pushed to prosecute the war in Iraq. See Jacob Heilbrunn, "The Neoconservative Journey" in Peter Berkowitz, ed. *Varieties of Conservatism in America* (Hoover Institution and Stanford University: Stanford, 2004): 105-128.

especially the "counterculture," sought to preserve their beleaguered postwar liberalism

in something resembling its original form. Thus, some in this group resisted the label

"neo-conservative" because they felt their former liberal allies had simply abandoned

them—taken in by faddish radical chic, naïve dovishness in foreign policy, and anti-

American nihilism (which, some Jewish neo-conservatives felt, was expressed as anti-

Semitism, especially through condemnation of the state of Israel for its policies toward

the Palestinians).[58] More concretely, the label was applied *to* them rather than *by* them;

among the first to do so was the socialist Michael Harrington, who used the term

critically in a 1973 article for *Dissent*, in which he described their rise as emanating from

a lack of sensitivity for the historical context that embedded the failures of the welfare

state in the 1960s.[59]

Because the term has been used in so many different ways, for the interests of

clarity I define it here in a different way, as a peculiar type of social methodology that

came to prominence in the mid to late 1960s, reaching maturity in the 1970s. More

specifically, with respect to domestic issues, emerging neo-conservatives, in the service

of "empiricism" or "objectivity" and using the methods of social science, believed the

world should be described only with the fullest possible sense of its messiness in mind.

This meant that policy-makers should evaluate social policy in quantifiable terms,

respecting the condition that solutions would not come easy, if at all, and in opposition to

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[58] A sampling of summaries are Joseph Epstein, "The New Conservatives: Intellectuals in Retreat" Dissent 20 (Spring 1973): 151-162; Irving Kristol, "An Autobiographical Memoir" in *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1995): 3-40; Mark Gerson, *The Neoconservative Vision: From Cold War to Culture Wars* (Boston: Madison Books, 1996); Heilbrunn, "The Neoconservative Journey," 105-128.

[59] This is the first use I have found. Earlier articles tend to refer to the phenomenon as the "new conservatism." Michael Harrington, "The Welfare State and Neoconservative Critics" *Dissent* 20 (Fall 1973): 435-454. A 1976 symposium with numerous participants is revealing for the general confusion about the term "conservative" among intellectuals: "What is a Liberal—Who is a Conservative? A Symposium" *Commentary* 62 no. 3 (September 1976): 31-110.

any approach that debated the potential outcomes of a given government policy from the perspective of ideology or guiding principles. It was a sobering stance that eventually rendered the civil rights movement naïve or idealistic, an object of nostalgia. In the end, more doctrinaire conservatives would use the critical rigor of this method to conclude that government-based solutions to social problems invited only failure.

Telling it like it is

Such intellectual honesty could encourage paralysis; at its best it was sharp-minded, at its worst, unctuous. And it was a style that had roots before the political transformations that finally merited it the label "neo-conservative." For example, a signal example of "telling it like it was/is" came in 1963, when the Jewish literary critic and editor Norman Podhoretz described what he called "My Negro Problem…And Ours" in the pages of *Commentary*, which would become, along with *Public Interest*, a flagship journal of the neo-conservative impulse by the early 1970s. "My Negro Problem" was not a disinterested take on the problem of racism, but an attempt at honesty by a revelation—in this case of the sundry details of Podhoretz's boyhood terrorizing at the hands of Negroes and by a frank airing of the character that his prejudices took on, moving from youthful hatred to adult suspicion and "sickness." Though Podhoretz wrote the essay during a radical, leftish phase amidst his various political peregrinations, it exposed the consistency of his, and eventually the neo-conservative, approach to racial problems. Thus his approach bore more similarities to that of the social scientists Glazer and Moyhihan than it did to Lionel Trilling and Ralph Ellison. The latter two, in their capacity as critics, insisted, like Podhoretz, that human life be portrayed honestly, but

chose more subtle methods, the outcome of which was often suggestive, oleaginous prose. Podhoretz, unburdened by such considerations, could be blunt and effusive, while Moynihan and Glazer benefited from the studied, cold gaze of scientific method.

Stylistic considerations like these were important. Podhoretz's forthright declaration of his own racism and its sources led him to the conclusion that racial integration through politics would prove torturously slow. Honesty meant divisions. "Love, wrote the critic, refuting the conclusions of James Baldwin in the latter's *Fire Next Time*, "is not the answer to hate—not in the world of politics, at any rate." The solution could only be racial intermarriage and total assimilation; black people would have to end their existence as a group if any peace might be had. (In response, Ralph Ellison was said to have reminded Podhoretz of the "one-drop rule" in American history—intermarriage would merely mean more black people, which would only make things worse for him.)

The critic's logic indulged the worst excesses of the liberal orthodoxy and its damage imagery. African Americans should assimilate because, unlike Jewish culture, which had long pinned its survival on a historic sense of chosen-ness, Podhoretz reasoned, "What does the American Negro have that might correspond to this? His past is stigma, his color is stigma, and his vision of the future is the hope of erasing the stigma by making color irrelevant, by making it disappear as a fact of consciousness."[60] It was a monstrous and rather bizarre moment of blindness as the grassroots freedom movement hit its stride.

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[60] Norman Podhoretz, "My Negro Problem—and Ours" in *The Norman Podhoretz Reader*, Thomas L. Jeffers, ed. (New York: Free Press, 2004 [1963]): 64. Podhoretz recalled Ellison's observation in "What Happened to Ralph Ellison," in Ibid. [1999], 362. In the latter piece, Podhoretz, prompted by Ellison's essays, concluded that his damage position of 1963 had been shortsighted.

Using the tools of science and employing its ethics of putative objectivity, Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Nathan Glazer came to similar conclusions about the insuperable divisions between ethnic groups in the United States, though without the blunt revelations of Podhoretz's "honest" liberal approach. At first, their perspective was leavened with the hope that reform was possible and in fact necessary through political means; by the late 1960s and early 1970s they would question such ideas. As early as 1963, Glazer and Moynihan, in their study of New York City's ethnic groups, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, concluded, with Milton Gordon and Harold Cruse, that assimilation was a needful myth, something that always lay "just ahead."[61] Like Cruse, the social scientists understood that the practice of politics entailed ethnic and racial divisions. Rather than merely responding to such divisions, political and social institutions often existed to serve these interests, reinforcing them. "American nationality, they concluded in 1963, "is still forming, its processes are mysterious, and the final form, if there is ever to be a final form, is as yet unknown."[62]

By the middle of the decade, race, rather than ethnicity, appeared paramount, the direct consequence of the civil rights movement. In 1965, Moynihan's "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" became public knowledge. It surfaced as commentators sought sources with which to interpret Lyndon Johnson's widely praised Howard University speech of June of that year, "To Fulfill These Rights," in which the president called for a meeting of scholars and civil rights leaders to come up with comprehensive ways of dealing with the African American poverty—to effect "not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and a result." The speech, written by

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[61] Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970 [1963]): 290.
[62] Ibid., 315.

Moynihan along with Richard N. Goodwin, admitted no easy solutions and called for enlightened government policy-making, recognizing the historic roots of racism and its harmful effects on black culture. Moynihan's "report" became especially prominent as numerous people struggled to explain the Watts uprising later that summer.

In March, before the report became fodder for controversy, Moynihan clearly outlined the reasons for its creation: "The United States" he intoned, "is approaching a new crisis in race relations."

> In the decade that began with the school desegregation decision of the Supreme Court, and ended with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the demands of Negro Americans for full recognition of their civil rights was finally met.
> The effort, no matter how savage and brutal, of some State and local governments to thwart the exercise of those rights is doomed. The nation will not put up with it—least of all the Negroes. The present moment will pass. In the meantime, a new period is beginning.
> In this new period the expectations of Negro Americans will go beyond civil rights. Being Americans, they will now expect that in the near future equal opportunities for them as a group will produce roughly equal results, as compared with other groups. This is not going to happen. Nor will it happen for generations to come unless a new and special effort is made.[63]

This was familiar territory. The movement increased expectations for African Americans, but the long view precluded easy solutions. Racism was far too entrenched, with deep historical sources. Recognizing that liberty and equality operated as conflicting impulses in American life, Moynihan emphasized that the civil rights movement, or the "Negro revolution" in his terms, demanded both liberty and equality. In effect, he read the civil rights movement as a pursuit of an egalitarian ideal. Recalling the conclusions of *Beyond the Melting Pot*, where the trajectory of American political life

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[63] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" in Rainwater and Yancey, eds. *The Politics of Controversy*, 43.

now admitted the fact of group rather than merely individual forms of identification, liberty, which many white Americans regarded narrowly as "equality of opportunity" expanded to include equality of results. African Americans, in other words, buoyed by the grassroots phase of the civil rights movement, had expanded the meaning of freedom to include the demand that equality exist as a fact, which Moynihan read as "a distribution of achievements among Negroes roughly comparable to that among whites."[64] Rising expectations necessitated action by whites, especially policy-makers. Crisis also demanded "an unflinching look at the present potential of Negro Americans."[65] Of course, this was where the controversy over the report would emerge—as a matter of the *methods* Moynihan used to explain his instantiation of a historical watershed: "unflinching" in his terms, "honest" in the hands of a less sensitive fellow traveler like Podhoretz.

Defending his work later on, Moynihan would lament the fact that the "moment" for the movement was lost. Before interrogating his opinion further however, a crucial permutation in intellectuals' understanding of the civil rights movement, described in Bayard Rustin's essay of the year before, "From Protest to Politics," demands attention. With respect to the integration of the American mind, Rustin had conflated the idea of the civil rights movement with government policy and the practice of traditional politics, especially the problem of poverty.

In that highly influential piece, published in February of 1965, the longtime activist betrayed a certain diffidence about the expansion of the idea of the civil rights movement into considerations of public policy and poverty. Thus the years from the

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[64] Ibid., 49.
[65] Ibid., 50.

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Brown decision in 1954 up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 deserved identification as a

"classical" phase in the movement. Detailing deep structural inequities between whites

and blacks in unemployment, a symptom of a more general maladjustment of government

policy to the American economy in a period of wider uncertainty, the direct result of an

ongoing transition he described as a "technological revolution," Rustin questioned the

descriptor "civil rights":

> These [unemployment, the growth of racial slums] are the facts of
> life which generate frustration in the Negro community and challenge the
> civil rights movement. At issue after all, is not civil rights, strictly
> speaking, but social and economic conditions…How can the (perhaps
> misnamed) civil rights movement deal with this problem?[66]

Only a few months later, reflecting on President Johnson's apparent embrace of

the movement, its tactics, and its signal phrase, "We Shall Overcome," Rustin (along

with his coauthor Tom Kahn) completed the conflation and the transition of the idea of

civil rights movement into the more general problem of poverty and economic

conditions.

> Beneath…elementary demands [equal access to public
> accommodations and the right to vote] are the fundamental social and
> economic needs of the Negro community, without whose fulfillment civil
> rights are empty formalities. So enmeshed are these needs with the
> nation's basic ills that it becomes impossible to label them "Negro" or
> "civil rights"….
> Here we are dealing with underlying problems and processes that
> do not manifest themselves in sudden dramatic events…but have an
> erosive effect on the struggle for racial equality. They cannot be separated
> out of the civil rights picture."
> The civil-rights movement…has a rougher terrain to travel
> through. Its own destiny cannot be divorced from that of the total
> society."[67]

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[66] Rustin, "From Protest to Politics," 25, 26.
[67] Bayard Rustin and Tom Kahn, "Civil Rights" *Commentary* 39 no. 6 (June 1965): 45, 46.

While some observers may have felt that the Johnson administration had attempted to "leap frog" the movement, the intellectual work for that development had already been done from within, thus the idea of the civil rights movement and the administration's War on Poverty came to inhabit the same conceptual terrain in the imaginations of many Americans.

In this broader intellectual context, in 1966 Daniel Patrick Moynihan defended his position and interpreted the civil rights movement as an object of near nostalgia when compared with the fractious divisions his report inspired. The consequences of the debate over his work fatally divided civil rights activists. Losing sight of the real issues at hand, they in effect rendered their movement impotent, and invited an upcoming "era of bad manners." The midterm elections of that year proved that the American voting public had grown weary of demonstrations and urban rebellions, and more specifically objected to the contentions of some African American leaders that there existed some "right" to riot. The results gave "clear instruction to elected officials everywhere that the country has gone as far as it wishes in providing social welfare and economic assistance to the Negro masses." In other words, most of the nation refused Rustin's conflation of the civil rights movement with those more elemental concerns, thus:

> The demands of the Negro in the South had been traditional, orderly, and unassailable in their justice: American citizens were asking that their constitutional rights be observed. Once the facts became clear, middle-class America agreed—instinctively, automatically. This was about the point—granting the looseness of any historical analogy—where things were left after the Civil War…Then, as now, going beyond legal entitlements to rights of this kind [economic, social welfare] meant getting involved in large social change…Moreover, the compassion for the suffering, Christlike, non-violent Negro demonstrations in the South was a

different thing from loving and understanding the frequently debased and disorderly slum-dwellers of the North.[68]

Of course, Moynihan merely reinforced one of the now common sentiments of a rupture or transition in the civil rights movement, but his explanation for the split proved interesting in that he felt it rather personally. The civil right movement showed its inability to encompass broader social and economic concerns, because it became mired in a "preposterous and fruitless controversy" over his report.[69]

Echoing the conclusions of *The Melting Pot* and those of Milton Gordon and Harold Cruse, the social scientist contended that the now-infamous "Report on the Negro Family" was part of an effort to create social policy by dealing with group rather than individual realities, thus his focus on the Negro family. Moynihan had attempted to outline the features of a general crisis, and in doing so, push for a change in public policy that would go beyond the "color blind" emphasis of most welfare personnel.[70] He sought to bring an ethnicity-based, or group-based methodology to bear on government poverty programs, which, in his estimation, were not working.

From Moynihan's perspective, the civil rights movement had been working in a vein similar to the initiatives he was proposing, only to be thrown off track during the fall-out over the Watts uprising of the previous summer. As different observers came to use his work to explain the chaos, the confusing and uncomfortable specter of race and sexuality emerged. In the hands of less sensitive or more opportunistic politicians like Ronald Reagan, for example, ghetto pathology and black matriarchy became thinly veiled

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[68] Daniel P. Moynihan, "The President and the Negro: The Moment Lost" *Commentary* 43 no. 2 (February 1967): 45, 31, 32-33.
[69] Ibid., 34.
[70] Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*, in Ibid., 37.

racist arguments that played upon the worst fears of middle class whites. To combat these

sorts of abuses, more militant figures in the civil rights establishment found it necessary

to condemn the "genteel racism" of Moynihan's report.[71]

Still, Moynihan showed some sensitivity by acknowledging the arguments of

Ralph Ellison, for example, who took him to task for thinking in the context of a white

rather than Negro "cultural pattern," so that the family structure of black families was

different from the traditional white family but no less functional in its own way. Yet,

Moynihan refused to believe that Ellison's point of view was completely defensible

("tenable" but not "viable") given the opportunism of whites who would necessarily

exploit a group of people they deemed both "deviant and dependent." In practical

political terms (or for the purposes of "telling it like it is/was") effective public policy

demanded some measure of public support, and such support could never be counted on

if a majority of people (namely whites) believed that their tax dollars went toward

supporting behavior they deemed "deviant."[72]

Neo-conservatism and the Specter of Colorblindness

Just over a year later, Moynihan would change his tune a bit, but his emphasis on

practical considerations remained a constant. Reflecting on the upcoming presidential

election in the immediate aftermath of the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., the social

scientist believed that the American people, true to Dr. King's vision, had essentially

resisted the Vietnam War successfully and nonviolently by removing a sitting president.

In the wake of increasing objections to the war, marked by the terror of Watts, urban

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[71] Ibid., 37.
[72] Ibid., 45.

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violence, and presumably the furor over the Moynihan Report, domestic, race-based

initiatives no longer figured much, if at all, on the administration agenda. Johnson,

bowing to public pressure, now spoke the language of what would come to be called "law

and order." The radical politics of the New Left, along with the proliferation of social

science studies on numerous issues (especially the Kerner Commission Report on Civil

Disorders) merely contributed to a backlog of ideas without any careful evaluation of

existing programs and policies.

