How New York Changes the Story of The Civil Rights Movement
Martha Biondi
Afro - Americans in New York Life and History; Jul 2007; 31, 2; Ethnic NewsWatch (ENW)
pg. 15

How New York Changes the Story of The Civil Rights Movement.

Martha Biondi[1]

When most people say "the civil rights movement" they are referring to the struggle against southern Jim Crow. They don't think to call it the southern civil rights movement because the southern-ness of the movement is taken for granted. But we actually should call it the southern civil rights movement, because there was a northern civil rights movement that needs to be recognized and understood on its own unique terms. The southern civil rights movement was preceded for over a decade by the northern civil rights movement. This northern civil rights movement had as its major center, New York City. The movement arose during the mass migration of Black southerners in the 1940s, which gave New York the largest urban black population in the world.

The early civil rights movement in New York is the story of Jackie Robinson to Paul Robeson to Malcolm X, a trajectory from integrationist optimism to Black Nationalist critique, with a flourishing African American left at its center. Since this trajectory foreshadows what would happen nationally in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the move from liberalism to Black Power, the early experience in New York has much to teach us about activism and resistance in the urban North. Yet despite this significance, the northern civil rights movement has been largely "forgotten," and omitted from the standard narrative of the U. S. Civil Rights Movement.[2]

In this essay I will provide some examples of the multiple struggles of the New York civil rights movement, but my primary focus will be to explain why they matter, and to illustrate how the northern movement alters the larger portrait of the American Civil Rights Movement. First, I want to emphasize that it is not new to assert that the civil rights struggle

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

was a national movement. Indeed, we know from historian Clarence Taylor that the largest civil rights boycott of the era took place in New York City in 1964 when 465,000 children stayed home from school to protest racial segregation.[3] But typically, the urban North and West enter the historical narrative after 1965 with the urban uprisings, the Black Panther Party, the Black Arts movement, campus rebellions, and Black feminism. So we have a portrait of the civil rights movement in the south, and the 'Black Liberation movement' happening later in the North and West.

Revising the chronology and geography of the Civil Rights Movement has many implications. For one, it makes us re-think the geography of racial segregation in the US. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision had national reach and authority. It not only legitimized segregation in the South, but anywhere it might be imposed in the United States. Such major national institutions as the military, interstate train and bus lines, federal public housing, major league baseball, YMCAs, and indeed the federal government itself practiced racial discrimination. And states all over the country permitted hotels, restaurants, realtors, swimming pools, landlords, employers and banks to openly and systematically practice racial discrimination.

To be sure, scholars have documented northern segregation since the antebellum period, but writing on the civil rights movement still tends to frame the story of segregation in an exclusively southern context. The black migration propelled the civil rights movement, in part because the massive northern and western shift of the African American population brought into greater public view, and into the consciousness and experience of the migrants themselves, that American apartheid was national rather than regional, and was dynamic and capable of expansion. Segregation in New York was not only widespread and lawful, but government and public policy sanctioned it and helped to create it: there were whites-only signs in Manhattan apartment buildings, racially restrictive covenants in property across the region, whites-only classified job advertisements, whites-only hotels and restaurants in the heart of Manhattan, and segregated seat assignments by American Airlines at La Guardia.[4]

The agenda of the New York civil rights movement, or as activists called it, "the struggle for Negro Rights," was more expansive than the agenda of the southern civil rights movement. In this regard, it is critical to remember that the northern civil rights movement began before

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

McCarthyism and Cold War liberalism shut the door on more throughgoing critiques of American society. African American activists in the 1940s struggled and theorized over police violence and defendants rights, economic restructuring and job flight, affirmative action, colonialism, poverty, inferior and exclusionary housing, Black representation in government, racist textbooks, and discriminatory banking policies, to name only a few.

The "struggle for Negro rights" began with as much focus on social and economic rights as on civil and political rights. This is an extremely important point to appreciate, since it is commonly asserted that "the civil rights movement did not address economic issues." But the northern civil rights movement certainly did—although this does not mean that such goals were realized. If there was a source of advocacy in the United States for western European style social democracy it came most consistently and vigorously from Black leadership, notwithstanding their awareness of the racial exclusions in the New Deal state.

African American activists in New York called for full employment, guaranteed by the government, affordable housing, guaranteed by the government, government subsidized day care, universal health care, criminal justice reform, an end to bank redlining, and full and complete equality in all aspects of life. Significantly, they asserted the right to have a job as much as the right to equal opportunity. African American political activists, shaped as they were by the rigid and pervasive exclusion of black people from the private sector—whether in private universities, hospitals, workplaces, or homes, vigorously advocated for an expanded and inclusive public sector. Foreshadowing a group like SNCC, the northern movement was also defined by its rejection of gradualism. "Freedom Now!" would be the slogan later, but in 1945, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the first African American elected to Congress from New York, declared, "the Negro people will be satisfied with nothing short of complete equality—political, economic, educational, religious and social."[5]

New York challenges the prevailing assumption that segregation in the North is "de facto" a result of market forces or the private actions of whites, rather than government laws or public policy. This view of northern segregation tends to relieve the state of responsibility for producing racial equality and it promotes the idea that racial segregation is too difficult to thwart. Racial exclusion and domination in New York was more than de facto—indeed the category itself is a political and legal

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

construction that functions in part to conceal the state's role in authorizing racial preference in the "private" sector. For example, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company built Stuyvesant Town, the largest urban redevelopment project in the nation, under a state law that authorized an unprecedented transfer of state resources for a for-profit venture, including a 25 year tax exemption, the ceding of public streets and the condemnation of private property, leading to the forced removal of ten thousand people. Met Life also officially restricted the development, located in the heart of Manhattan, to whites only. A campaign to desegregate Stuyvesant Town took ten years and launched the American fair housing movement, but the courts were no friends to civil rights in this case. The state's highest court concluded that there was no state action in the operation of Stuyvesant Town, despite all of this state largesse, and so as a private enterprise, not subject to the 14th Amendment, Stuyvesant Town was free to practice racial discrimination in tenant selection. In 1950 the US Supreme Court let the ruling stand. These decisions performed an erasure of the state's role in authorizing and facilitating segregation.

In addition to exposing the large potential for Jim Crow to spread, the migration also set in motion a political mobilization to stop it. The migrant generation launched what became known as "the second reconstruction." They fought to change the North and the nation--to halt the further spread of segregation as the Black migration continued. The first civil rights laws since Reconstruction were passed in New York City and state, including the first fair housing, employment, and education laws. These inspired similar laws in dozens of other states, and became models for national legislation in the 1960s. The migration was a momentous circulation and relocation of people, families, and communities and it generated new exposures, altered perspectives, raised expectations, and encouraged activism.

We know that leaving the South and then returning to it, was significant in shaping the activism of people such as Amzie Moore, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Robert F. Williams, and many others. Since this was often a consequence of military conscription and service overseas, the effect of travel and relocation on women's activism is somewhat neglected, but the return visits to the South of female migrants discloses it. Fully a decade before Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery bus, many African American women traveling on interstate trains refused to change seats when they

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

crossed the Mason Dixon line. These travelers endured violence and intimidation to vindicate their rights. Like Ida B. Wells in the 19th century, they are part of a long line of African American women who went to court to claim their right to sit wherever they wanted on a public carrier.

In 1945 Nina Beltran and her five year-old son boarded a southbound train at Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan. In North Carolina, a conductor told all the Black passengers to move to the Jim Crow car. Encumbered by her baggage and small son, Mrs. Beltran had a difficult time reaching the car, and by the time she did, there were no seats left. Desiring to sit down, and having bought the same ticket as everybody else, she returned to her original seat and faced the conductor's wrath. At the next stop, the conductor called in a police officer who punched Mrs. Beltran, shoved her son, and forced then into the overcrowded so-called "colored car." Back in New York, Beltran sued and she eventually won $3,000.