Thus, Moynihan believed it was time to focus on "what works," assessing the

programs put in place earlier in the decade. An honest reappraisal of this sort meant the

uncomfortable reality that certain "miscalculations" had taken place, among these "the

disposition of Liberal Democrats to underestimate and misinterpret the forces in

American society that are resistant to meaningful change and which limit the power of

the federal government to bring such change about." In fact, the rather disconcerting fact

was that conservative criticisms about government programs and their effectiveness were

"turning out to be more right than wrong." Liberals, among whose number Moynihan

included himself, had to begin to listen to conservatives. Moynihan and his political

brethren consistently promised much but delivered little, and it was a recipe for

disaster.[73]

Obviously, Moynihan's practical and apparently intellectually honest sensibility

would come to threaten the meaning of his own stated political affiliation. (No doubt, his

participation in the Nixon Administration after 1969 made him vulnerable to accusations

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[73] Moynihan, "The Democrats, Kennedy and the Murder of Dr. King" *Commentary* 45 no. 6 (May 1968): 20, 22; also Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: Free Press, 1969). A fascinating statement of the perils of promising a lot and delivering too little is Aaron Wildavsky, "The Empty-head Blues: Black Rebellion and White Reaction," *The Public Interest* no. 11 (Spring 1968): 3-16.

of near-total apostasy.) In a crucial move for the idea of the civil rights movement,

though, he concluded,

> One of the calamities of the present moment is that we have taken over
> the vocabulary and moral imperatives of the civil-rights movement in the
> South and have applied them with but few alterations to the social and
> economic problems which are the crux of the matter in the North.
> The consequence is that we make fewer and fewer distinctions between
> those issues which are correctly defined as having to do with race and
> those much more accurately, and usefully, defined as matters of social
> class.[74]

Moynihan was not so naïve as to contend that racism ceased to be a source of

serious social and economic problems, yet he departed in significant ways from his and

others' concentration on group realities in the creation and administration of social

policy. No doubt chastened following the firestorm precipitated by the Report on the

Negro Family, he argued in effect, that the language, and in some sense the idea of the

civil rights movement acted as a barrier to effective social change. He sought to confine it

to its Southern context, or, to use Rustin's choice of words, to its "classical" phase,

ending in the achievement of national civil rights legislation. The time for "moral

imperatives" was over; now was the time to "lead and educate within the limits of our

own understanding" which presumably did not include the idea of the civil rights

movement.

Moynihan's conception of the movement, then, meant something like a language

of crisis or a broader moral indictment of a racist society. While it didn't appear that he

counseled a lack of engagement with the problem of racism in the United States,

Moynihan did admit that the time for radical solutions and new ideas had passed, and that

intellectuals had better see what the civil service was doing in those communities where

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[74] Moynihan, "The Democrats," 26.

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the programs lately created were now operating. The move for community control of

existing programs then in vogue was no solution either—it only ensured that such

programs would become more firmly ensconced, and that the status quo would be

reinforced rather than changed or toppled. Even worse, continued agitation in the mold of

the civil rights movement would foster a public who were unwilling to pursue social

problems through government initiative, slowing even further changes that had already

been made, and which, in any case, were characterized by mistakes and missteps.[75]

Not surprisingly, Nathan Glazer agreed with these sentiments, but in terms even

more forceful and circumspect than those of his frequent collaborator. The civil rights

movement existed in two stages: the first had abundant moral clarity, and was an

exclusively Southern phenomenon, while the second stage moved North and dealt with

complexities admitting no easy solution. Yet, the complaint of fundamental racism in

American society persisted. Thus the Kerner Commission Report, which decried

continuing racism in American life writ large, famously: "two societies, one white, one

black—separate, and unequal," attempted to "cast the enormous problems of creating a

true and widespread equality for American Negroes in the pattern of the heroic battles to

change the cruel social structure of the South."[76] The idea of the civil rights movement,

in other words, could not admit complexity. The new field of action could not belong to

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[75] Ibid., 24.
[76] Nathan Glazer, "The New Left and its Limits" *Commentary* 46 no. 1 (July 1968):31-39. In effect, Glazer deemed the civil rights movement the forebear of the New Left, in that both movements dealt with fundamental problems, the former justified in its emphasis, and the latter confused. (The New Left was characterized by a sort of Rousseauian contempt for institutions in Glazer's reading.) Moynihan essentially agreed with Glazer with respect to the Kerner Report. White racism was the problem, but was never explored nor explained. See Moynihan, "The Professors and the Poor," *Commentary* 46 no. 2 (August 1968): 28.

the activists; it must be left to the experts and the administrators, a less satisfying but nonetheless unavoidable conclusion.[77]

By 1970, following the upheavals of the previous two years, Glazer would wonder: "How does a radical—a mild radical it is true…end up by early 1970 a conservative, a mild conservative, but closer to those who call themselves conservative than to those who call themselves liberal?" In short, Glazer came to believe that attacks on existing institutions could not take place without any careful consideration of what would replace them, and of whether or not a new order of things would be an improvement, or even make things worse.[78] As the 1970s wore on, Moynihan and Glazer, following this line or reasoning, would criticize various government efforts at attaining desegregation, specifically programs that dealt with specific quotas for racial groups, etc. Glazer, for example, came out forcefully and controversially against government busing policies in 1972 on the basis that such programs were not achieving their desired ends. For his part, Glazer offered that court-mandated busing was forcing a process of broader desegregation that was already taking place, however gradually, thus threatening that process and inspiring perfectly understandable white and black demands for control of their own backyards. Moynihan, on the other hand, proposed a transition from "program to policy" in which a longer view, less restricted by the fashions of a given moment, measured outcomes rather than inputs when reforming social policy, understanding government initiatives within the context of a complex system, an interconnected web of

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[77] Of course, Harold Cruse would have an answer to this problem in the form of a leading role for black intellectuals. Moynihan acknowledged, for example, that white social scientists, white foundation executives, and white activists were behind community action programs in particular, and that, at the very least, the inclusion of black social scientists in the policy-making process may have given white officials some better idea of the complexities involved in implementing such initiatives. Moynihan, "Professors," 23. Moynihan anticipated this opinion, though a bit more positively, and a bit earlier, before the Report in Moynihan, "The Professionalization of Reform," *The Public Interest*, no. 1 (Fall 1965): 6-10.

[78] Nathan Glazer, "On Being Deradicalized," *Commentary* 50 no. 4 (October 1970): 74, 75.

relations. Thus, contra the Kerner Report, for example, Moynihan contended that race relations were indeed improving.[79]

More importantly, Glazer and Moynihan never denied that the civil rights movement was, in its essence, a specifically "ethnic" (their choice of term) phenomenon, and one that had inspired various ethnic groups throughout the world to pursue their own interests. They made a distinction between the movement and the specific legislation it encouraged, the letter of which made clear that the government should be "color blind." Rather against the intent of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 then, the federal government employed ethnic categories as a "basis for distributing its rewards…*at the very moment it* [ethnic categorization] *was being declared abhorrent and illegal*."[80] The movement, in other words, goaded the government to make "positive efforts" on the behalf of those discriminated against historically. This, the social scientists contended, was "perhaps inevitable." Thus the civil rights movement was not "color blind" in itself, but the Civil Rights Act of 1964 constituted an effort to encourage "color blind" *government*, which became complicated by efforts to eliminate discrimination in numerous aspects of American institutional and social life.

Ethnicity, group identification and interest thus remained consistent preoccupations for the two thinkers for well over a decade, beginning with *Beyond the*

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[79] Nathan Glazer, "Is Busing Necessary?" *Commentary* 53 no. 3 (March 1972): 39-52; also Glazer, "Ethnicity and the Schools" *Commentary* 58 no. 3 (September 1974): 55-59; Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1975). Moynihan, "Policy vs. Program in the 1970s," *The Public Interest*, no. 20 (Summer 1970): 90-100. A helpful example of Moynihan's perspective is that of the Interstate Highway Act during the Eisenhower administration. While that administration was generally considered far from energetic in social concerns, the highway system affected the social system on various interrelated levels, so that highways contributed to the very shape of American metropolitan areas, to more mobility and thus employment opportunities for countless Americans, including black people, which had an "immense effect" on race relations and the welfare of black Americans.

[80] Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, "Why Ethnicity?" *Commentary* 58 no. 4 (October 1974): 34, emphasis in original.

Melting Pot. [81] Yet, for Glazer especially, group identities ceased to be the proper vehicle for social and economic policy. For example, there had existed in his estimation a "national consensus" on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (and later the Voting Rights and Immigration Acts of 1965) so that most everyone agreed that in the arena of national law, no distinctions should be made on the basis of race or national origin. By 1982, this sense of consensus got a bit sloppier, traveling under Glazer's contention that those who sought and approved the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 envisioned a "color-blind" society, one that sustained and protected individual rights first, and beyond individual rights.[82] Without much of a stretch, one might easily lump in grassroots activists and prominent civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and others with this group of supporters.

The primary significance of Moynihan and Glazer's development of the idea of the civil rights movement was not necessarily that it paralleled many other stories (which it did), but that they and others like them took the lead in defining the limits of the movement's meaning. For them, the radicalism of the movement, its sense of moral imperative and critique of fundamental racism at the core of American society worked in a simpler time; as the movement encountered complexities, its radical sensibility no longer functioned. Still, in their estimation, it was the movement's language of national regeneration and indictment of white racism that influenced the politics of the New Left, however misguided. So while it remained unclear whether or not either social scientist believed that the goals of the civil rights movement as they understood them were "colorblind" so much as sweeping national legislation and majority (and even consensus)

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[81] Ibid., 33-39. Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination*, 3-5.

[82] Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination*, 3; Glazer, *Ethnic Dilemmas, 1964-1982* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983): 1-9; 213-273.

public opinion were, they nonetheless made it entirely possible and even plausible to believe that the civil rights movement meant black middle class resistance to Southern reactionaries in the name of basic, individual constitutional rights. This was perhaps how many Americans understood it, stripped of its radical indictment of a society sick with racism. Soon, their neo-conservative nostalgia for a simpler time became the received wisdom of another.

CHAPTER V

CONSERVATIVES AND THE CREATION OF THE LIMITED CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT

In a 1967 article, provocatively titled "What Killed the Civil Rights Movement?"
the conservative political theorist Willmoore Kendall reminded his readers of an
interesting claim made only two years earlier. The monumental civil rights legislation of
the 1960s, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, were "great
Conservative victories." With typical iconoclasm and characteristic confidence, he
declared that not only was he alone among conservatives in making this claim at the time,
but he was right and everyone else was wrong. For Kendall, the legislation was a
conservative victory because it had effectively decimated the revolutionary ambitions of
the civil rights movement. It had ensured that Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil
rights leaders, their impassioned insistence to the contrary, would have to wait. With the
end of legal segregation in the South came equality before the law, but "*substantial*
equality" (Kendall's phrase), would mean broadening the movement's appeal in ways
that the majority of Americans would never easily accept. Threatened with upheaval in
the years immediately preceding the legislation, "the system" revealed yet again its
characteristic conservatism, incorporating the acceptable elements of the movement and
successfully restoring its equilibrium. When it came to "remaking" the American
economic system, which the realization of substantial equality would require, legislative
gears were sure to grind slowly, if not halt altogether.[1]

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[1] Willmoore Kendall, "What Killed the Civil Rights Movement," in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1971[1967]): 468, 463, 465, 463, Kendall's emphasis.

Furthermore, Kendall argued, these developments left white liberals in a quandary. In a very real sense, civil rights had always been, "*their* movement, not that of its titular owners, the unavoidable result of *their* teachings about equality, about the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment, about the incompatibility of the American Dream and the *status quo* South of the Mason-Dixon line." Unfortunately, these same white liberals failed to anticipate what their teachings portended: with the South in line legally, the movement would continue its agitation for equality. Once civil rights leaders moved to indict the nation in its entirety, pushing for measures designed to redistribute wealth and effect substantial equality, liberals would have to withhold "*all*-out support," and slow the pace of change. Careful never to repudiate the stated goals of the movement, yet hesitant to embrace the revolutionary measures necessary to bring their shared understanding of equality to its fullest realization, liberals would inevitably stifle the movement's farthest reaching ambitions.[2]

The troubled, controversial history of liberal civil rights initiatives in the years that followed seems to indicate that Kendall may have been on to something. The unfinished quality of the civil rights movement is a consistent refrain among liberals; the American economic system has not been remade, and racial poverty remains widespread. Nonetheless, Kendall understood the intimate relation between American liberals and the civil rights movement: despite frequent frustrations and misunderstandings, African Americans and white liberals forged a lasting political alliance during the 1960s. And, in keeping with his contentions, in subsequent years white liberals would tend to claim the civil rights movement as their own.

Kendall refers to a previous article, "The Civil Rights Movement and the Coming Constitutional Crisis" in Ibid., [1965]: 383.
[2] Ibid., 459, 460-461, Kendall's emphasis.

Given this intimate relationship between liberals and the civil rights movement, among the more surprising developments in recent years has been conservatives' apparent embrace of the movement and its major figures. For example, a conservative president, Ronald Reagan, signed the legislation creating the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday in 1983. More recently, George W. Bush included the movement in his 2004 inaugural and in his 2006 state of the union address, presumably showing some sympathy for its objectives. Facts like these appear even more puzzling given the apparent sources of conservatives' political strength and appeal. In particular, several scholars have argued that white backlash against the changes the civil rights movement wrought played an immensely significant role in elevating modern conservatism to the status it enjoys today.[3] Conservative leaders of the present may owe their careers to the fact that a "silent majority" of white Americans thought the movement too radical, or perceived the integration of black people into formerly white enclaves as a threat to "law and order." The now dominant "New Right," which became a commanding presence by organizing what one historian has called the "suburban warriors" of the Sunbelt, was the Republican

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[3] On conservatives and their opposition to civil rights in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the phenomenon of and appeal to "white backlash" see, for example, Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 218-219; Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991): 35-46; Gregory L. Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of the Contemporary Right* (New York: New York University Press, 1999): 58-60; Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995): 46-48, 83; Michael W. Miles, *The Odyssey of the American Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980): 289-293. For intellectuals' opposition to the movement, George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976): 260-264. A more in-depth take on conservative intellectuals and civil rights is Richard H. King, "The Struggle Against Equality: Conservative Intellectuals in the Civil Rights Era" in *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South,* Ted Ownby, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002): 113-136.

party of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, two politicians who chose not to support the civil rights movement in the 1960s.[4]

This type of evidence could make one conclude that the conservative embrace of the Civil Rights Movement is purely "political": in the vague, commonplace usage that many people ascribe to that term, namely, "political" decisions are inherently demagogic ones. But this conception of politics reveals very little, insofar as it signifies merely an amoral manipulation of American popular opinion (an amorphous proposition) for the purposes of retaining power. Such a perspective tends to obscure the utility of certain symbolic acts of affiliation in the shaping of political behavior. People make political decisions within a context of elaborate symbolic worlds that shape their decision-making, so symbols are efficacious in that limited sense. Politics conceived of as a type of demagoguery denies the complexity of the relation between political language and political action, divorcing one from the other. In other words, political actors do not simply say one thing and do another, but employ certain words to signify various types of political activity.

Despite the problematic historical relationship between conservatives and the movement, by embracing certain civil rights figures and their memory, conservatives partly transformed and contributed to the creation of the civil rights movement as a key term in American political discourse. In short, many of the symbols and some of the

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[4] Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.) While Barry Goldwater was a member of the NAACP and publicly insisted that he did not oppose integration, he opposed any government efforts to coerce localities to desegregate, and voted against the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Goldwater did vote for previous civil rights legislation, so it was also probable that his objection to the 1964 Act was related to his status as the Republican candidate for President in that year. To clear up potential misunderstandings, it is necessary to state that there are many varieties of conservatism. At the risk of oversimplification, here I treat the Republican Party during and in the aftermath of its rightward shift starting in the 1960s, and the conservative intellectual movement begun during the 1950s. Obviously, the "Christian Right" is missing from this story, as I am concerned primarily with legal and political ideas rather than religious ones.

language of the movement have proven worth conserving for many on the right of the American political spectrum. One can argue that conservatives distorted and continue to distort the "true" meaning of the movement, but whatever the character of such a truth, the distortion is just as crucial to how many Americans, particularly those who describe themselves as conservatives, understand something called "the civil rights movement." If recent political developments offer any lessons, they suggest that scholars should get a more thorough understanding of how those on the right think.

In this spirit, what follows suggests a rather neglected approach to the movement, one that proceeds from the assumption that it may be useful to consider not what the movement was or is, a potentially tenuous foundational claim, but what it meant or means to the people who use the term "civil rights movement." This is a somewhat different approach from Jacqueline Dowd Hall's recent contention that, "the movement's meaning has been distorted and reified by a New Right bent on reversing its gains." Hall argues for a "truer" history to combat the triumphalist assumptions and distortions that characterize civil rights history and memory. Again, I contend here that it may be worthwhile to investigate the ideas that gave rise to or made possible this ostensible misuse of the movement. In that sense, the "civil rights movement" is a contested term that, for good or ill, has many possible meanings.[5]

Simply put, conservatives came to believe that the civil rights movement sought the creation of a "colorblind" society. This is far more complicated than it first appears. An odd tendency exists to assume prima facie that colorblindness has a clear meaning, which is probably ill founded. For example, one might distinguish (perhaps too quickly)

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[5] Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1235.

between the juridical term "colorblind" and the medical condition known as colorblindness. Unreflective accounts of this term suppose that in the former usage, colorblindness comprises a legal criterion by which the racial identity of an individual should not be taken into account by the state in its doings. But such a criterion necessarily supposes that in order for such discrimination *not* to take place, the person in question must be identified according to a racial classification. In other words, ensuring that a person is not discriminated against requires the classification or identification of certain racial groups. Otherwise, it would be impossible for a person to appeal to the state to redress violations of a colorblind standard. So practically speaking, to erase discriminatory practices, one must take into account a previous history of invidious classifications. Thus a certain discrimination, in the strictest sense of that term, does take place in a putatively colorblind schema. A colorblind "ideal," or "racial realism" as some choose to call it, is an abstraction with no real existence, or at least an abstract goal that one might think about, but never realize, insofar as some discrimination proves necessary in the process of its realization.[6] This cuts both ways. Opponents of affirmative action, for example, must claim some sort of biased treatment to make their cases. It seems difficult to imagine a time far in the future when such discriminations might just wither away and the term "colorblind" would no longer be necessary. The very existence of the

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[6] See the previous chapter on Daniel P. Moynihan and Nathan Glazer. On conservatives and "colorblindness," or "racial realism" see Ibid.; Alan Wolfe, "Enough Blame to go Around," *New York Times Book Review*, 12 June 1998, p.12; Philip Klinker, "The Racial Realism Hoax," *Nation,* 14 December 1998, pp. 33-38; Morgan Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice: Minority Voting Rights and the Undoing of the Second Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Michael K. Brown, et. al., *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). More recent representative studies by conservatives that operate according to the assumption of a colorblind ideal include Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997); Tamar Jacoby, *Someone Else's House: America's Unfinished Struggle for Integration* (New York: Free Press, 1998); Shelby Steele, *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998).

term indicates its other, which merely speaks to the inevitable dialectical nature of identity; to contend that colorblindness might be some sort of absolute is quite simply an absurdity, and is therefore not real in any phenomenal sense. Yet even those studies critical to the idea tend to allow that it has some inherent or foundational validity, and in doing so threaten to reify it.[7]

Of course, this sort of absurdity shows that colorblindness is rather similar to other unrealizable abstractions, like equality and freedom, to name just two of them. (In the case of those two terms, few, if any, would contend that an absolute form of one or the other would be an inherent good, and for that reason it might be important to state an obvious fact, namely that equality and colorblindness are constituent terms. Colorblindness necessarily assumes a type of equal treatment or consideration, which is impossible to realize in practice because such notions are inevitably freighted with evaluative considerations like fairness or justice.) In the end, then, "colorblindness" fails to escape entirely its meaning as a medical, experiential condition. As a physical condition, "colorblindness," even the most extreme case, allows those who experience it to make out, often very acutely, the distinguishing characteristics between different things.[8]

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[7] For example, Morgan Kousser makes this assumption in a rather different way, arguing that a colorblind standard "not only perpetuate[s] injustice" but is "meant to perpetuate injustice….Far from "colorblind" they are deeply color-conscious." A more historicist, nominalist perspective shows that one should not be so quick to make even this assumption without further reflection. Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*: 10.

[8] In his account of his visit to the Pacific Island of Pingelap where one in twelve natives had the condition known as achromatopsia, or total colorblindness (where one can only distinguish varying gradations of what color-sighted people would call "grays"), Oliver Sacks notes that achromatopes, especially when confronted with monochromatic scenes, are able to make out detailed differences between objects that those who do see color in the traditional sense are unable to see. In this sense, the colorblind are often able to distinguish between things even more clearly than those who are not colorblind. Oliver Sacks, *The Island of the Colorblind and Cycad Island* (New York: Knopf, 1997): 15-20, 32-33, 44-45.

Not surprisingly, these kinds of problems failed to impress the countless legislators and jurists who employed the term quite frequently throughout the twentieth century, or at the very least since Justice John Marshall Harlan's dissenting opinion, made in the *Plessy* decision in 1896, that "our constitution is color-blind." In the case of the civil rights movement, "colorblindness" was actually the position taken by the Legal Defense and Education Fund of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) until the mid 1960s, when the complexities of school integration made them abandon the idea for its lack of usefulness. Like every abstraction, it proved a bit unruly in its practical application. One could establish a colorblind, nondiscriminatory standard for the Constitution, but doing so would not make segregationists do anything affirmative to integrate Southern schools, for example. If one were to take an absolutist position on colorblindness, where no racial classifications could be used by the state, then how could one effectively compel recalcitrant white Southerners to integrate? Once the signs came down and *de jure* segregation was extinguished, how could the government take coercive measures to guarantee that discrimination was not taking place and at the same time outlaw more subtle or *de facto* forms of segregation, without appealing to an eminently evadable standard of equality before the law? Faced with these problems, the Supreme Court had to proceed from the assumption that segregated facilities and institutions were inherently unequal, and as a result, decided to use racial classifications on an ad hoc basis, according to a standard of whether or not such classifications were used to further some "necessary" or "permissible" state objective.[9]

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[9] The full story of this transition is accounted for in Andrew Kull, *The Color-Blind Constitution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): 151-181. "Necessary" and "permissible" is from Chief

Reacting, then, against the Warren Court's pragmatic validation of government

efforts at integration, which increasingly endorsed an "equality of results," to use the oft-

quoted phrase, conservatives came to adopt a position somewhat similar to the one that

the NAACP actually employed for quite some time, before the complexity of efforts to

implement school integration became all too clear in the late 1960s.[10] Moreover,

conservatives' adoption of the NAACP's colorblind language may have originated with

the grassroots movement of the "suburban warriors." In at least one telling case, middle

class, white suburbanites who protested against busing strategies designed to achieve

school integration in the late 1960s and early 1970s made the language of colorblindness

stick by accompanying it with the language and symbols of the civil rights movement in

the pursuit of their cause. [11] Combined with the idea of the civil rights movement as

construed by Daniel P. Moynihan and Nathan Glazer in the late 1960s and early 1970s,

"colorblindness" became a persuasive position that, in less dedicated circles, became an

excuse for general inaction in the field of civil rights.

To paraphrase a favored sentence from Martin Luther King, Jr's "I Have a

Dream" speech: conservatives imagined a society where people were judged not by the

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Justice Earl Warren's opinion in the *Loving* decision of 1967, also in Kull, 171. Some conservative jurists, in particular Clarence Thomas, have argued that the overriding assumption that segregated facilities are unequal threatens the viability and prestige of black-run institutions, especially historically black colleges and universities. For this reason, the liberal Court's take on these issues threatens African American self-determination and pride in complicated ways. See Justice Thomas' concurrent opinion in *Missouri v Jenkins*, 515 U.S. 70 (1995): "It never ceases to amaze me that the courts are so willing to assume that anything that is predominantly black must be inferior."

[10] Of course, neo-conservatives, that is, liberals or leftists who later became conservatives, often did so because policies of affirmative action and busing alienated them. For this reason it is plausible to argue that neo-conservatives, bringing their colorblind values with them, exerted some influence on conservatives more broadly. A characteristic example given the neo-conservative predilection for social science studies is Nathan Glazer. See Nathan Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

[11] See Matthew D. Lassiter, "The Suburban Origins of Color-blind Conservatism: Middle-class Consciousness in the Charlotte Busing Crisis" *Journal of Urban History* 30 (May 2004): 549-582. Middle-class, suburban anti-busing advocates made public claims of supporting "integration, not busing" and even sang "We Shall Overcome" in their protests.

color of their skin, but by the content of their character.[12] By the 1980s, many on the

right argued that King would have opposed those policies commonly called "affirmative

action" in the form of racial quotas or set asides. Impulses such as these, designed to

correct past wrongs, too often created the moral crisis commonly called "reverse

discrimination" where deserving whites were passed over for less qualified minority

candidates on the job market or in college and professional school admissions. Because

the movement successfully created a United States where racism was a thing of the past,

existing only as the pathetic preserve of cranks and crackpots, such measures were

unnecessary, and even worse, discriminatory.

Taking this conservative embrace of colorblindness seriously does not entail

obscuring their earlier resistance to the civil rights movement. Evidence shows that

conservatives did not side with the movement during its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s,

yet, they praise its major figures and use some of its language today, and to reiterate, tend

to conflate the NAACP's earlier legal-juridical understanding of the civil rights

movement with its iconic figures and events, completing a process begun by disaffected

liberals like Glazer and Moynihan (whatever the actual intentions of the two social

scientists). With respect to these more recent developments, many scholars maintain that

conservatives' embrace of this "colorblind" or race-neutral language, particularly during

the Reagan administration, was actually coded in such a way as to appeal to continuing

white backlash and prejudice.[13] But aside from the handful of studies that embrace the

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[12] Consider black conservative Shelby Steele, *Content of our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990).

[13] Colorblindness and race neutral language as coded forms of racism are in, among others, Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, esp. 172-214; Kousser, *Colorblind Injustice*; Steven A. Shull, *A Kinder, Gentler Racism? The Reagan-Bush Civil Rights Legacy* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993); Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1996). Nicholas Laham, *The Reagan Presidency and the Politics of Race: In Pursuit of Colorblind*

suburbs in the spirit of the new urban history, few scholars have seen fit to ask why conservatives might have approached the movement in this way aside from reasons of political opportunism or racism--and none have attempted to account for the right's rapprochement with the movement in the context of a coherent conservative theoretical position.

A specific set of historical events, namely conservative responses to the Second March on Washington in 1983 and the creation of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday later that same year, help reveal a peculiar variety of American political thought with respect to the idea of colorblindness and its relation to the civil rights movement. When informed by a conception of equality that the influential political theorist Willmoore Kendall developed some two decades before the controversy over the King Holiday, conservatives could ascribe their rejection and later endorsement of the movement to a startlingly coherent political logic. This is not to say that the conservatives who embraced the movement in 1983 did so with Kendall's ideas directly in mind. Conservatives have no better knowledge of their own tradition than liberals, but it is worth remembering that such a tradition exists. Quite possibly, it informed the conservative understanding of what might be called *the limited civil rights movement*, instantiated in the first instance by Glazer and Moynihan. In a very real sense, Kendall was proven right: civil rights legislation was a conservative victory, one that the victors would increasingly associate with the movement's major figures and symbols.

Justice and Limited Government (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998) rejects this perspective, arguing that rather than strategically playing on the racial prejudices of white voters and capitalizing on backlash against civil rights, Reagan's civil rights policy was based upon a philosophical predilection toward equality of opportunity and "colorblind justice."

Race, Politics, and the Commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement

President Ronald Reagan signed the King Holiday into law on November 3, 1983; it went into effect starting in January of 1986. In immediate terms, the holiday was the result of an extensive effort. The move began to institute a national holiday only days after Dr. King's assassination in April of 1968, often accompanied by proposals for less ambitious memorials, such as busts at the capitol, postage stamps, or commemorative coins. At least once in every year from 1968 until its final passage, liberal members of the House proposed a national holiday in King's memory. As late as 1979, the measure failed in the House by five votes. Yet, in 1983, the bill breezed through both houses of Congress with overwhelming support (339-90 in the House and 78-22 in the Senate). Presumably, four years changed a great deal.[14] Of course, the final passage of the King Holiday resulted from a grassroots campaign spearheaded by Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, with the organizational support of the King Center in Atlanta, a campaign that gained considerable steam after 1979.

Conservatives were crucial to the developments that culminated in the holiday's passage. The debate over the proper commemoration of the movement, especially for many conservatives, indicated a more general national political mood with regard to questions of race and its relation to government, one not without some diversity of opinion. Much of what one might call the "New Right," for whom Reagan bore the standard in 1980, embraced measures calling for the dismantling of large portions of the limited American welfare state, particularly those programs enacted or expanded during Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. "Big government" was the enemy, as were taxes and

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[14] House proposals with regard to the King Holiday and other commemorations are from a perusal of the Congressional Record indices from 1968 to 1983.

"entitlement" programs of any sort, including and especially affirmative action, which signified racial quotas and terribly divisive efforts to implement desegregation. In effect, conservatives adopted the criticisms of Glazer and Moynihan to make a case for the dismantling rather than revision or rethinking of existing programs. Finally, in the arena of foreign policy, this meant tough measures against communism, not limited to the Soviet variety. The holiday debate connected with all of these issues.

As of the summer of 1983, more than a few in Reagan's core conservative constituency believed their triumph incomplete; the president had given in far too often to interests in his administration they deemed, interestingly enough, "pragmatic." Conservative opinion on Reagan was far from united. He raised taxes in the previous year, failed to end all of the programs he had promised to in the election of 1980, and in the arena of civil rights, appeared far too bothered by charges that his administration was racially "insensitive." (The term "politically correct" was not yet in widespread use.)[15]

These charges had some measure of truth. A battle was ongoing between Democrats and Republicans over the president's appointments to the presumably independent, bipartisan National Civil Rights Commission. Civil right leaders traditionally associated with that body believed that the president's appointments indicated his intention to roll back the gains achieved by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and

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[15] On Reagan and White House "pragmatism": Patrick Buchanan, "Tables Turned on White House Pragmatists," *Human Events*, 30 July 1983, 7; John McLaughlin, "New Right Adrift," *National Review*, 24 June, 1983, 740; "Justice Department Promotes Quotas," *Human Events*, 17 September 1983, 5; Tom Bethell, "Snickers and Food Stamps," *National Review*, 16 September 1983, 1124. The *National Review* tended to feature more moderate conservatives, (with some exceptions) while *Human Events* had a much more cantankerous perspective. Interestingly enough, The *National Review* featured a few articles on William James' Pragmatism, for example, Michael Novak, "Undiscovered Treasure," *National Review,* 16 September 1983, 1148. For Reagan and charges of "insensitivity": "Reagan Warms Up for 1984," *Newsweek,* 15 August 1983, 16-17; "Storm Over Civil Rights," *Newsweek*, 7 November 1983, 104; Robert K. Gordon, "Reagan's Sensitivity Campaign: Civil Rights Wars," *The New Republic,* 29 August 1983, 7-9; "Minding Our Manners," *National Review*, 2 September 1983, 1053-54.

the Voting Rights Act of 1965, particularly surrounding such controversial issues as affirmative action hiring and busing as a strategy for school desegregation. The impolitic comments of embattled Secretary of the Interior James Watt proved even more embarrassing. At a dinner for Chambers of Commerce lobbyists in Washington, DC in that year, Watt jokingly explained that his recent appointments to a committee for the use of natural resources were sufficiently diverse: "We have every kind of mix you can have…a black…a woman, two Jews, and a cripple. And we have talent." Watt was soon replaced, and the administration struggled to improve its image.[16]

The support for the holiday in 1983 was the product of considerations one might deem "political" in the practical sense of a party attempting to retain its power. More than a few pundits and political observers looked forward, with some hesitation, to the following election year. Some Reagan supporters, while aware that African Americans would not vote for their candidate in any appreciable numbers, worried that a critical number of white middle class voters might be turned off by the appearance of racism in his administration. In these practical terms, Jesse Jackson's potential candidacy, while widely scoffed at or at least ignored by many conservative observers, exposed the danger of "rocks just layin' around," an image Jackson invoked at the twentieth anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington in reference to the Biblical story of David's slaying Goliath. Given Reagan's slim margin of victory in a few crucial Southern states in 1980, a broad-based, reasonably successful voter registration and get-out the vote campaign

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[16] Watt quote and more general comment in "Have you Heard the One about the…" *National Review* 14 October 1983, 1255; "The Meaning of Watt," *National Review,* 28 October 1983, 1323-24; William F. Buckley, "Looking Back on Watt," *National Review,* 28 October 1983, 1361; Melinda Beck, "James Watt's Last Gaffe?" *Newsweek,* 3 October 1983, 45-46. After the passage of the King Holiday, the *National Review* in its "This Week" section, associated the Watt controversy with the King Holiday: *National Review*, 28 October 1983, 1316.

among Southern African Americans could swing some vital states against the Republican candidate.[17] Many Republicans dismissed such concerns, however. Thus, one wonders why Reagan cared at all about the administration's image on racial issues given that African Americans did not support him? More importantly, what gave some of his supporters the impression that the appearance of "racial insensitivity" mattered to potential Republican voters?

Reagan was responding to the growing mainstream influence of black politics, as well as the entrance of the civil rights movement into the realm of nostalgia. African American politicians spoke and people listened. That more than a few observers took Jesse Jackson's candidacy very seriously seems evidence enough.[18] Twenty-year memorial celebrations of major civil rights movement successes, particularly the March on Washington, ensured that King's "Dream" speech garnered significant media coverage nationwide. The trials of radical black nationalists were largely off the screens and out of the newspapers, and the media found itself in a rather nostalgic mood, one in favor of reunion following the turmoil of the Second Reconstruction. Reagan and the Republicans had already begun making this rhetorical shift. They campaigned in 1980 on a platform that featured inclusive language, emphasizing "blacks and whites," and the contention that "Republicans…treasure the ethnic, cultural, and regional diversity of our people. This diversity fosters a dynamism in American society that is the envy of the

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[17] "rocks just layin' around" in William Brashler, "Dr. J.: He Has a Scheme," *New Republic*, 17 October 1983, 14. On Reagan and the courtship of black voters and civil rights interests, see "Reagan's Black Courtship Could Backfire on GOP," *Human Events* 20 August 1983, 19

[18] On the idea of a black political renaissance, see "Dr. J.: He Has a Scheme," *New Republic,* 14 October 1983, 14-19; Andrew Kopkind, "Jesse's Run: Black Power in the Age of Jackson," *The Nation*, 26 November 1983, 534-541.

world."[19] Encomiums to inclusiveness and diversity could very quickly appear hypocritical if Republicans did not carefully monitor the politics of race.