In 1946 Mrs. Berta Mae Watkins of Harlem purchased a ticket to occupy a reserved seat to Florida. In Jacksonville, railroad agents ordered her to move and when she refused they called the police. Mrs. Watkins saw her action as part of a larger struggle. She said, "For my interest in this case is not only what can or may be gotten out of it financially, but to let the Southern Whites know that about thirteen million or more Negro men and women have gotten tired of being pushed around at their commands," She also won her case, and a thousand dollar settlement. The railroad companies wanted to find a way to continue segregation but avoid all these confrontations and lawsuits. So officials at Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan began to assign southbound Black passengers to Jim Crow cars in New York. Well, this was quickly discovered and it led to a major showdown. Penn Station at first defended its actions, insisting it was for the convenience of Black passengers. But the political mobilization of Black New York forced them to retreat. As one minister said, "Perhaps we cannot do too much about conditions in Georgia, but there is no reason why anyone boarding a train in New York should be segregated."[6]

One of the major consequences of the omission of the northern civil rights movement from the narrative of the civil rights movement is that labor has been neglected. In many ways, the New York movement was a labor-civil rights movement. Unions and workers were as important as churches and ministers in leading the struggle. And issues important to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

African American workers were at the center of the movement's agenda. When the northern civil rights movement began the labor movement was at the height of its political power in the United States. The entry of a million black workers into the CIO at this politically auspicious moment had a profound impact on Black communities and civil rights leadership.

There arose a new generation of African American labor activists whose goal was to make the labor movement a weapon in the fight for racial justice. They had a dual agenda: to make the labor movement pro-civil rights and to make the civil rights movement pro-labor and worker centered. The war had led to the biggest jump in black earnings since emancipation. Civil rights leaders mobilized to preserve this newly won piece of the industrial pie. They made the fight for economic inclusion the number one focus of civil rights activism. For black women workers, the stakes were even higher. Wartime job opportunities had finally given them a chance to break out of the low pay, condescension and sexual harassment of domestic service. One could even argue that the northern civil rights movement was spawned from Black women's determination not to be forced to labor as cooks or maids after the war.[7]

New York adds to our understanding of the history of affirmative action as a strategy to desegregate workplaces. Affirmative action was not a departure from an original but thwarted integration strategy. It was the methodology of the struggle for jobs waged by Black migrants in the urban North. Numerical or proportionate hiring goals and statistical measures to assess outcomes characterized the fair employment struggle from its inception—they were used in the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" boycotts that arose during the Depression to pressure businesses in Black neighborhoods to hire Black workers. After World War II many Black trade unionists (especially in left-wing unions) advocated affirmative action to protect the jobs won during the war.

After New York State passed antidiscrimination laws in employment, education and housing a clash developed between civil rights leaders and the administration of Republican Governor Thomas E. Dewey over the nature of their implementation. Conservatives argued then, much as they do now, that civil rights laws are no guarantee of equality of representation, or even of access. In its first decade, the new State Commission against Discrimination adopted the rhetoric of a "color-blind" state and a strategy of passivity. What happened in essence was that civil rights laws were passed, and then barely enforced. Black leaders were alarmed. They urged the state to conduct industry-wide

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

investigations and use race-conscious strategies and statistics to judge compliance. Reflecting the worldview of their New Deal generation, they saw the law as an instrument of social change that made government into an active agent in the desegregation process.[8]

New York, then, provides a preview of what would happen across the nation after Congress passed antidiscrimination laws and a national clash over enforcement and the push for affirmative action began. New York was the location of both the first civil rights victories and the first post-civil rights disappointments. A further illustration of this, which also prefigured and forecast national political developments in the 1960s, was the emergence in the later 1950s of a Black Nationalist critique of the inadequacies and betrayals of postwar urban liberalism. While there are many who voiced this critique, including Carlos Cooks and James Lawson, the best known is Malcolm X. On the eve of the March on Washington when the southern civil rights movement was at its peak and the federal government was on the verge of breaking with Jim Crow, Malcolm X declared, "the government has failed us." While some might marginalize this as a characteristically bleak Nationalist trope, it is not so different from what Kenneth Clark, and other leading integrationists, said a year later when Harlem exploded in one of the first riots of the decade.[9]