The second March on Washington merits further attention for what it reveals about the political ideas central to conservatives' reinterpretation of the civil rights movement. The twentieth anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, celebrated with another march on the capitol mall (which Coretta Scott King again played a central role in organizing) inspired several comments about the meaning of the movement across the political spectrum. The perspective of those on the right illuminated the reasons why Reagan and so many Republicans later supported the King Holiday. They criticized present day civil rights activism by noting the success of the previous variety.

Writing in the days after the 1983 march, and echoing many of the sentiments of Moynihan and Glazer years earlier, conservative journalist (and later political candidate) Patrick Buchanan explained "How the Movement Died." Buchanan wondered why "the hope and anticipation of twenty years ago…[gave] way to frustration and rage." In his estimation, this mood existed because the movement had succeeded. The demands of the protesters at the first march "were met." For Buchanan, these "demands" referred to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Making a crucial move that many conservatives would repeat frequently, Buchanan collapsed the 1960s movement nearly *in toto* into Willmoore Kendall's conservative victory. Thus the "frustration and rage" of the marchers indicated a "radically altered mindset." Black men and women were no longer denied access to public places, African Americans were nowhere denied the right to vote, and the Mississippi political landscape, once the hard core of

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[19]"The Republican Platform of 1980" in *The American Presidency Project* http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showplatforms.php?platindex=R1980

segregationist resistance, now admitted the importance of black votes, and politicians in that state even campaigned to get them.[20]

The editors of *National Review* reached similar conclusions. The first March on Washington, they reasoned, "was concerned, in its own view of itself, with rights. It sought to redress what the marchers saw as specific violations of a general contract. To the extent that the Negro (as he was called then) may now vote and enjoy places of public resort, the contract has been fulfilled. The first march succeeded." For the *Review*, a certain "momentum" then carried the movement along, moving grievances into the arena of economics, which he read as "(*Redistribution. Job Quotas*)" and desegregation now became more specific to neighborhoods "(*Busing)*." Thus the movement now dealt not with rights in a narrow sense, but with "privilege," which for the conservative weekly indicated an oppositional mentality, where those who were skeptical of such strategies, or sought their own benefit, became "the enemy." The conclusion was clear:

> King asserted in his speech twenty years ago that his dream was "deeply rooted in the American dream." He quoted the Declaration of Independence. Much of the organized black movement, having decided that its rendezvous with America and the Founders has been disappointing, or uninteresting, is content to sink into the pool of the left.[21]

King's "dream," then, included the basic striving common to all Americans. The original March on Washington meant an equal opportunity for all the nation's citizens, the inclusion of African Americans into what the editors of *National Review* elsewhere called the "national feast."[22] The language here, of course, included the pecuniary sense of the American dream, where everyone should have the opportunity to pursue her own

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[20] Patrick J. Buchanan, "How the Movement Died," *Human Events*, 10 September 1983, 6,8. Edsall and Edsall also point to this idea of civil rights success as a more general conservative perspective. Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 184.

[21]"I Have a Daydream," *National Review*, 16 September 1983, 1116.

[22] *National Review*, 28 October 1983, 1316.

profit. Policies that denied or at limited one's capability, whatever her race, to compete for resources sunk "into the pool of the left." Presumably the careful transition from the term "Negro" to the term "black" marked the transition from an acceptable, earlier phase of the movement to a radical phase defined by black power particularism, developments which paralleled the move from colorblind policies and initiatives to race-based ones.

Figures within the Reagan administration made similar claims. Assistant attorney general William Bradford Reynolds, the controversial head of the justice department's civil rights division, at a meeting of the National Civil Rights Commission less than a month after the memorial march, maintained that the administration's civil rights policies aligned with the perspective of Martin Luther King, Jr., who, Reynolds argued, opposed "remedial goals, quotas, and set asides." The justice department official contended, to significant and vocal objections among the attendees, that Ronald Reagan's opposition to these programs fell within the historical trajectory of the long civil rights movement, beginning during Reconstruction, reinforcing "the colorblind ideal…staunchly defended in the 1960s by the real titans of the civil rights movement and the authors of the civil rights acts and the 14th amendment."[23] As someone presumably familiar with the legal arguments against segregation waged by the NAACP throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, Reynolds invoked a limited civil rights movement that interpreted the 14th amendment's equal protection clause as a colorblind standard, and in a crucial and

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[23] Robert Pear, "Reagan's Civil Rights Stance Called Akin to King's" *The New York Times*, 13 September 1983, B17. Reagan released a statement of support on the day of the memorial march, "A Statement By the President," *The New York Times*, 28 August 1983, 30. Bradford Reynolds was the principal architect of "color-blind" civil rights policies under Reagan. See Raymond Wolters' supportive assessment, *Right Turn: William Bradford Reynolds, the Reagan Administration, and Black Civil Rights* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 1996).

unprecedented move, included the preeminent icon of the movement, namely King, in this limited conception.

For many on the right, the 1983 version of the March also exposed the general poverty of civil rights leadership, represented by the comparatively sparse "hodgepodge" of activists who took part, despite the fact that so many other interests now sought representation under the umbrella of the historic struggle for civil rights.[24] In effect, the narrower interests of the first March drew from a broader base of national support, while the more expansive interests of the newer group showed its "radicalism" and thus unpopularity. That the new marchers used the occasion to attack the president showed this affiliation with those left of the mainstream. The multiplicity of causes the participants advocated showed how diluted (and presumably deluded) the message of the marchers had become, especially when compared to the clear message of national inclusion Dr. King offered twenty years earlier.[25]

In noting this diffuse, even incoherent gathering of interests at the march, some conservatives also took the occasion to attack liberal social welfare policies. Recalling the conclusions, if not the policy initiatives, of Moynihan (*National Review's* Man of the

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[24] "Hodgepodge" is a term used in "I Have a Daydream," *National Review* 1116. The *Review* described the numbers of attendees as in the tens of thousands, while the National Park Service noted numbers similar to those of the original march. Kenneth B. Noble, "Rights Marchers Ask New Coalition for Social Change," *The New York Times*, 28 August 1983, 1. This association of civil rights with a radical agenda was not new, however. For example, William Rusher, publisher of *National Review* in 1983, associates numerous other causes with civil rights as part of a general group who disagreed with traditional views on "*life-style* and *family*" in the latter half of the 1960s. In short, civil rights became controversial and even unpopular when other movements used the space it opened to promote an ostensibly more radical agenda, particularly "black militants." William Rusher, *The Rise of the Right* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984): 180-181. Edsall and Edsall make similar conclusions about the latter half of the 60s and show how Reagan and his supporters used the notion of "groups" to make these very same associations. Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction,* 45-73, 176.

[25] For diffusion of interests, see "A Coalition Without a Conscience," *Human Events*, 10 September 1983, 5-6; Stanton M. Evans, "D.C. March: The Communist Connection," *Human Events*, 3 September 1983, 16; "Notebook: Signs of the Times," *The New Republic*, 19 and 26 September 1983, 11-12.

Year in 1975), in his controversial 1965 *Report on the Negro Family*, conservatives

pointed out that the alliance of African Americans with left-of-center groups obscured the

basic source of black economic inequality: the dissolution of the black family. Liberal

and left-of-center groups were not the friends of African Americans; they were the ones

who created and advocated a welfare system that conservatives linked in a causal chain

from an "easy money psychology," to the destruction of the black family, and thus to dire

material circumstances.[26] In a fascinating turn that conveniently glossed over a whole

host of historical complexities, liberals, it seems, were the ones who had hijacked the true

civil rights movement.

The National Holiday and the Two Kings

> The birthdays of Franklin and Adams
>   Don't make us excessively blue,
> While honoring Jefferson yearly
>   Has never been something we do.
> But should Dr. King be so honored,
>   Some cranks will look rather perplexed,
> Especially when they discover
>   That William Sloan Coffin is next.[27]

To make these arguments, of course, conservatives had to de-radicalize King. The

Martin Luther King, Jr. whom conservatives sought to claim for a "colorblind ideal" was

rather different from the historical King, whose revolutionary tendencies proved

problematic as disagreements emerged over the creation of the national holiday in his

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[26] On the association of civil rights and the march with welfare policy and the black family, see "I Have a Daydream," 1116; Buchanan, "How the Movement Died," 6; Warren T. Brookes, "Will Jackson Restore the 'Dream,' or Just Exploit it," *Human Events*, 22 October 1983, 10. Though it appeared the day of the march, the same conclusions are in Clarence McKee, "Why Have Black Leaders Closed Their Minds?" *Human Events,* 27 August 1983; the moderate New Republic makes a similar point, but does not make the connection to liberal welfare policy: "March to Nowhere" *The New Republic*, 19 and 26 September 1983, 7-10; cf. note 9.

[27] W.H. von Dreele, "What about Father Divine?" *National Review*, 16 September 1983, 1138.

memory. In effect, conservatives carefully distilled an acceptable King from the more radical ethos of the civil rights leader. Some conservatives recognized that King was not an entirely neat fit with all of their ideas, and they imagined the civil rights leader as a symbol for values they deemed acceptable, while condemning the historical figure for his shortcomings. In the process, they created a palatable Martin Luther King, Jr. with broad appeal across the political divide, one who encapsulated their version of the civil rights movement and its meaning.

Republicans supported the King Holiday in large majorities in both the House and the Senate. Those in Congress who voiced their objections most vociferously were politicians whom most observers considered reactionary, figures like Georgia Democrat and John Bircher Larry McDonald in the House, and in the Senate, North Carolina Republican Jesse Helms. In the estimation of Louisiana Democratic Senator J. Bennett Johnston, for example, Helms' objections to the bill "brought all the crazies out of the woodwork." Republican Alan Simpson of Wyoming worried that Helms' vigorous opposition to the bill would alienate potential Republican African American voters: "It's unfortunate to write off the black vote when our party is making a serious effort to enlist black voters." For Senate majority leader Howard H. Baker, Jr. of Tennessee, the passage of the bill was "proof positive that this country and the Senate has a soul."[28] Former Dixiecrat and conservative warhorse Strom Thurmond's support for the bill lent even more credence to this widespread mood of reconciliation.

In the opinion of many in Washington, then, Helms' crusade against the holiday seemed the pathetic race-baiting of an unreconstructed Southerner. Nonetheless, the

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[28] All quotes in Steven V. Roberts, "Senate Votes Holiday to Honor Dr. King," *The New York Times*, 20 October 1983, B9.

nature of the arguments against the holiday illuminated the meaning of the civil rights movement among conservatives generally recognized as the "New Right." Among conservatives against the King holiday, four basic arguments, often connected, emerged: first, the federal government could not afford another national holiday, which would cut into revenues. Second, "historical perspective" made clear that Martin Luther King, Jr. while important, was not as influential as other Americans who did not merit national holidays, figures such as Jefferson, Madison, or Benjamin Franklin, to name a few. Third, King was an avowed radical and revolutionary who knowingly associated with Communists, and did not actively seek to distance himself from them. Finally, King denounced the United States and its policies on several occasions, and was therefore unpatriotic.[29]

Conservatives gave the most careful attention to the last two of these arguments. Helms, for example, distributed an information packet to his Senate colleagues containing a report detailing King's Communist associations, large parts of which his staffers culled from a selective reading of historian David Garrow's *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: from Solo to Memphis*.[30] Helms also filed suit to gain access to the complete FBI records on King, which had been sealed for fifty years starting in 1977.

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[29] These arguments are culled largely from the pages of *The National Review* and *Human Events*. Not surprisingly, *Human Events* gave exhaustive coverage to the controversy, and even published Helms' report in its entirety. See "House Paves Way for King Holiday," 13 August 1983, 4; James J. Kilpatrick, "Why a National Holiday for Martin Luther King?"17 September 1983, 7; "King Holiday on Verge of Passage," 1 October 1983, 3; "Why a King Holiday?" 15 October 1983, 1, 19; "Helms Acts to Unseal Secret King Files," 22 October 1983, 6,8; "Senate OKs King Holiday," 29 October 1983, 3.4; "Why Bobby Kennedy Tapped King's Phone," 29 October 1983, 4,5; "King Was a Communist Sympathizer," 5 November 1983, 4. Helms' report appeared in Helms, "The Radical Record of Martin Luther King," 12 November 1983, Special Section, 1-8. *The National Review* was far less obsessive, see "The Week," 28 October 1983, 1316; "This Week," 11 November 1983, 1381; "Comrade King?" 11 November 1983, 1382; William F. Buckley, Jr., "Lessons Learned en Route to the Martin Luther King Day," 9 December 1983, 1572; Joseph Sobran, "Gentleman's Agreement," 23 December 1983, 1618.
[30] David Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: from Solo to Memphis* (New York: Norton, 1981).

(This effort was unsuccessful.) Despite Helms' statements to the contrary, his objections

seemed little more than the tired red-baiting-as-race-baiting tactic of many a

segregationist. Yet, the way in which conservatives carefully framed their accounts of

Helms' allegations or voiced their reservations against the King Holiday revealed crucial

aspects of their reading of the civil rights movement.

Some members of the "New Right," while stridently against a national holiday for

King, repeatedly offered caveats to their objections, proposed alternate solutions, or

defended their "colorblindness," at times, it appeared, with a wink and a nod. [31] On the

Senate floor, Helms protégé John East of North Carolina, a polio victim and paraplegic,

while explaining his objections to the bill (it was too expensive, another holiday was

unnecessary) wondered if his colleagues could likewise be accused of prejudice against

the handicapped if they voted against a proposal for a Franklin D. Roosevelt Day. East,

like Helms and other conservatives, contended that media and popular pressure had

censored the debate over the holiday. Proponents portrayed those against the bill as

"converted racists, bigots, people opposed to the proper treatment and continued

improved treatment of black Americans."[32] Conservative columnist and thinker James J.

Kilpatrick (who was perhaps the most principled defender of the segregated South during

the 1960s) bemoaned such consequences of opposing the holiday: "It is preposterous to

contend that if one opposes the bill, one is therefore anti-black, but political life is filled

with preposterous propositions. It will take courage of a high order to vote against the

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[31] There were a handful of efforts to amend the proposal to exclude King and substitute instead a "civil rights day" or "national equality day." Conservative senators complained that to honor King specifically would exclude other worthy minorities. East, for one, proposed a national civil rights day on James Madison's Birthday. Congress, Senate, Senators Kennedy, Helms, East, Moynihan and others speaking for and against the national holiday for Martin Luther King, Jr., S. Res. 400, 98th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 129, pt. 20 (18 October 1983): 28069-28116.
[32] Ibid., 28091.

measure."[33] As members of a movement born in opposition during the postwar heyday of American liberalism, some conservatives latched onto the King Holiday as another expression of their outsider status. Opinion-makers and the media might be in favor of the holiday, at least one observer reasoned, but if the "grassroots" knew the truth about King, his communist associations and personal moral failings, they would not be so quick to support a holiday in his honor.[34]

Nonetheless, in many cases, even those conservatives who opposed the holiday were careful not to besmirch King or the movement entirely. The holiday, some reasoned, was not designed to honor black achievements in the arena of civil rights, but was a salvo in a "radical agenda," pushed for during the "March on Washington II." So, conservative opponents argued, though "few question that King was a courageous individual who was the driving force behind the civil rights revolution of the 1960s," memorializing the man himself threatened to conflate the civil rights leaders' radical and "controversial" statements against the war in Vietnam with the cause of civil rights generally. In effect, conservatives imagined two Kings, a radical, unacceptable one, and another who "spoke out eloquently for the cause of civil rights," the acceptable leader who reinforced American traditions of colorblind equality, especially as rendered in the "I Have a Dream" speech at the first March on Washington in 1963.[35]

Arguably, a sanitized, de-radicalized Martin Luther King, Jr. carried the day in the end. Ronald Reagan, whose media savvy has been so widely acknowledged as to become a tired truism, was said to have commented that though he had reservations about the holiday, he decided to support it because popular perceptions were based on "image, not

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[33] "Why a National Holiday," *Human Events*, 7.
[34] "grassroots" in "King Holiday on Verge of Passage," *Human Events*, 3.
[35] Ibid.; "Why a King Holiday," *Human Events*, 1.

reality."[36] In some sense, then, the radical King whom some on the conservative right sought to expose was the one who was lost as the furor over the holiday subsided in the years that followed. Arguably, the sanitizing of King and the movement was a deeply ironic development, given that a politician (Jesse Helms) regarded by many as a southern reactionary, presented the most radical and revolutionary version of King, while supporters of the holiday (especially Senators Edward Kennedy and Daniel P. Moynihan) actively sought to dismiss what they regarded as calumny, the "vestiges of old hatreds" on the part of a denizen of "Old Jim Crow." The report that Helms distributed, while highly selective in its emphasis, was not precisely the "filth" and "obscenities" that liberal senators condemned.[37] It was largely the work of a very careful and discerning historian, David Garrow. What did get lost in the national debate was Garrow's interpretation of those documents, which clearly showed that Cold War paranoia and J. Edgar Hoover's personal obsessions made for an FBI vendetta against King and the movement. To be as fair as possible, the disagreement between Helms and Kennedy, for example, was not over the substance of the facts in question, but over what Helms did or did not mean to imply about those facts. Kennedy assumed that Helms meant to condemn King and with him the civil rights movement as a communist conspiracy of some sort.[38] Helms never made that argument explicitly, but it remains instructive that Kennedy quickly jumped to that conclusion. It is also interesting that most Republicans stayed out of the fray, which Helms, of course, felt it necessary to point out, commenting that "I

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[36] "Comrade King?" *National Review*, 1382.