New York makes us appreciate that the network of African American activism in the Civil Rights era was national. New York was not only a battleground for local change, it was also a movement center from which broader struggles were waged or supported. The massive migration destabilized southern white supremacy, and spawned antiracist mobilizations in the North that created a national solidarity network. The postwar campaigns against lynching, the poll tax, and for a national fair employment law were all based in New York City. This portrait however, tends to go against the grain of localism in southern civil rights scholarship. Many scholars have stressed the local character and roots of the southern civil rights movement and its reliance on the internal resources of the African American community, partly to counter the tendency of journalists to emphasize the agency of the federal government in racial reform. Local roots have also been stressed because segregationists castigated civil rights activists as "outside agitators" and "communists." But, appreciating the southern, or national, indeed international consciousness and orientation, of the New York civil rights movement, puts New Yorkers like Harry Belafonte, Bayard Rustin, Clarence Jones, Ella Baker, Stokely Carmichael, Bob Moses, and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Julian Mayfield who gave enormous aid, solidarity and support to the southern struggle against Jim Crow, into a longer historical narrative and a larger political map.[10]

The African American struggle in New York was part of the global rise of people of color after World War II. Activists in New York endorsed colonial freedom, and attacked the efforts of the European empires to reassert their power in Africa and Asia. So for example, that a candidate seeking to become the first Black state senator in New York in 1946, called for a free India, Caribbean self-determination, a strong United Nations, plus full employment, open housing, and end to police brutality, was not exceptional or unusual, but typical. There was a fluid link between local issues and international concerns in postwar New York politics. Moreover, in contrast to the southern civil rights strategists who needed to make the federal government their ally in the fight against states rights, northern activists, especially leftists, were more willing to name federal complicity in Jim Crow, and to ruffle the feathers of Washington in overseas advocacy. Paul Robeson is, perhaps, the best example of this, but he is one of many.

New York is widely seen as a bastion of liberalism in the United States, especially socially and culturally. But it's really the robust movement culture of the city, rather than its dominant culture, which has generated this image. The rise of New York City as a cosmopolitan global capitol was a legacy of the New York Civil Rights Movement. As the home of the new United Nations, segregated Manhattan social and cultural life would need to change. And this was, to a large degree, made possible by the struggles of Black New Yorkers to desegregate places of public accommodation, transportation networks, cultural institutions, and the media. The outcome of their efforts was not preordained, and activists faced considerable resistance, even violence. In scores of lawsuits and picket lines, in the 1940s and 1950s Black New Yorkers pushed open the doors of Manhattan and Brooklyn hotels, restaurants, swimming pools, skating rinks, and nightclubs.

Because the Northern civil rights struggle has not been sufficiently conceptualized, historians have tended to exaggerate white liberalism in order to explain the dramatic emergence of race in the postwar Democratic Party. It's common, for example, for President Harry S. Truman, much like Branch Rickey, to be portrayed as a man ahead of his time on civil rights issues. But Truman's endorsement of a civil rights platform in the 1948 presidential election was a result of Black political

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

mobilization and the civil rights movement, especially the anti-lynching struggle. Just as race would be a major issue in the 1964 presidential election due to the southern civil rights movement, it was a major issue in the 1948 election due to the northern civil rights movement. In fact these dates are signposts that delineate the arc of the movement. The first major case that revived the national anti-lynching movement after World War II occurred not in the South but in Long Island. Four brothers Charles, Alphonzo, Richard and Joseph Ferguson were out for an evening in February 1946 in Freeport, Long Island. The Ferguson brothers were enjoying a reunion. Charles and Alphonzo were US army soldiers, Joseph was in the Navy and Richard was the lone civilian. A white manager of a coffee shop refused to serve them coffee and called the police when they protested. When the rookie white police officer arrived, he began arguing with the brothers and ordered them and a passerby, also African American to line up. The officer, Joseph Romeika, abruptly fired his weapon, killing Charles and Alphonzo, and wounding Joseph. Immediately after the shootings police amassed in the area, readied with tear gas to prevent, according to the police chief, "a possible uprising of local Negroes."

Richard Ferguson was tried and convicted a few hours later. The Judge said, "Four fellows going out looking for trouble are going to get just what they are looking for. I want to commend any Police Officer who can keep trouble away from this Village." The next day, the District Attorney called the shooting "unquestionably justified." And in short order an all-white Grand Jury cleared Romeika.