[37] "vestiges of old hatreds" is Senator Kennedy in Congress, Senate, 98th Cong. 1st sess. *Congressional Record*, 129 pt. 20 (18 October 1983): 28073. "Old Jim Crow" was Senator Bill Bradley's language, in "Senate Votes Holiday to Honor Dr. King," *The New York Times*, B7; "Filth" and "obscenity" was Daniel Patrick Moynihan in *Congressional Record* (18 October 1983): 28075, 28076, respectively. Earlier, just as acrimonious debate on the measure, including Helms' Report and Kennedy's Response, is in Congress, Senate, 98th Cong. 1st sess. *Congressional Record*, 129, pt. 19 (3 October 1983): 26865-26886.

[38] Kennedy in *Congressional Record* (18 October 1983): 28069-28073, 28089.

cannot begin to say how many Senators have come to me in the cloakroom and have said, 'Jesse, you are exactly right on this thing, but if I stand with you, the newspapers back home will eat me alive.'"[39] On the Senate floor at least, the vast majority of Republicans left this Helmsian statement of principle to languish unacknowledged. Nonetheless, if prominent liberals and a few moderates dismissed the reactionary South in 1983, they also obscured the revolutionary aspects of King's thought, as well as the voices that may have sought to defend King's associations and statements amidst Cold War fears and pieties. Thus the "radical agenda" that some conservatives feared the holiday represented could be replaced by the denatured, "colorblind" movement that many conservatives, even those against the bill, advocated.[40] To be sure, William Sloane Coffin was not next; Jesse Helms and Ted Kennedy made sure of that.

Willmoore Kendall, Equality, and Creation of the Conservative Civil Rights Movement

While these developments reveal a great deal, they fail to capture entirely the type of thinking that enabled many conservatives to support the establishment of a King Holiday, and with it, the civil rights movement.[41] A strand of conservative thinking about the meaning of equality, exemplified by Willmoore Kendall, made the conservative embrace of colorblindness plausible, and may have contributed in interesting ways to their creation of the civil rights movement.[42] In other words, Kendall might offer intellectual provenance for the political logic (originated by neo-conservatives like

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[39] Helms in Ibid., 28069.

[40] In a letter to the editor of the New York Times, Michael Parenti, "What if Communists Had Links to Dr. King?" *The New York Times*, 1 November 1983, A26, made this precise point.

[41] Of course, the end of the previous chapter is a window into this sort of thinking.

[42] For a fuller account of conservatives' debate on equality, including perspectives that differ from Kendall's, especially the Straussian Harry Jaffa, see Richard H. King, "The Struggle Against Equality." I use Kendall here because his is the most fully conceptualized statement on the idea of equality among conservative political philosophers for the relevant period.

Moynihan and Glazer) that made certain aspects of the movement worth conserving for people like William F. Buckley, Jr. and the other editors of *National Review*, or for Patrick Buchanan. The logic and conclusions of Kendall's theorizing suggest what the Republicans accomplished in 1983, perhaps unbeknownst to them.

In 1963, twenty years before the controversy over the King Holiday, Kendall published *The Conservative Affirmation*, marking a crucial moment in American conservative thought. The inspiration for the irascible title character of Saul Bellow's short story *Mosby's Memoirs* and a professor of government at Yale throughout the 1950s whose eccentricities and way of thinking never quite mixed with the rest of the faculty, he was also among the founders of the *National Review*. (Not surprisingly, Kendall was a major influence on William F. Buckley, Jr.) Kendall finally left New Haven in 1961 after Yale bought out his tenure in exasperation. He finished his career at the University of Dallas, a private Catholic institution, where he established a politics program largely according to the methods of the political philosopher Leo Strauss (whose thought he had come to embrace, perhaps to a fault, in the 1950s). He succumbed to a heart attack in 1967.[43] He is perhaps best remembered among conservatives as an immensely creative interpreter of American federalism.

Against thinkers who tended to identify American conservatism with European traditions, like the Burkean Russell Kirk, Kendall showed, with brimming confidence, that conservative ideas had long existed in the United States, from the very founding of the republic. In Kendall's estimation, conservatism

distinguishes between "change" directed at the *development and*

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[43] Biographical information from Kendall, *Contra Mundum*, 9-26.

> *perfection* of our heritage as *that which it is*, and "change" calculated to transform that heritage in *that which it is not*; and far from opposing the former, stands forth as its champion.[44]

Recalling Socrates' distinction between vulgar opinion (*doxa*) and knowledge (*episteme)*, *The Conservative Affirmation* reasoned from popularly regarded views of conservatism to something best resembling the "real." Thus conservatives "affirmed" a heritage; liberals sought to change that heritage from "*that which it is"* to "*that which it is not.*"

With this in mind, Kendall made an important distinction between egalitarianism and equality. The former sought to set an agenda in the pursuit of an ideal vision, while the latter affirmed the basic foundations of the American political heritage. Kendall noted that the Declaration employed the verb "hold" to describe the self-evident truth of equality, and therefore, it did not presume to *make* the world equal. Efforts to do so were part of an ongoing liberal onslaught against long-term conservative resistance. For the conservative theorist, the battle over the meaning of equality was joined in the aftermath of the Civil War, when the Reconstruction amendments potentially changed its meaning from the founding understanding to something like the egalitarian principle. Kendall did not discuss the fact that the intellectual context in which these amendments passed was the very same which witnessed the birth of the modern conception of civil rights, but one can assume that he was aware of the problem. If one considers Kendall's reading of equality as one of the generative concepts for the conservative reinterpretation of the civil rights movement (as I argue here), it existed in opposition to the modern idea of civil rights. In this narrow sense, the term "civil rights," when used by some (not all) conservatives, refers to a concept that actually opposes its modern usage. In liberal usage,

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[44] The emphasis is Kendall's. Willmoore Kendall, *The Conservative Affirmation* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1963): x.

"civil rights" refers to the egalitarian principle; in contemporary conservative usage, "civil rights" can refer to Kendall's conception of "equality."[45]

Some explanation is necessary here. In typically loose and conversational fashion, Kendall described the difference between the two positions in rather realist (in a philosophical sense) terms: "The egalitarian principle stands over against the equality principle in a relation like that of a caricature to a portrait, or a parody to a poem." One represented a closer approximation of the real, while the other "parodied" it. (Of course, the Socratic analogies only went so far, inasmuch as Kendall appeared unbothered by the fact that Socrates kicked the poets out of his Republic.) In a telling move, he used an analogy from controversies of his day over civil rights and busing to bring home his point:

> The equality of the Declaration is the equality to which, say, Abraham Lincoln was born—an equality that conferred upon him merely an equal right to compete with his fellow-men in the race, as we run it here in America, for whatever prize he in his equality chose to go after. Not so the egalitarianism of the Liberals. It must pick Lincoln up at dawn in a yellow bus with flashing lights, so saving him shoe-leather, whisk him off to a remote consolidated school (financed in all probability, by inflationary bonds), feed him a free lunch, educate him for democracy, protect him from so-called concentrations of social and economic power, eke out his income by soaking the rich, doctor him, hospitalize him, and finally, social-work him—if, as he probably will now, he turns into a juvenile delinquent.[46]

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[45] Kendall's privileging of the 10th amendment over the 14th amendment in later writing is instructive here. For Kendall, liberals, by reading the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment to apply a standard by which one challenged the equity of existing laws, potentially overturning them, rather than reading the clause, as conservatives might, to mean only that existing laws be equitably enforced, in effect overturned the 10th amendment, which delegated the specific powers reserved for the states and the national government. Kendall, "Equality and the American Political Tradition," in *Keeping the Tablets: Modern American Conservative Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988): 71-83. Conservatives and Straussians like Kendall tend to reject Justice Black's notion, now by and large Constitutional doctrine, that the 14th Amendment in effect made the Bill of Rights apply to the states and not just to the Congress.

[46] Kendall, *Conservative Affirmation*, 18.

To battle such liberal privations, Kendall sought an alliance of the conservative "eggheads" and the "resisters" of the egalitarian agenda in Congress. In service of his move to lead conservatives out of the cave, the conservative theorist outlined the basic features of a limited concept of equality, one that made the conservative embrace of the civil rights movement plausible. By virtue of being created equal (presumably by God) one could make an *equal claim* to be treated as a person, but this did not contain the additional claim that one need be *made* an equal person.[47] This was an addition that Kendall contended, rather like the editors of *National Review* twenty years later, involved a privilege rather than the basic presupposition of an existing truth. Though Kendall was not explicitly aware of it, the "line of battle" (his term) he sought to draw between conservatives and liberals was based upon an ontological distinction between types of equality. If the Founders' sense of equality was real, an absolute term in American political discourse, its "caricature" attempted to subvert the very foundations of democracy in the United States by substituting a vague ideal for an absolute truth. That which came after might parody this truth, but it could not correct it; conservatives did not resist "change," they articulated the basic moral principles that liberal *doxa* tended to obscure.

If this contribution was not completely new (one might identify it as a non-utopian form of original intent) what proved more important was Kendall's attempt to characterize and thus unite conservatism as a movement of ideas against liberalism. His was an exercise in consciousness-raising, but he also posited the suggestion that conservatives were *winning*, and more importantly would always win, because the basic nature of the political system in which the competing sides operated did not admit

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[47] Also see Kendall "Equality and the American Political Tradition," 75.

revolutionary change of the sort threatened by liberals. Again, liberal *doxa* obscured the

true character of the case. Conservatives had successfully resisted revolution at every turn

since the battle had been joined 100 years before. While this hardly seemed a great

victory (by this logic liberals had been chipping away for the last one hundred years,

while conservatives merely held the line), it did make the fascinating claim that liberals

were *always* a revolutionary group. In other words, if the full extent of the liberal,

egalitarian agenda were to come to fruition, it would mean that a revolution had taken

place. With this logic in mind, Kendall would later conclude that that the civil rights

movement invited a "constitutional crisis" because it was the truest form of this

egalitarianism, an especially virulent strain that refused to "take no for an answer."

Fortunately, the movement lost considerable steam with the passage of the Civil Rights

Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.[48] Conservatism held yet again. Because

the United States had never experienced a full-scale revolution (that is, the Founders'

system had never been overthrown), conservatism was the true American tradition.[49]

Kendall's explanation for this interpretation was rather ingenious, in that it

involved an interesting rendering of the meaning of the majority in American democracy.

Again Kendall assumed the mantle of Socrates, taking apart popular notions to reveal the

apparent truth of the matter. In his estimation, two ideas about the "majority" existed in

American political thought, executive and legislative. People generally supposed,

incorrectly, that the executive was the truest source of enlightened public opinion, and

should therefore carry out majority mandates against the obstructionist practices of

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[48] Kendall, "The Civil Rights Movement and the Coming Constitutional Crisis," 366; also see Kendall, "What Killed the Civil Rights Movement?"
[49] Broader discussion of conservatives' battle against the egalitarian agenda is from Kendall, *Conservative Affirmation*, 1-20.

Congress (for example, the filibuster, the overrepresentation of rural areas in the Senate, etc.). In this popular view, Congress often opposed those measures designed to streamline or concentrate the power of the executive. For example, executive efforts to enforce desegregation were part of this appeal to an enlightened majority mandate—Congress were the obstructionists. The perception that the executive somehow got his way historically overlooked the fact that executives never achieved anything resembling the full extent of the changes they sought—Congress always limited the efforts of aggressive presidents. In short, Congress, with its rituals and bicameral structure, protected minority opinion, while the executive carried out majority mandates.[50]

These, for Kendall, were widely held misconceptions, ones that misunderstood the two *types* of majorities in the American political system. Congress was not anti-majoritarian; rather, if one truly understood the intent of the Founders, it became clear that they sought to organize a majority in a "particular way."[51] The Founders, because they were morally attuned human beings who believed in the absolute existence of justice and injustice, sought to organize the Republic according to such ethical distinctions. (Against the modern contention that conceptions of justice were only matters of individually held values, Kendall insisted that one take seriously that the Founders would have considered the existence of an absolute standard of justice unquestionable.) When people went to the polls to elect their representatives, they did so on the basis of local concerns, but more importantly on the basis of the virtues of a particular candidate. For this reason, representatives did not go to the assembly with specific instructions, but did so with virtues and the sense of the just that their constituency validated. By emphasizing

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[50]Ibid., 21-49.
[51] Ibid., 36.

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individual, absolute conceptions of justice over the parochial interests of a particular constituency ("pork"), Kendall meant to privilege the relatively continuous deliberative process between independent virtuous men in Congress over the intermittent electoral process.

For Kendall, the Founders (Madison in particular) made this quite clear given that they were well aware that the "people" broadly considered were not capable of making policy given the complexities of the process, and the fact that they lacked access to relevant sources of information. What the people were able to do was to make sound moral decisions about the virtues of their neighbors in their own communities. The representatives they elected, then, reflected a majority of the *polis'* basic moral judgment through the outcome of their deliberations; they were not constantly beholden to the parochial interests of their given constituency.

It followed that legislators, by reflecting their constituency's understanding of justice, including the ethical bedrock emanating from that understanding, also represented the hierarchies extant in such communities. This in turn meant the individual moral judgments and understanding of virtue one made with respect to one's neighbors. In other words, an individual's capacity to judge the virtue of her neighbors generated local hierarchies, because those people who were leaders in a community reflected its values. Kendall offered an example:

> This state of affairs is reflected in the notorious fact that congressmen and senators, when they phone home to consult, are more likely, other things being equal, to phone bank presidents than plumbers, bishops than deacons, editors than rank and file newspaper readers, school superintendents than schoolmarms—and would be very foolish if they were not more likely to.[52]

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[52] Ibid., 44.

To sum up, this conception of a majority conceived of in a "particular way" meant that the outcome of deliberations in Congress best represented the basic virtues of the majority, because those who took part in these deliberations were (ideally at least) virtuous men, who represented the best moral judgments of their specific locales, judgments which human beings made by appealing to a basic, foundational sense of justice (an appeal which the Founders would not have found problematic). The "people" were not supposed to make policy, and did not take part in such deliberations; in this way, a majority did not necessarily signify some form of popular, egalitarian democracy, which was to be avoided. (People in local communities, of course did deliberate about specific issues of local importance, which they could understand in clear moral terms.) What Madison and others did was allow for the possibility of a popular movement for justice, while preventing, to the best of their ability, a demagogic popular movement designed for injustice. In other words, the Founders would not have entirely understood the modern *doxa* on the idea of a majority, which meant "majority mandates arising out of plebiscitary elections," like that which selected the executive.[53] This was but one type of majority. Americans had largely forgotten about the existence of the other.

So Congress, while popularly considered an impediment to decisive change with putatively undemocratic features (rules, rituals, staggered elections, filibusters, etc.) actually ensured that politics retained a moral dimension. One might believe that Congress over-represented narrow, local prejudices and parochial interests, but the constituencies that comprised these interests understood their particular predicament in moral terms. (Again, specific local issues involved intimate moral concerns.) Kendall's understanding of a popular majority here was vaguely reminiscent of Rousseau's general

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[53] Ibid., 35.

will. What the Founders feared were the majorities within specific locales, which might

lead to chaos should the union break apart. They sought a majority that better reflected

the basic values of the people. By electing people who represented the basic virtues all

men held in common, they ensured cohesion based upon shared conceptions of justice.

Moreover, such conceptions could be realized only cautiously, through Congressional

deliberation. Executive, plebiscitary considerations were far more dangerous. The

president, by appealing to ostensibly high principles on the level of national policy, might

in fact be swaying with the moral fashion of the day:

> Madison's [Kendall's virtuous majority] is a mandate that emerged
> from a process that was always intended to emphasize specific moral
> considerations, e.g., the kind of considerations involved in deciding who
> are virtuous men. To put the point otherwise: it is a process that was
> originally conceived in terms of a moral theory of politics, while the
> theorists of the presidential mandate tend, to say the least, to a certain
> relativism about morals (which is why they can end up insisting that this
> and this must be done because the majority demands it *tout court*). Its
> emphasis, therefore is on the ability of the people (i.e., at least the majority
> of the people) to make sound judgments regarding the virtue of their
> neighbors, not on their ability to deliberate on matters of policy.[54]

How might Kendall have understood why conservatives supported the cause of

civil rights in 1983? Conservatives could give ground or even believe in "civil rights" as

represented in those laws passed by Congress, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the

Voting Rights Act of 1965.[55] They did not have to agree with the ways in which the

Supreme Court interpreted those laws, nor with the ways in which the executive put them

into practice.[56] A Madisonian majority mandate, in other words, allowed "civil rights" in

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[54] Ibid., 42-43.
[55] It is significant that the Republican Party Platform of 1964 promised "full implementation and faithful execution of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but opposed "inverse discrimination." In David Reinhard, *The Republican Right Since 1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983): 194.
[56] For example, Kendall makes his hostility to the "liberal" Supreme Court very clear in "Liberals will attempt, from a mere minority position in American politics—to impose the new interpretation [in this

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that *narrow* sense, to take place. This narrow, Congressional rendering of the civil rights movement ensured that the revolutionary implications of the movement were contained and incorporated, and ensured that conservatives could argue against affirmative action policies, especially given that in 1964, supporters of the Civil Rights Act insisted that racial quotas were not in keeping with the spirit of the legislation.[57] "Colorblindness," then, might serve to maintain this conception of equality and a Congressional mandate, conceding only the strictest interpretation of the legislative victories of the Civil Rights Era.[58]

So deliberation on the part of a majority with a solid sense of moral judgment on questions of virtue was acceptable, particularly if the majority was a large one, which, in the case of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, it was. Attempts to remake the existing state of affairs were then rejected. While popular opinion about African Americans' place at the "national feast" may have changed, the basic legislative structure did not. Legislative decisions were legitimate because such an upheaval never took place, and because they were conducted after a period of deliberation, a process recognizing the constituent source (morals) of these representative men.[59] In keeping with the "colorblind" character of conservative understandings of equality, race was epiphenomenal, or more accurately a type of *doxa*, and vulgar opinion admitted considerations of virtue only in a very partial sense; virtue involved relations between

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case, of the 14th amendment] by sheer fiat of the Supreme Court." Kendall, "Equality and the American Political Tradition," 83.

[57] Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960-1972* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990): 139-152.

[58] Michael K. Brown, et. al. make clear that conservatives understand colorblindness in this limited, legislative sense. Michael K. Brown, et. al. "Introduction," in *Whitewashing Race*: 1-33.

[59] Kendall granted the legitimacy of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Kendall, "The Civil Rights Movement and the Coming Constitutional Crisis," 382-383.

human beings who could effectively judge the character of their neighbors in their particular locales, but needed the deliberation of representative men to best approximate the foundational or real.

The important aspect of Kendall's thinking for the purposes of the civil rights movement is that it made for a consistent theoretical position whereby one could oppose desegregation earlier, support the movement later, and still maintain the necessity of absolute moral principles or foundations for political activity. It should come as no surprise then, that Pat Buchanan and many other conservatives could maintain that the civil rights movement had succeeded, or was over. Whatever the attempts of presidents to push a popular agenda, or the courts to influence policy, the movement had absolute moral worth in the sense that it reflected basic, absolute understandings of justice transmitted through Congressional deliberation. Similarly, conservatives could at least partially evade charges of racial insensitivity because they actively associated the movement's iconic leadership with their limited conception of the meaning of the civil rights movement. In the end, the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday was grudgingly acceptable to many conservatives, because, in the words of the editors of *The National Review*: "Congress…wished…to admit into the American pantheon an ethnic symbol—a common honorable procedure—and to memorialize a leader, whose rhetoric, at its best, appealed to all-American principles of justice and rights."[60] The fact that civil rights legislation passed in 1964, 1965, and presumably 1983 signified the movement's failure to realize the full extent of its most idealistic claims, showing that conservatives had carried the day; thus they could claim it as a victory without expressing any affiliation with its potentially revolutionary meanings. As Kendall rather gleefully admitted in 1967,

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[60] "Comrade King?" 1382.

the passage of civil rights legislation had effectively killed the movement. By 1983, conservatives completed this victory by using carefully selected, "colorblind" portions of the language and imagery of the civil rights movement to complete their claim to a narrow conception of civil rights and equality. In a neatly ironic turn, they celebrated with a King Holiday.

CHAPTER VI

PARTIES DOWN AT THE SQUARE

If the proper place of intellectuals' influence on the civil rights movement seems

difficult to pin down, then the modern, visual character of the movement makes it subject

to innumerable, contested meanings. One can discuss what strands of ideas gave rise to

and sustained the movement, but this reveals only part of the story of its creation. As

events developed, it became clear that the most significant difference between the

American civil rights movement of the 1960s and most other worldwide social

movements before it was the frequent portrayal of the tactic of nonviolent direct action by

the modern media, particularly on television screens.[1] Showing scenes of nonviolent

direct action in practice and shooting the violent responses of authorities and vigilantes,

photographs and moving images educated countless viewers, affecting public opinion at a

pace unimaginable in years past. Scholars, journalists and other observers, with few if

any exceptions, acknowledge that such images are indelible accompaniments to recent

history of the United States South and to the history of the black freedom struggle

worldwide. It comes as somewhat of a surprise then that unexplored complexities

remain.[2]

For this reason, it behooves intellectual and cultural historians to deal with, at

least in a preliminary way, the problem of visual representation as it relates to the

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[1] Of course, the Indian revolt against British rule used nonviolent tactics and was seen throughout the West in newsreel footage.

[2] A fine study of the movement in photos does exist, and what follows owes much to the insights of Steven Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History, 1954-68* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996).

integration of the American mind. In an attempt to understand at least some of these complexities, what follows incorporates two levels of analysis, one contemporary to the civil rights movement and the other from the perspective of present-day concerns, the two necessarily connected. The first level of analysis includes speculation about what social theorists might call the "repertoires" of symbols at play during civil rights demonstrations, offering reasons for their effectiveness as frames of social and cultural action.[3] In other words, why did these images shock so many viewers, motivate them to take action or to feel connected to the events they saw? Certainly, depictions of violence often strike an emotional chord, but in the case of the civil rights movement, violent images mined much deeper terrain in American collective memory, namely that of the lynching ritual.

Departing from this perspective a bit, the second level, related to the first, accounts for the present-day status of these images, locating the characteristics intrinsic to them that ultimately rendered them a part of a mainstream, putatively progressive historical narrative of the United States, one that acknowledged and even embraced the persistence of violence in American culture. "Shooting" photographs of violence, journalists gave the public a visual record of the events, but inevitably rendered a death of sorts, making "museum objects" (to paraphrase Roland Barthes).[4] Similarly, film footage, while showing in at least some measure the continuity of experience, fetishized

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[3] On repertoires, esp. Charles Tilly, "Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain" in Mark Traugott ed., *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). On framing, Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 106-122. In the case of the American Civil Rights Movement, Tarrow notes, "The costumes of revolt are woven from a blend of inherited and invented fibers into collective action frames in confrontation with opponents and elites (118)."

[4] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), "the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity…Photography transformed subject into object, and one might say, into a museum object." 12-13.

white on black violence for a willing audience. In this sense, I want to argue for a possible reading of the movement to which few, if any, have dedicated much thought. In other words, the following analysis is very different from the other chapters in this study because it takes part in a creation of its own. It operates as an object lesson in the tremendous fluidity of meanings the visual character of the movement allowed, and it partly transgresses any narrative conceits one might draw from this study. It will prove difficult, then, to track this analysis as a story that develops from the previous chapter. Yet, it should show the immense possibilities the civil rights movement can offer for political inquiry and appropriation. Of course, this is potentially problematic. Once we loose the movement from its clearly declared intellectual moorings we enter uncomfortable terrain: in our political discourse, the criterion for what is true about the movement changes. In other words, if we allow that the movement may mean something different from what its supporters and participants intended, and from what intellectuals made of it, we claim it on the basis of criteria that are resolutely ethical rather than dependent upon any presumed foundational standard of historical facts that correspond to a world that is some particular way. In keeping with the presumption of this study, however, that the movement exists in a constant, fluid state of creation, so that the "actual" way things happened is inaccessible to us, I offer an interpretation that revisits the provocative intent of African Americans' protest.

Reading Protest in an Ellisonian Mode: The Party Down at the Square

It was some night all right. It was some party too. I was right there, see. I was right there watching it all. It was my first party and my last.[5]

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[5] Ralph Ellison "A Party Down at the Square," in *Flying Home and Other Stories* (Random House, 1996): 11.

Few would deny that Civil Rights Movement demonstrations proved effective and provocative because of their dramatic character. Referring to the student sit-in movement that began in Greensboro and Nashville in 1960, James M. Lawson, Jr., the preeminent educator of nonviolent tactics and strategies for the movement, and one of the primary architects of the nonviolent demonstration, described this phenomenon using typically circumspect language:

> Progress has come, but it hasn't begun to touch some of the commonplaces of life that affect the Negro deeply, the normal but subtle things that bite at his internal life, that he feels make him subhuman…[Negroes] are tired of middle-class methods for seeking our rights. The legal redress, the civil rights redress, are far too slow for the demands of time. The sit-in is a break with the accepted tradition of change, of legislation and the courts. It is the use of a dramatic act to gain redress.[6]

As forms of ritual drama, such demonstrations, or "dramatic acts" reenacted the long history of white violence against black people, and more importantly, the traditionally nonviolent response of African Americans to this white aggression.[7] At a time when lynching no longer had the sanction of public space or daylight, the nonviolent demonstration—well-ordered, disciplined and imaginative—*staged* white on black violence for a public audience, effecting a reversal of the white tradition of public murder

[6] James Lawson quoted by David Halberstam, "A Good City Gone Ugly," *The Reporter* 31 March 1960, in *Reporting Civil Rights* vol. 1 (New York: Library of America, 2003).

[7] There are, of course exceptions to this idea. A handful of civil rights scholars indicate that self-defense was more common among African Americans than was previously acknowledged, to the extent that one might term it a tradition, for example Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999). A more comprehensive study which accounts for some incidences of African American self-defense, but for most part details written reactions is Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988). Moreover, it must be mentioned that black resistance to white violence took on many forms as W. Fitzhugh Brundage acknowledges, "on a continuum somewhere between the poles of outright compliance with white values and brazen rebellion against them." W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "The Roar on the Other Side of Silence: Black Resistance and White Violence in the American South, 1880-1940" in *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997): 274.

during decades previous.[8] While one should be careful not to deny the complex of

reasons and motivations for white on black lynching in the post-bellum American South,

as an article of popular collective imagination and memory it had rich symbolic and

ritualized content.[9] Indeed, one can reasonably argue that the lynching of Emmett Till

was one of the events that sparked the indignation of many participants in the struggle,

showing, through brutal pictures displayed in the black press, the hypocrisy of many

Southerners' claims that good race relations existed in their region. For this reason, Till's

murder was thoroughly believable—it reinforced with horrific evidence, the omnipresent

threat of violence that served to maintain Jim Crow. Yet the widely televised and

photographed civil rights demonstrations in the South were significant not only because

they revealed the brutal content of white racism (unmasked its ostensible "mystique"),

but because they signaled a profound shift in power relations, where African Americans

now seized the opportunity to redefine the terms of Southern public ritual and select its

participants.

Moreover, this act of reversal was performed or framed in such a way that it

revealed a portion of the movement's aesthetic, or at least aspects of its characteristic

style and imagery, its vital merging of the political with the physical. As a useful

conceptual matrix to examine these qualities in civil rights imagery, primarily a piece of

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[8] Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement*, emphasizes this staged character. Most sources indicate that public lynchings were a thing of the past by the 1930s, and had sharply declined in the 1940s. For example, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930 (University of Illinois Press, 1993): 245-259.

[9] In this sense, what follows does not attempt to offer any simple explanation for the complex phenomenon of lynching in the South. Pace Brundage, I do not contend that all lynchings can be reduced to "a dramatization of the values and consensus of close-knit communities." *Ibid,* 19. Rather, the civil rights activists effected the reversal they did precisely because of the ritual, public, *staged* character of their *own* protests. For example, the public character of the lynching described here denies the fact that a large percentage of lynchings were the doings of private mobs, or posses meting out summary justice. No matter—in the cases covered here, civil rights activists used media in such a way as to make their protests intrusively public. Like lynching, civil rights protests took on myriad forms. I describe one type here.

short fiction, the African American novelist Ralph Ellison's "A Party Down at the Square" shapes the discussion that follows. Ellison's piece is relevant because, first, the novelist and essayist consistently concerned himself with just the sort of use of ritual and symbol expressed here. Second, and more specifically, a perceptive reading of the civil rights movement in Mississippi by Ellison some years after the writing of this particular piece of fiction opens up some interesting possibilities for reading the later intellectual tendencies of the novelist onto this early text, which he wrote around 1940.[10]

In a 1964 review of Howard Zinn's call to arms against (and attempted critical unmasking of) the segregated Jim Crow South, *The Southern Mystique*, Ellison gave characteristically piquant criticism, chiding the historian and activist for not fully understanding the meaning of African American political activity. Using an example from the civil rights movement (which may have been a bit unfair given Zinn's record as an organizer, particularly measured against Ellison's own rather genteel withdrawal from explicit political organizing) the author made yet another case for what might best be called his cultural nationalist project.[11] The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), formed by an interracial group of civil rights activists in protest to the racially exclusive Democratic Party in that state, had recently caused some stir at the 1964 Democratic Party convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, by demanding to be seated as delegates, in effect challenging the legitimacy of the traditional party, and in the process

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[10] I give Ellison a more "traditional" treatment in Chapter three. "A Party Down at the Square" was never published by Ellison during his lifetime, though evidence suggests that it was written around 1940. John F. Callahan, "Introduction" in Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and Other Stories* (Random House, 1996): xxii.

[11] Reading Ralph Ellison as a sort of "cultural nationalist" threatens to deny the complexity of Ellison's ideas about culture and about the American nation (which tended toward a sort of pluralism), but there is some precedent for doing so. The best example of a culturally nationalist reading of the novelist is Larry Neal, "The Black Writer's Role II: Ellison's Zoot Suit," in *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989): 30-56.

offering a cogent indictment of the lily-whites' undemocratic practice of excluding

countless eligible Black Southerners from the franchise. According to Ellison, this

"drama" was an event which in effect "change[d] the joke and slipped the yoke," to use

the author's own turn of phrase, (actually borrowed from an African American folk

witticism). The party, which began its life in what the Ellison deemed a "mock" election

for Mississippi state officers held simultaneous with the officially sanctioned state

election, became a "significant political gesture" given the events in Atlantic City. In

other words, Ellison contended that the MFDP translated what had begun as a

presumably empty ritual, a "joke" election, into concrete political action. In broader

terms, he contended that "For Negroes the Supreme Court Decision of 1954 and the Civil

Rights Act of 1964 induced no sudden transformation of character; it provided the *stage*

[emphasis mine] upon which they could reveal themselves for what their experiences

have made them, and for what they have made of their experiences."[12] For Ellison, the

MFDP was yet another instance proving the strength and adaptability of African

American culture. The civil rights movement made national exposure of the type the

Freedom Democrats garnered in Atlantic City possible, but did not usher in newly

creative forms of democratic political activity—African Americans had long been

creative and politically engaged despite the restrictions imposed upon them by white

supremacy. It followed that for Ellison nonviolence was also little more than African

American custom made an effective and pragmatic political strategy (this, after all, was

how blacks had frequently responded to white violence). Using these insights, then, one

might interpret some of the most memorable civil rights protests in an Ellisonian mode,

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[12]Ralph Ellison, "If the Twain Shall Meet," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison,* John
Callahan, ed. (Modern Library, 1995): 575.

reasoning that the ritualized, dramatic character of many civil rights demonstrations were a reformulation of the historical experiences of African Americans: reenactments of the long history of black nonviolent response to white violence, staged with newly prominent visibility. What follows adopts this mode to interpret Ellison's earlier piece of short fiction in light of the characteristics of the civil rights protest (in a sense imagining an older Ellison interpreting the younger through the medium of the civil rights movement).

"A Party Down at the Square" is an account of the public lynching of an African American man in a Southern town as seen from the vantage point of a young white boy from Cincinnati.[13] The voice of the white boy is restricted to a sort of blank reportage, offering little analysis or reflection, only an often primitive and uneasily formulated mix of images which range from fascination and exhilaration to revulsion as the events unfold. The boy's language is largely descriptive rather than analytical in any sense. As he tells it, the townspeople choose to burn the victim on a pyre in the center of the town square under cover of night. The conflagration quickly illuminates things, revealing the content of the ritual for what it is: "The bronze statue of the general standing there in the square was like something alive. The shadows playing on his moldy green face made him seem to be smiling down at the nigger." (4)

This account contains within it a variation on a now all to familiar theme: the central, racialized content of the Lost Cause mythology (presumably a Confederate general "standing there in the square") in this case backlit by the burning of black flesh, with the black male body as symbol of white manhood's perpetually unfulfilled desire for social control, a strange, corporal effigy: stripped of personhood and transformed into

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[13] Ellison's use of the white boy's voice is significant, though not completely unique to African American literature, for example, James Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* (New York, Dial Press, 1965): 262-265.

dehumanized representation by the sacred rite of white supremacist tradition in the

South.[14] The boy's observation that "Every time I eat barbecue I'll remember that nigger.

His back was just like a barbecued hog" (9) evokes horrors of sight and smell, but also

signifies the other site of contestation during and after what Vernon Parrington called

America's 'Great Barbecue,' the fetishized African American body, collected in pieces as

souvenirs or displayed in store windows, simultaneously an act of racial terrorism and

white communal solidarity (One of Ellison's lynchers collects the bones of the victim).[15]

Figure one: Metropolitan Police reserve Lt. R. H. Pybas looks at an
effigy of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., hanging in the rear of police
headquarters.