His exoneration sparked a five-month protest campaign to pressure Governor Thomas Dewey to appoint a special prosecutor. Activists used the political rivalry between Dewey and Truman—who would face off in the presidential election two years later—as leverage. The US army ruled that Charles Ferguson was shot in the line of duty and he was buried with full military honors. Dewey responded by opening an investigation of the killings, but the police officer was never punished. Nor would the Justice Department intervene. The Supreme Court had promulgated a virtually unattainable standard of intent. This redoubled the national mobilization for a federal anti-lynching law, which would strengthen the power of federal government to intervene in local jurisdictions.[11]

New York activists led the American Crusade to End Lynching to the nation's capital. The trip culminated in a heated exchange in the oval

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

office between Paul Robeson and President Harry Truman. Robeson told the president, "Negro war veterans who fought for freedom want to know that they can have freedom in their own country," and demanded federal action to stop racial violence. Robeson raised two alternatives that alarmed the president. One was armed self-defense. Robeson said that unless the government did something to stop lynching and police brutality, African Americans would do it themselves. Secondly, Robeson warned there would be international scrutiny of US human rights violations at the United Nations.

Truman called Robeson's strategy unpatriotic, and told him that American dirty laundry should not be aired to international audiences. Still, Robeson's strategy, which played upon US foreign policy concerns, as the nation was asserting itself as the leader of the free world in competition with the Soviet Union, which cast itself as the advocate of the colonized and subject masses, would be increasingly used, and was not without effect: Cold War pressures were one factor explaining the Democratic Party's shift to civil rights during the 1948 presidential election. But the enfranchisement of African American migrants in the North and West and their political mobilization, was another. In response to pressure from the anti-lynching movement, Truman appointed the President's Committee on Civil Right. Their report, *To Secure These Rights*, became a blueprint for legislative action for the next two decades, even though many of its proposals remain unfulfilled to this day. This document was a product, to a large degree, of the New York civil rights movement.[12]

Adding New York to the Civil Rights Movement puts the issue of racialized law enforcement at the center of our understanding of the civil rights agenda. Moreover, like so many issues of the northern movement, policing and the criminal legal system are as relevant today as they were then. The fight against police brutality and for criminal justice reform became a major component of the movement. After the war, there was an explosion of police violence against Black people. From 1947 to 1952 forty-six unarmed African Americans, and two whites, were killed by police officers in the state of New York. Activists developed a comprehensive agenda for criminal justice reform, including protection from unreasonable search and seizure, an end to police immunity from prosecution, a halt to coerced confessions, the creation of an independent civilian complaint review board, more Black police officers, an end to the media stereotyping of Black men as criminals, and better, fairer

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

policing of Black neighborhoods. The struggle aimed to extend the U. S. Constitution's Bill of Rights to state police procedure. They organized for a state law, for example, to make evidence obtained from illegal searches and seizures inadmissible in state court. This grassroots effort preceded the landmark Supreme Court rulings of the 1960s that extended the Bill of Rights to state criminal courts. New York was at the forefront of this extremely significant, but neglected, component of civil rights history.[13]

Integration is often characterized as the goal of the Civil Rights Movement—but this is not really accurate. The struggle in New York was for good jobs, democracy, justice, and complete equality—the phrase integration, with its connotation of assimilation or a melting pot, was rarely if ever used. The fight for better housing illustrates this point. It was a fight for the right to engage in unfettered property transactions and to accumulate capital; for the right to both live anywhere and to get better housing in Black neighborhoods. The goal was to strengthen individual opportunity and strengthen Black communities, not break them apart. Harlem property owners, for example, fought against the conspiracy by banks to starve Black neighborhoods of mortgage lending. Policies by the FHA and banks that restricted Black access to homeownership have worked powerfully to block the development of wealth intergenerationally in Black communities. Harlem leaders fought for legislation barring discrimination in mortgage lending and formed Carver Federal Savings and Loan in order to spur Black access to homeownership. Thus, it would be erroneous to conclude that the civil rights movement sought exclusively to break racial barriers to enter into white communities---the movement devoted as much if not more attention to improving housing within Black communities, especially in neighborhoods like Harlem which were not originally built for the poor, and had beautiful dwellings.[14]