Figure one, taken during the Nashville civil rights campaign in 1963, depicts an

effigy of Martin Luther King, Jr. found hanging from a bridge, the traditional site of

many a lynching in the South. Nashville police disposed of it, but later unknown persons

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[14] As Ellison noted, "rites are actions, the goal of which is the manipulation of power—in primitive religions magical power, in the South (and in the North) political power." Ibid., 572. Orlando Patterson contends that lynching, as a form of human sacrifice, satisfied the creative impulses of the Lost Cause religion, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas, 1998): 208-224.

[15] Or, as Patterson suggests, the odor of barbecue indicates that the victim is symbolically eaten as an act of communal solidarity, reinforcing Levi-Strauss' distinction between raw and cooked (savage and civilized); Ibid, 199-201.

fished it from the trash, re-hanging it in the back of the Nashville Police Station.[16] White

toughs who responded to nonviolent direct action understood the power of symbols of

social control in the 1960s, but found themselves bereft of the traditional resources. There

would be no publicly condoned lynching as a form of communal participation. The

anonymous person or persons who hung the effigy did so as a prank, a joke. It was a farce

of a lynching, an absurdist take on a menacing tradition. (A child's mangled teddy bear

made up to be an object of hatred and derision). Yet a profound change had occurred. The

figure is named—the source of white racial animus is still an archetypical image (a vague

racist caricature) but no longer the customary lynching victim made brutally and

anonymously corporal, disfigured by the pyre and by souvenir hunters. A representation

of a *named* human being, the use of an effigy in this case rendered violence and violation

an object of fantasy, a proxy for carnal desire. Operating under a vainglorious logic, that

"To name the ineffable is to kill it," Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged as icon: articulate,

possessing an inscrutable black intelligence and embodying a long history of mostly

unrecognized struggle.[17] The dummy in Nashville revealed the intellectual content of the

separation between races in the South, formerly attenuated now amplified by King's

public displays of intelligence, which penetrated decades of dissembling resistance.

Novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston described this phenomenon by imitating a

typical response to a white request for knowledge: "He [the white man] can read my

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[16] Jerry Thompson, "King Effigy Hanged Anew" *The Tennessean* 14 April 1963, p.1 (photo by Harold Lowe, original caption.)

[17] Kimberly W. Benston, "'I Yam what I Am': Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature" *Black American Literature Forum* (Spring 1982): 4

writing but he 'sho can't read my mind. I'll put my toy in his hand, and he will seize it

and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."[18]

So the sense of community inspired by the lynching party, as the poet Sterling

Brown described it, "It wasn't no solemn business/ Was more like a barbecue" would be

undermined and reversed by movement activists, who sometimes joked and sang during

and after the experience of violence at the hands of white authorities.[19] The use of humor

was a form of community, of what Henri Bergson once described as "a kind of

freemasonry, or even complicity with other laughers, real or imaginary."[20] It also

mocked the resistance of white authorities to change, their mechanical obeisance to the

codes of white supremacy. (A profound reversal here: those purported to be subjects

mocked their tormentors, who had subjugated themselves to a system of apartheid by

seeking to uphold that system.) Laughter indicted Jim Crow for its lack of

correspondence to the rhythms of genuine, lived social interaction among equals.

Bergson defined this aspect of the comic as "the mechanical encrusted on the living."[21]

Comedian Dick Gregory, a frequent participant in civil rights protests, remembered

telling the following joke two weeks after Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama:

> But a lot of folks were surprised you made it this far. Like George
> Wallace. I understand the first day he said, "Those rabble-rousers have just
> left Selma." The second day he said, "Those trouble-making outside agitators
> have marched twenty miles." The third day he said, "Those civil rights
> marchers are more than halfway here." The fourth day he said, "The freedom

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[18] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, Harper Perennial ed. (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1935; New York: Harper and Row, 1990): 3.

[19] Sterling Brown, "He Was a Man" in Anne P. Rice, ed. *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003): 265. Examples of humor and song are numerous. A good sampling is The Freedom Singers, Fannie Lou Hamer, Willie Peacock, et al. *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs*, Smithsonian Folkways, 1997 SF 40084.

[20] Henri Bergson*, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan, 1911): 6.

[21] Ibid, 10.

walkers are on the outskirts of Montgomery." And tomorrow, when he looks out the window and sees 30,000 folks marching toward him, Governor Wallace'll probably be waiting on the steps of the Capitol saying, "Hey baby, what took y'all so long?"[22]

As the marchers move closer, Wallace increasingly takes on less combative language, eventually taking on the hipper 'Hey, baby.' By stripping him of his typical, mechanical rhetoric ('rabble rousers,' 'outside agitators,' etc.) Gregory mocked Wallace's intransigence in the face of inevitable change. It was a potentially queasy truth: jokes, as acts of resistance, made clear that the subjugated had been making fun of their subjugators for longer than the latter would find comfortable to admit.

So laughter was also a form of aggression, of social and cultural exclusion, and communal knowledge. White authorities found themselves objects of derision, or at the very least weren't in on the joke. And nonviolence, by embracing the inevitability of violence, freed protesters to merge the political with the physical and to conceptualize their experiences and their laughter far beyond the level childish pranks, making their jokes a form of art. Again, Bergson summed up the phenomenon much more adequately:

> Laughter…does not belong to the province of esthetics alone, since unconsciously…it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement. And yet there is something esthetic about it, since the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art.[23]

But "A Party Down at the Square" contains even more insights. The story quickly turns chaotic and complex due to a collision of forces natural and technological by means of a familiar Ellisonian move, the use of an electricity trope. The lynching occurs in the middle of a terrific, windy rainstorm, so that an airplane in trouble mistakes the burning pyre for a landing beacon, flying too low into the town square, hitting a set of electrical

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[22] Dick Gregory, *Up From Nigger* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976): 95.
[23] Bergson, *Laughter*, 20.

wires with its landing gear. The fractured wires strike the soaked ground and electrocute a white woman onlooker: "She was lying in a puddle as stiff as a board….Her white dress was torn, and I saw one of her tits hanging out in the water and her thighs." (7) The effect is a riotous mix of images. The white boy describes the dead woman in language just as visceral and starkly physical as he does the black man being murdered. The juxtaposition is a striking one, despite the gulf between the two according to the practice of Jim Crow etiquette (the black man as the customary object of white sexual panic, focusing around the figure of white womanhood). The intrusion of electricity, or somewhat more broadly technology or modernity, reduces the white woman to the simple equality of crude physicality. The electrical shock renders her instantly dead, and presumably she does not suffer. The murder victim is not so fortunate. He lingers on for some time with his body on fire, eventually begging for some bit of mercy. "'Will one a you gentlemen please cut my throat?'" he asks, "'Will somebody please cut my throat like a Christian?'" To which one of the men in the crowd responds, "Sorry, but there ain't no Christians around tonight. Ain't no Jew-boys neither. We're just one hundred percent Americans." (8)[24] Ellison renders the apotheosis of the *herrenvolk* democratic religion—a different brand of heretic being burned at the stake. The black man then resists his fate, breaking away from the flames and tumbling on to the ground, at which point the mob pushes him back on to the flaming heap of logs. The boy admits that he left the scene after watching the man resist, vomiting near the downed electrical wires, yet he sums up his story with a renewed sense of fascination: "All of that in one night, and all of it but the storm over one nigger.

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[24] It's probable that Ellison lifted the victim's words from an account of a lynching in the *Crisis* from 1912, "I wish some of you gentlemen would be Christian enough to cut my throat." Or, this may call into question Callahan's dating of the short story, given that many details of the lynching given in "Party Down at the Square" come from a collection compiled some years later, Ralph Ginzburg *100 Years of Lynching* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1962).

It was some night all right. It was some party too. I was right there, see. I was right there watching it all. It was my first party and my last. God, but that nigger was tough. That Bacote nigger was some nigger!" (11) It remains that underneath this boyish, adolescent sort of braggadocio ("I was right there, see.") the black man's resistance impresses him most of all. It presumably induces his bodily sickness and ultimately invites his greatest praise and only significant evaluation. So shifting between poles of exhilaration and bodily revulsion, (never anger or abject horror) the narrator is an observer of the ritual, if not entirely a participant. Too weak to go out the next day, he is admonished as "that gutless wonder from Cincinnati." The lynching is a ritual that takes a long period of initiation, "you get used to it in time." (10)

While "A Party Down at the Square" reveals most of the familiar facets of the lynching, the narrator's voice and the clashing of a rather primitive quasi-religious event (a human sacrifice) with technology (namely the airplane and the power lines) give the piece a sort of prescience that Ellison may have never imagined. In this sense, Ellison's depiction anticipated the character of the civil rights movement demonstration as commonly conceived, though the protesters would reverse the power dynamics of the action. Nonviolent civil rights protesters understood that the site of contestation for the central dilemma of American democracy would be the black body. They also understood that only their capacity to resist and to suffer could counteract the violence of those who were against them. This was the content of Gandhian *satyagraha* as understood by movement educators, and as articulated by Gandhi himself: "It should be remembered that nonviolence comes into play only when it comes it contact with violence."[25]

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[25] Mohandas Gandhi, *Gandhi on Nonviolence* Thomas Merton, ed. (New York: New Directions, 1964): 36.

Nonviolence was the act that brought morality (vaguely conceived of as Christian love) into the political arena and unmasked the physical content of Southern white racism, unleashing "true social forces."[26]

But more importantly, like the black man's resistance in Ellison's short story, this capacity for suffering would affect the uninitiated, who, by the 1960s, comprised most of the nation's citizens (particularly Northerners), collective white boys from Cincinnati. Many activists and organizers also knew that acts of violence against protesters must be elicited, seen and made public, revealing the actual content of Jim Crow practice—transcending traditional American politics by substituting images of violence for analytic judgments, rather like Ellison's adolescent narrator.[27] Political speech, in this sense, inevitably bespeaks *prior* conflict; it breaks the silence, explaining and justifying the speechlessness of violence and violation. Theoretically, the technology of the camera's lens brooks no such justifications when seen, but like the electric shock of the power lines in the square, lends those being violated the crude equality of their own physicality: white and black bodies being struck, attacked, pushed, or shoved.

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[26] Transcript of audiotaped interview with James Lawson, August 21, 1969. Box 22, Folder 135, Sanitation Strike Project, Mississippi Valley Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis Library.

[27] My interpretation follows that of Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982): 178-9 who contends that civil rights activists, especially King and his associates knew that for success it was necessary to elicit violence from authorities to gain national and governmental support. (For example, the Selma campaign was chosen because it was known that Sheriff Jim Clark was "violence-prone.") Aldon Morris, "Birmingham Confrontation Reconsidered: An Analysis of the Dynamics and Tactics of Mobilization" *American Sociological Review* 58 (October 1993): 621-636, disagrees, arguing that the mobilizing efforts of local people and their supporters were far more important than the depiction and eliciting of violence from authorities.

Figure two: Hoses in Birmingham

Figure two is a depiction of Birmingham public safety commissioner Bull Connor's minions, in this case the fire department, attacking nonviolent protesters with high pressure hoses in 1963.[28] Such images, particularly those from the Birmingham protest, piqued widespread national outrage or disgust. "BFD" is clearly emblazoned on the attackers' jackets, and they wear a full complement of protective gear, spewing water rather than the gasoline and fire of the lynching party. By engaging figures of authority rather than the traditional communal mob of the lynching or the ragged group of jeering racists, protesters were able to expand their indictment of segregation to include a much broader field of potential moral opponents.

Among the most infamous nationally televised and frequently photographed instance of white authorities attacking African Americans and their supporters was "Bloody Sunday" on the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965 as protesters attempted a march from that city to Montgomery to petition governor George Wallace in the name of voting rights. The events on the Pettus Bridge were also the most

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[28] *Time*, 3 January, 1964, 16. (photo by Charles Moore, with caption as it appeared there.) Appears alongside a photo of Commissioner Bull Connor under which the caption reads: "Unwittingly, he and his city brought millions of people to the Negro's side."

trenchant example of a televised lynching spectacle well after traditional rituals had faded

from national prominence. The protesters, attacked on the bridge by state troopers and

Selma police under the command of the brutal sheriff Jim Clark, inspired tremendous

outrage, culminating in a second, well-publicized, peaceful, court-sanctioned march that

began two weeks later. Bridges have almost universal symbolic significance as places of

transition, and this case contained all of the requisite elements of a neat triumphal

narrative. Just over a week after the events of Bloody Sunday on March 15, President

Lyndon Johnson gave an impassioned endorsement of the movement, speaking the

refrain of its central song, "We shall overcome." Some three months later, Johnson

signed the Voting Rights Act. Yet bridges were also a frequent site of lynching;

traditionally, black bodies hung from bridges performed the function of terrorizing

African American passersby, designed to keep them away, making clear the

consequences of violating the racial order. In a startling reversal of this function, the

symbolic lynching at the Edmund Pettus Bridge further awakened the moral conscience

of scores of white Americans, inspiring outrage rather than fear, substituting national

action in midst of a crisis for southern white supremacist ownership of a sacred site.[29]

Early in the student movement in 1960, James Lawson articulated the problem

that these depictions of nonviolent direct action and violent white response exposed:

> The South and the entire nation are implicated in the same
> manner…the real lynching continues unabated—the lynching of souls,
> persons (white and Negro) violating its victims absolutely, stripping them
> of human traits. The actual lynching goes on every day even while we
> make believe that lynching is a phenomenon of the past. What's more, the

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[29] Orlando Patterson contends that this function "hardly made sense" given that African Americans customarily stayed away from lynching sites, whatever the location, for days after a murder had occurred. Perhaps more importantly, Patterson views the bridge as a sacred site of the Lost Cause religion, exemplifying the crisis of transition from slavery to the Postbellum regime. *Rituals of Blood*, 209-211.

masses of people, including most moderates of both "races," are glibly unaware of the lynching.[30]

Lawson's statement indicated a crucial aspect of movement rhetoric, the invoking of black personhood in the context of protest. By reversing the basic symbolic terms of the lynching, civil rights demonstrators exposed the "lynching of souls" that Lawson believed to be a national disease, humanizing figures that one might previously have understood solely as a "problem." (This language of pathology was often used by civil rights orators—it was a characteristic mix of older forms of Christianity with a therapeutic language that characterized the period.)[31] In many ways, then, civil rights protesters succeeded, reversing and in some cases even mocking the postbellum white South's sacred communal ritual for a national audience, revealing the most uncomfortable dynamics in southern race relations, but these parties down at the square would yield complex and potentially contradictory outcomes.

Protest, Rupture, and the Camera's Eye

The eye of television is drawn to violence as the normal eye is drawn to the light in a jewel.[32]

If one contends that scenes of violence at Birmingham and Selma (especially) in many ways continue to determine the tenor of racial politics in the United States, it is also possible that these images and the types of violence that they depict have become so common that they sometimes cease to shock some viewers. Very few (if any) would argue that the cause of the civil rights movement was not just in an abstract democratic

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[30] James Lawson, "From a Lunch Counter Stool," in Francis Broderick and August Meier, eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971): 309.

[31] On therapeutic language, Rieff, *Triumph*

[32] Larry McMurtry, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen: Reflections at Sixty and Beyond* (New York: Touchstone, 1999): 109.

sense (African Americans had far too long been denied basic constitutional rights), yet it is such a consistent and even obvious reference point for American politics that it has sometimes acquired what V.S. Naipaul, in a characteristically flippant moment, called "the kind of playfulness that a political cause attracts when it has become safe."[33] The standardized quality of portrayals and interpretations of the movement threaten to denude it of its radicalism and most of its educative possibility—its ability to provoke public concern or inspire new generations to activism. Popular portrayals of the movement have as their primary quality a well-worn nostalgia for simpler times, a sort of last gasp liberal religious revivalism. (Though it is bit more than a mystical feeling of union with the ghost of Walter Rauschenbush; it means a chance to satisfy the American appetite for moral indignation by feasting on a pretty large target—misguided white supremacist cranks, the denizens of a bygone era.)

Whether a distortion of the movement's radicalism or not, nostalgic portrayals have some measure of truth. Philip Rieff, writing in the mid-1960s at the height of the civil rights movement, was keen to point out that while the "Negro protest movement" was a fresh expression of "communal purpose," it was a belated attempt to recharge an older, rapidly emptying source of cultural power.[34] As one observer of the condition of political modernity has written,

> Ours is an age that is understandingly weary of fanciful, eschatological political claims….enlightened—or so it would like to believe—about the folly and zeal of political theology: the notion that the kingdom of ends might be realized on earth via secular political means. We have become properly mistrustful of redemptory political paradigms.[35]

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[33] V.S. Naipaul, *A Turn in the South* (Vintage, 1989): 30.
[34] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (Harper, 1966): 18.
[35] Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (University of California, 1994): xxi.