African American antiracist protest has typically been labeled as either integrationist or nationalist, or some variation on this theme. But "the Struggle for Negro Rights," as Black New Yorkers called their movement, does not fit easily into these categories. It did share aspects of both: its primary goal was desegregation and full equality. But it also sought to strengthen the political power of black communities and it advocated race conscious forms of redress; moreover, activists did not seek assimilation into a supposedly color-less American identity. The

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

New York civil rights movement best fits into a different category, the Black radical tradition.

The Black radical tradition, or as Manning Marable has called it the transformationist tradition, is neglected in accounts of the Civil Rights/Black Liberation Movement, but it was highly influential, especially in the urban North and West.[15] The movement emerged during a period when the Communist influenced Left had a significant presence and influence in a range of reform movements in New York City. In order to appreciate both the left's stature and subsequent erasure, it is crucial to recognize that the struggle for African American rights began before McCarthyism, it began in an era when the left was a formidable force in reform circles. The leadership and participation of self-identified leftists or radicals should come as no surprise to students of twentieth century social movements in general or African American activism in particular.

New York radicals, such as Paul Robeson, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Ossie Davis, Ben Davis, Ada B. Jackson, Ewart Guinier, Hubert Delany, Hope Stevens, Shirley Graham, Charles Collins, Thelma Dale, Ferdinand Smith, Audley Moore, and WEB Du Bois, were deeply shaped by, and helped to construct, an internationalist, egalitarian, working class, Black politics. And they were not politically isolated or unique: they were emblematic of the times. Local civil rights groups such as the NAACP, African American trade unionists and community activists, even many ministers, worked openly in "Popular Front" style coalitions with Communist affiliated organizations or activists. To be sure, most African American activists, including even leftists, were not members of the Communist Party, far from it. But Harlem leaders used the considerable resources and infrastructure of the left—such as the American Labor Party, trade unions, or The People's Voice newspaper—to wage a struggle for racial justice. Moreover, the left rejected gradualism and embraced direct action tactics in the struggle for equal rights.

African American women played influential roles in the American left. The National Negro Congress was an important Popular Front antiracist organization that sought to widen job opportunities for Black women. Thelma Dale, later Thelma Perkins, was a leader of the Manhattan branch. A graduate of Howard University, in 1947 she wrote an essay called "The Status of Negro Women in the United States" in which she articulated ideas that would become hallmarks of Black

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

feminism. The "approximately six million Negro women in the United States" she wrote, "face the double oppression of both racial and sex discrimination." Black women who were "brought to this country as chattel slaves, and used for three hundred years of slavery as breeders and hard laborers," she declared, "have found it even more difficult to attain a position of equality either with white women or Negro men." Dale became the secretary of the Committee to Elect Negroes to Public Office formed in the wake of Henry Wallace's 1948 Progressive Party presidential bid. She spearheaded a successful effort to get the Party to nominate an African American woman as its vice presidential candidate in 1952. African American women activists such as Thelma Dale Perkins sought to imbue the civil rights and labor struggles with a vision that today we would call feminist, race conscious and social democratic.[16]

When the cold war began and the anticommunist campaign got underway, the civil rights movement's association with the left became a significant liability or vulnerability. It led to internal turmoil as trade unions and civil rights groups "purged" members who were associated with the left. This produced a culture of internal surveillance and monitoring in many labor, liberal, and civil rights organizations, and in some cases, strengthened the position of those who resisted racial reform. As a result of these tumultuous times, the strategy and politics in civil rights advocacy changed. Left-progressivism gave way to Cold War liberalism as the predominant paradigm for racial reform. The need to bury a left wing past explains, in part, why the 1940s civil rights movement was "forgotten." Activists needed to re-frame their movement in the language of American nationalism and patriotism. Civil rights organizations blanketed their appeals for racial justice with foreign policy justifications. Racial reform, they argued, would deny the Russians their favorite propaganda theme and help America win the Cold War.