Here one wonders if the basic faith of the civil rights movement had long run its course; "beloved community" as repining elegy. In any case, the civil rights movement must appear in uneasy truce with modernity, but all the more heartbreakingly appealing for being so. It is Christian, now characteristically American, and safe.[36] The movement created a form of protest and tactics that were new to the United States, infused with heavy doses of old time religion, yet once established such tactics, freighted with new meanings, became available for widespread use, inspiring a heightening of political activity among other groups: feminists, environmentalists, and anti-abortion advocates.[37] In short, the clear, volatile, racial content of the nonviolent direction action protest is a thing of the past; it no longer bears much of the stain of the lynching party. Mainstream African American politicians still invoke the civil rights movement with some regularity, as do many white liberals, but conservative opponents of affirmative action now find an ally in Martin Luther King, Jr., and Heritage Foundation scholars dedicate their efforts to declaring the civil rights movement a crusade for absolute truth--which in many ways it was.[38] And it is possible that at least some of the seeds of this transition of the civil rights movement and its symbols from a radical effort at social transformation into an inclusive, mainstream narrative of America's democratic progress, subject to multiple uses, were contained in the images of protest themselves.

This mainstream narrative proceeds in the following way: the civil rights movement, called by some the "Second Reconstruction," indicated the completion of the

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[36] One might also read safe as asexual, though something a bit deeper may be at work. Philip Rieff notes, "In light of their personifications in terms of releasing motifs, American Negroes are stuck with a double-edged motto: "Freedom Now" aptly expresses the nervousness and furtive envy of white ideas about Negro behavior" (Rieff, *Triumph*, 23, note).
[37] Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 118.
[38] See chapter five.

first, presumably failed, effort at Reconstruction, and was arguably the locus of the "liberal consensus." By the mid-1960s, images of segregationist authority shocked a very broad audience, violent racism became politically unacceptable, and the movement in many ways highlighted the paradoxical character of the American Creed, its bothersome calculus of racial intolerance and democracy. Particularly after the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, ideas of physiological hierarchy and particularity lost influence, and notions of human universality held sway, at least briefly. The civil rights movement exploited this larger intellectual and linguistic transition.

In this reading, it is commonplace to put the end or at least the decline of the modern civil rights movement somewhere in the mid 1960s. According to convention, the movement in the American South had achieved its basic objectives with national legislation: the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It thus lost a good deal of its moral clarity (basic constitutional rights achieved, racism became far more difficult to show clearly, becoming elusively systemic). Frequently cited as well is the fact that the movement splintered as its older establishment, led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC, foundered, struggling to refocus and reformulate its tactics to reflect vaguely emerging, contested objectives, while the younger corps of activists, especially those in SNCC, became impatient with the nonviolent emphasis and old fashioned black church religiosity of King and his cohort. This split between younger and older activists corresponded to an intellectual and tactical split between black power/black nationalist particularity and liberal Christian universality.[39] No doubt, these explanations are relevant, but leave open many questions about why this process occurred, particularly apart from the traditional narrative or script.

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[39] See Chapter four.

As an answer for these questions in light of the images of protest themselves, three

overlapping factors prove the most telling. First, many African Americans grew impatient

with nonviolent direct action, finding it increasingly difficult to make the connections

between the Christian love ethic (or King's agape love) and a politics of self-respect,

particularly given exhaustive portrayals of African Americans as victims. Second,

spontaneity, or at least the appearance of spontaneity, was lost in the nonviolent protest as

authorities adjusted their tactics in response to the activists so that violence was no longer

the central feature of civil rights imagery. Finally, the coverage and then memorializing

of the movement in modern forms desiccated the nonviolent protest as an artifact rather

than an article of pure experience, revealing a basic tension between modern reportage,

the subjectivity of human experience, and the nonviolent ethos, particularly as theorized

about by its primary proponents.

The novelist James Baldwin, though often considered a spokesperson of sorts for

the civil rights movement, notoriously had little patience for Christianity or the black

church (for example, "there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and

despair"). Nor was Baldwin convinced about the absolute, positive value of nonviolent

direct action. For Baldwin, Malcolm X's black nationalist rhetoric rang true in many

cases, "I, in any case, refuse to be put in the position of denying the truth of Malcolm's

statements simply because I disagree with his conclusions, or in order to pacify white

liberal conscience." He also recognized the tremendous discipline and patience required

for nonviolent direct action to work, something not required of white opponents:

> there *is* no reason that black men should be expected to be more patient,
> more forebearing, more farseeing than whites; indeed, quite the contrary.
> The real reason nonviolence is considered a virtue in Negroes—I am not
> speaking now of its racial value, another matter altogether—is that white

men do not want their lives, their self-image, or their property threatened.[40]

Writing in 1962, Baldwin captured the feelings of some African Americans, particularly radicals, who wondered why nonviolence was a necessary prerequisite for an expression of a black politics of self respect. While Baldwin never saw fit to illuminate entirely his allusion to "the racial value" of nonviolent direct action (one might consider the analysis in the first section of this essay an effort to fill this curious omission), he recognized that "white men" did not feel threatened by the tactic: the stated goals of most civil rights protests did not make demands on white economic status. Moreover, while Baldwin did not comment extensively on the reaction of the spectator who might watch the violence that nonviolent tactics coerced, most television watchers sensed the basic humanity, or "personhood" (to apply the movement's own language) of those being attacked, construing them as victims, but they may not have understood nor known completely about the depth of black grievances against forms of white authority, in the South or nationwide. Of course, this problem of victim-hood or damage imagery would reach its critical height three years after Baldwin published his analysis, with the appearance of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report, "The Negro Family" A Case for National Action." Many white liberals proved unwilling or unable to conceive of black people as anything else than victims of what Moynihan blithely described, quoting Kenneth Clark, as a "tangle of pathology" resulting from a long history of oppression beginning in slavery.[41]

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[40] (Emphasis Baldwin's) James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial, 1962): 73.

[41] See chapter four. Also Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, eds. *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967): 48-49. It bears mentioning here that the most controversial portion of Moynihan's report, "The Roots of the Problem (61-73)" dealing with the issue of

Such criticisms of nonviolence can be read through the medium of the lynching and "A Party Down at the Square" with provocative but important results. In effect, the use of the camera during the nonviolent demonstration inspired revulsion in those who watched, but also fascination, rather like the experience of Ellison's white boy from Cincinnati. The photo below (figure 3), taken in 1964, shows a cameraman filming an interracial group of people coming to the aid of an injured woman. [42]

Figure three

The cameraman does not assist, but follows the action, and members of the group look in his direction. While such images shocked many observers, they also fetishized black suffering for mass consumption, effectively counteracting the efforts of activists

slavery and making use of Stanley Elkins' (as summarized by Thomas Pettigrew) positing of a "Sambo" personality, while emphasizing damage, also emphasized the ability of African-Americans to persevere under the most dire of circumstances. Still, it was not clear to what extent Moynihan believed slavery and the "Sambo" mentality was a singular *cause* of African-American deviance and damage. Nonetheless, the association Moynihan made in this regard was explosive given its lack of clarity. In many ways he misread and misapplied Elkin's ideas and for this reason he and Elkins weathered a good deal of criticism. For a reevaluation of Elkins' *Slavery* in light of this controversy, see Richard H. King, "Domination and Fabrication: Rethinking Stanley Elkins' Slavery," *Slavery and Abolition* 22 (August 2001): 1-28. On the prevalence of "damage" imagery in the social sciences in particular, Daryl Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[42] April, 28, 1964 staff photo by Frank Empson taken for *The Tennessean*; it never appeared.

and organizers to encourage self-respect and personhood. In other words, the tactics of nonviolent direct action simultaneously humanized and individualized the black body as an object of suffering while the camera's eye marketed suffering in such a way as to create caricatures of black people as victims. While a substantial departure from the ghoulish souvenir gathering of the lynching party, these images arguably performed a similar function in the public ritual—communal solidarity through mass consumption. So aspects of the movement's repertoires of protest worked at cross purposes, giving the demonstration paradoxical and volatile meanings subject to numerous interpretations by different groups of individuals. With Birmingham and Selma concluded, Moynihan was just on the horizon. Interestingly enough, this reading makes it possible to conceive of Black Power/Black Nationalism not as a direct departure or aberration from the mainstream civil rights movement, but an organic product of it, an inevitable outcome of the conflicted meanings of the images that proliferated following the most prominent civil rights demonstrations.

Second, in practical terms, civil rights movement demonstrations became commonplace and lacking in spontaneity because authorities were able to adjust to the tactics in question. After a mixed record of success and failure in organizing and employing nonviolent tactics in the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike (less than four years after the movement had accomplished its major goals), James Lawson lamented the changes in organizational etiquette. Lawson believed at least the "*appearance* of spontaneity" was necessary for successful protest. Though such spontaneity did occur in Memphis in at least one case, the decision was made by some leaders to keep city authorities abreast of the situation, the times and routes for marches.

Given that the city vowed to protect the protesters' freedom of assembly rather than

challenge its legality there was no chance for the release of social "forces," nor to put

these forces into the public space and compel them to confront one another. Lawson

contended that this was the arena where true change would occur because the "true" and

the "real" presented themselves in such situations. Though the outcome may be ugly or

violent, Lawson believed that "authentic" social forces had to be dealt with in a political

space with an element of spontaneity.[43]

      This lack of spontaneity and the ability of authorities to anticipate nonviolent

protest rendered this type of protest a "safe" political cause, replete with elaborate staging

including a tendency toward consumer-oriented forms of promotion. Naipaul's Hosea

Williams for example (the civil rights activist, leader of the Bloody Sunday March in

Selma in 1965 and close SCLC companion of Martin Luther King, Jr.) self-promotes in

the absence of a vibrant movement, thus "existing in a special kind of electronic reality or

unreality."[44] In other words, the script now largely set in advance, and violence rare,

nonviolent demonstrations now compete with other newsworthy items for coverage. (One

wonders if the civil rights demonstration would have had the same impact if media

outlets were as large, complex, and diverse as they are today.)

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[43] Emphasis mine; James Lawson, transcript of interview on August 21, 1969. SSP, Box 22, Folder 135. Doug McAdam points out that the SCLC's Albany Campaign of 1962 followed a similar pattern, though authorities did not make agreements in advance with the protesters. Nonetheless, Chief Laurie Pritchett's refusal to use violence against protesters rendered their efforts far less successful. McAdam, *Political Process*, 177-178.

[44] Naipaul, *A Turn in the South*, 28.

Nonviolence, Medium, and Message

When it was first invented, photography or the film camera were investigated as a way to capture motion or real time events, and the civil rights demonstration reflected this modern, realist interest. Reporters of civil rights attempted to capture instances of real time, invariably depicting violence, but conditioned by the format of modern newscasts, the necessity of editing, and choices of the photographer or cameraperson. Inevitably photographs, but more importantly, television newscasts, are not unmediated signifieds. Captions and narrative stories accompany news photographs. Television journalism is similarly framed, so that moving images inhabit a place in an individual piece or story, which exist within a larger, structured format. "Breaking news" may interrupt planned programming on television, creating odd juxtapositions or more fortunate ones, an accidental narrative structure of sorts. Breaking news of the violence on the Pettis Bridge, for example, interrupted the program "Judgment at Nuremburg" on ABC. The parallels obviously were not lost on most viewers of the events in May of 1965 nor were the ghostly qualities of the pictures that emerged. As one viewer of the events in Selma accounted for what he saw: "The pictures were nor particularly good. With the cameras rather far removed from the action and the skies partly overcast everything that happened took on the quality of an old newsreel. Yet this very quality, vague and half-silhouetted, gave the scene the immediacy of a dream."[45] Dreamt or imagined, but not truly seen, with almost overwhelming consistency the images of violence offered on television and in photographs showed stoic, well groomed African Americans being brutally attacked. As narrative, this translates to a simplistic reading of the civil rights

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[45] George B. Leonard "Midnight Plane to Alabama: Journey of Conscience," in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle, 1954-1990*. Clayborne Carson, David Garrow, et.al. eds. (New York: Penguin, 1991): 213.

movement: long, patient struggle and forbearance of the type Baldwin found so problematic, far different from the urban violence that Moynihan, for example, believed had alienated countless Americans. Moreover, parties down at the square, featuring the iconic image of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a central figure in an American and even worldwide popular historical narrative (now complete with a national holiday) obscured the diverse forms of protest and organizing that typified the movement. As with lynching, where highly choreographed, ritualized public displays constituted only a small minority of white on black vigilante murder, so Birmingham and Selma caricatured the efforts of countless, largely unnoticed activists.

In theoretical terms, when experiencing a nonviolent protest, James Lawson (ideally at least) believed that practitioners might inhabit what theologian Rudolph Otto coined the "numinous" realm, an experience of the holy separated from the intellect or from the rational—existentially *a priori* in status, what William James called "a feeling of an objective presence more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed."[46] Yet nonviolent direct action also had more pragmatic qualities. Lawson consistently contended that the forces of protest must be more disciplined and organized than the forces of authority. It was "A kind of American myth, that self-defense means that I have a stick in my hand."[47] Instead, nonviolence for the civil rights educator was the most effective way to deal with the unexpected; it was a creative lifestyle or method to harness the "truth" or the authentic "human element" in experience. As a pragmatic tactical method of *doing* rather than an abstract or fixed set of rules or

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[46] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995 [1902]): 58.
[47] Lawson, SSP, Box 22, Folder 135.

guidelines, Lawson's human element appeared to involve a specious present (or quite possibly what Otto termed a *numen praesens*).[48] In other words, human beings conceptualize their experience of time or of the present tense in past tense terms. The "being there" quality of events is inaccessible to us as a form of language (despite more than a few philosophers' torturous shots at explaining it). Lawson believed that nonviolent direct action was a creative style of life that was infinitely adaptable to changing circumstances as present time events triggered immediate, disciplined, potentially non-conceptual responses. If taught in the proper way, the nonviolent protester could make the present political through use of creative physical tactics, learned in advance of those telling moments of conflict, so that the "truth" might reveal itself, in a very elemental way, before the process of evaluation began.[49] Lacking the customary weapons of defense (a gun or a stick in the hand) nonviolence demanded creative and immediate physical activity.

As we remember civil rights through the medium of videotaped footage and archived pictures the vibrancy in Lawson's formulation of the meaning of nonviolent direct action becomes lost, an artifact. No doubt this is a problem of the historical act itself (the historian cannot capture, as much as he or she may try through various means, the pure experience of an event); it is inevitably shaped by memory and retrospective analysis. In short, that quality which made the civil rights protest so modern and effective, coverage by and manipulation of the modern media, was mitigated by a philosophy of nonviolence that drew from Christian mystical thought, which drew largely from modern sources, though was pre-modern in its insistent present-centered way of

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[48] Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, John Harvey trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950): 11.

[49] On the "human element," Lawson, Sanitation Strike Project, Box 22, Folder 137.

interpreting the dynamics of religious experience. The philosopher Nelson Goodman

captures this crisis in nominalist terms (the belief that only individual objects of

perception have existential status as opposed to universal concepts):

> To make a faithful picture, come as close as possible to copying the
> object just as it is. This simple-minded injunction baffles me; for the
> object before me is a man, a swarm of atoms, a complex of cells, a
> fiddler…If all are ways the object is, then none is *the way* the object
> is…the world is in many ways as it can be truly described, seen, pictured,
> etc., and there is no such things as *the way* the world is.[50]

The film camera cannot capture "the way" an object it is, because an object has no "way"

about it. As Rudolph Otto contended that those who never experienced moments of deep

religious feeling would fail to understand his inquiry, those who watched images of

nonviolence could only imagine the events, applying their own limited, distorted

interpretations, undermining the hopes of Lawson and those like him who sought to

realize the "beloved community: a revolution in the way people lived and thought. We

remain locked in the prison of our perceptions, despite efforts to theorize some realm of

objective yet possibly shared reality. On its face, this seems patently obvious, but is

nonetheless important given that spectator responses would prove largely ephemeral.

Civil rights was yet another crisis in an era of crises. (Vietnam would soon dominate

television screens.)

  The end product of the memorialization process that followed the demonstrations

was a civil rights movement with the character of a script or a narrative with a mythology

all its own. Key civil rights activists and their supporters attempted and attempt to

negotiate and control their images for public consumption. Intellectuals interpreted it in

numerous ways with varying results. Today, the King family zealously defends the

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[50] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1968): 6.

memory of the movement's slain leader, and Rosa Parks enters legal battles with rap groups.[51] While nonviolent demonstrations were extremely effective in accomplishing at least some of the movement's goals, the conflicted, volatile nature of these "parties down at the square" contained within them the complexities that plague racial politics in America today. The nonviolent protest, when effective, harnessed violence by using and reversing key symbols from America's violent, racially charged past, recasting the terms of the lynching ritual. Yet it left some of the dynamics of that past unresolved given that nonviolence, especially when viewed by others through modern forms of media, became subject to a variety of competing and contested meanings. Today, we are left with an essentially contested idea of the civil rights movement, in some quarters expansive in its aims and in others limited or definitively over. This is the conflicted legacy of the integration of the American mind.

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[51] For the Rosa Parks—Outkast case, see chapter two.

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