Scholars of the Cold war and civil rights tend to either focus on the damage of the red scare, or the benefits of the Cold War on the effort to end Jim Crow in the United States. I see a more mixed result. On the one hand, the domestic red scare unleashed fear throughout society, set back reform movements of many stripes, and destroyed the careers of many prominent figures. For a time, it brought the northern civil rights movement to a halt. It also had devastating consequences for the southern civil rights movement, where Communists were more or less a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

phantom: laws against foreign subversion destroyed the NAACP in many parts of the south, J Edgar Hoover, used the threat of Communist infiltration to persuade President Kennedy to allow wiretaps and extensive surveillance of Dr. King. Hoover may have turned up infidelity rather than communist plots, but he used what he could in a never-ending crusade to thwart the movement and destroy the reputation of Dr. King. Similarly, when SNCC began to move in more radical directions after Freedom Summer, it was redbaited and donations declined from liberal groups, who were trained in the lock-step anticommunism of the era. Yet at the same time, the international cold war made the federal government worry that white supremacy would undercut its war against communism and hurt American efforts to win the allegiance of newly independent African and Asian nations. This gave civil rights activists new leverage to use in the desegregation struggle. However, this proved to be a more effective strategy for the southern civil rights movement rather than the northern civil rights movement. Not only did the southern civil rights movement coincide with decolonization and creation of African nation-states, but the Jim Crow South presented a more striking contrast to America's claim to be the leader of the free world, than the now post-civil rights North with its discourse of de facto segregation.[17]

The political conservatism of the 1950s, alongside the beginnings of deindustrialization and the spread of residential segregation, sharply curtailed the modest gains of the postwar civil rights movement, and set the stage for urban upheaval in the 1960s. Still, the New York civil rights movement left a significant legacy. All the issues that would be at the center of the uprisings of the 1960s, and that continue to resonate in urban politics, African American activists put at the center of municipal politics beginning in the 1940s: the fight against police brutality and for defendant's rights; the fight for more and better housing, as well unrestricted access to property anywhere in the city; the struggle for African American teachers and Black history in the public schools; the fight to expand and equalize government social spending, and the struggle to elect African Americans to office, including statewide office, which remains a particular challenge.

Finally, including New York (or the North/West) in the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement helps us imagine solutions to the continuing and in some cases, worsening racial disparities and inequalities that mark the contemporary U.S. It is often said that in contrast to the myriad

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

challenges of the present, the fight against Jim Crow was relatively straightforward. Bull Connor or George Wallace were obvious and clear proponents of racial domination, whereas identifying and remedying today's injustices is said to be more complex. But activists in the New York civil rights struggle always saw racial inequality as complex, and as deeply entwined with other systems of hierarchy, exclusion and domination. They were committed to a political analysis that took into account the multifaceted nature of political subjectivity, and to imagining remedies that addressed the full scope of human needs and aspirations. Viewing the Civil Rights Movement in this light helps us avoid seeing it as a transcendent moment outside of history, and instead puts it into conversation with political movements that both preceded and followed it. In many ways, the roots of the black power movement lie here, in the complicated aftermath of the suppression of the left and the persistent white bias of American liberalism.

---

[1] Martha Biondi is a member of the African American Studies Department at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

[2] There has been on outpouring of scholarship on the northern and western civil rights movements, although most of it focuses on the 1960s and frames the story as a shift from liberalism to nationalism, leaving out or downplaying the left. Two excellent recent works are Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) and Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[3] Clarence Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

[4] See generally Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[5] Biondi, 16.

[6] Biondi, 85-6.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

[7] Biondi, 21-32. See also Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[8] Biondi, 105-108. See also Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: the Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[9] Biondi, 2.

[10] For an interesting example of scholarship that emphasizes both local roots and internationalism in the south, see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[11] Biondi, 61-7.

[12] Biondi, 68-9.

[13] Biondi, 74-78.

[14] Biondi, 229-241. See also Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[15] Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: the Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1982* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1984).

[16] Biondi, 26.

[17] For scholarship on the effects of the Cold War on civil rights reform see Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U. S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) and Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). For effects of anticommunism on SNCC, see James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997; 1972) For African independence see James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Are Africans:*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.