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A RETROSPECTIVE ON THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: Political and Intellectual Landmarks

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ABSTRACT

This review provides an analysis of the political and intellectual contributions made by the modern civil rights movement. It argues that the civil rights movement was able to overthrow the Southern Jim Crow regime because of its successful use of mass nonviolent direct action. Because of its effectiveness and visibility, it served as a model that has been utilized by other movements both domestically and internationally. Prior to the civil rights movement social movement scholars formulated collective behavior and related theories to explain social movement phenomena. These theories argued that movements were spontaneous, non-rational, and unstructured. Resource mobilization and political process theories reconceptualized movements stressing their organized, rational, institutional and political features. The civil rights movement played a key role in generating this paradigmatic shift because of its rich empirical base that led scholars to rethink social movement phenomena.

INTRODUCTION

What would America be like if we could turn back the clock to 1950? One thing is certain, the pre-civil rights movement era would stand in stark contrast to the America that currently exists just two years before the new millennium. In terms of race relations, the contrast is so sharp that we are justified to speak of a pre- and post- civil rights movement period. The civil rights movement is clearly one of the pivotal developments of the twentieth century. The task of

this chapter is to elucidate the factors that made this movement such an important force in America and abroad. The chapter also concerns itself with how the civil rights movement has affected the theoretical developments in the field of social movements. The first concern is to discuss why the civil rights movement was necessary in the first place.

The Jim Crow regime was a major characteristic of American society in 1950 and had been so for over seven decades. Following slavery it became the new form of white domination, which insured that Blacks would remain oppressed well into the twentieth century. Racial segregation was the linchpin of Jim Crow, for it was an arrangement that set Blacks off from the rest of humanity and labeled them as an inferior race (see Morris 1984:2). Elsewhere I characterized Jim Crow as a tripartite system of domination (Morris 1984) because it was designed to control Blacks politically and socially, and to exploit them economically. In the South, Blacks were controlled politically because their disenfranchisement barred them from participating in the political process. As a result, their constitutional rights were violated because they could not serve as judges nor participate as jurors.

Economically Blacks were kept at the bottom of the economic order because they lacked even minimal control over the economy. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, most rural Blacks worked as sharecroppers and hired hands where they were the victims of exploitation because of the unequal economic arrangements they were forced to enter. As Blacks migrated to Southern and Northern cities they found that their economic status did not change radically; in these settings they were forced onto the lowest rungs of the unskilled wage sectors. Therefore, "in 1950 social inequality in the work place meant that nonwhite families earned nationally 54% of the median income of white families" (Morris 1984:1).

The social oppression Blacks experienced prior to the civil rights movement was devastating. The Jim Crow system went to great lengths to impress on Blacks that they were a subordinate population by forcing them to live in a separate inferior society. Moreover, the fact that Blacks had to use separate toilets, attend separate schools, sit at the back of buses and trains, address whites with respect while being addressed disrespectfully, be sworn in on different bibles in the court room, purchase clothes without first trying them on, pass by "white only" lunch counter seats after purchasing food, and travel without sleep because hotels would not accommodate them—all these—resulted in serious psychological damage.

The role that violence and terror played against Blacks during the Jim Crow period has been documented. John Hope Franklin (1967) detailed the violence that white supremacist groups, including the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia, heaped upon African Americans. He wrote that such groups "used intimidation, force, ostracism in business and society, bribery at

the polls, arson, and even murder to accomplish their deeds” (Franklin 1967: 327). The lynch rope was one of the most vicious and effective means of terror used against Blacks. In a painstaking analysis of lynching in one Southern state, Charles Payne (1994) wrote that “between the end of Reconstruction and the modern civil rights era, Mississippi lynched 539 Blacks, more than any other state. Between 1930 and 1950—during the two decades immediately preceding the modern phase of the civil rights movement—the state had at least 33 lynchings” (1947:7).

As late as the 1950s the Jim Crow regime remained firmly intact, effectively oppressing the Southern Black population. Earlier in the century W.E.B. DuBois had predicted that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line (DuBois 1903). By the 1950s racial realities suggested that the color line was not likely to undergo substantial change during the twentieth century. As late as the 1940s, the majority of white Americans still held racist views that squarely supported white supremacy. Larry Bobo summarized the evidence:

The available survey data suggest that anti-Black attitudes associated with Jim Crow racism were once widely accepted. The Jim Crow social order called for a society based on deliberate segregation by race. It gave positive sanction to anti-Black discrimination in economics, education, and politics...All of this was expressly premised on the notion that Blacks were the innate intellectual, cultural and temperamental inferiors to whites (Bobo 1997:35).

In their heyday, systems of domination often appear unshakable. By 1950 the Jim Crow regime appeared to rest on a solid foundation of white supremacy capable of enduring indefinitely.

Beneath the placid appearance of permanent dominance there may exist substantial resistance. For the Black population such resistance had gathered steam long before 1950. It is often the case that students of protest overlook resistance until it becomes highly visible and threatens dominant interests. The inability to grasp such “subterranean” forces is more pronounced when the oppressed population is perceived as inferior and incapable of generating the agency required to transform domination. As I discuss later, this certainly was the case for African Americans. We now have nuance studies documenting the continuity of Black protest and Black insurgent ideologies. Vincent Harding’s (1983) study, *There Is A River*, details the numerous protests that African Americans initiated throughout the slave period and the radical visions associated with these struggles. George Fredrickson’s (1995) *Black Liberation*, does a masterful job documenting how African Americans developed radical ideologies from the nineteenth century to the present that have guided their struggles and played significant roles in liberation ideologies on the continent of Africa. These studies make clear that African Americans have long possessed

a protest tradition that is continually refashioned and interjected into new rounds of struggles.

Early years in the twentieth century African Americans launched protests directly attacking racial inequality. Between 1900 and 1906 Southern Blacks developed boycott movements against Jim Crow streetcars in most major cities of the South (Meier & Rudwick 1976:267–89). By the turn of the twentieth century Black women had organized local and national clubs through which they relentlessly fought both for the overthrow of Jim Crow and for women's rights (Collier-Thomas 1984:35–53). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909–1910. This was an important development because the NAACP was the first national protest organization organized specifically to attack the Jim Crow regime and racial inequality. It immediately began attacking the legal basis of racial subordination during the Jim Crow era (McNeil 1983, Tushnet 1987). The NAACP would win major legal cases against racial segregation throughout the first half of the twentieth century especially with regards to segregated schools.

Major developments occurred in the 1920s that challenged entrenched ideas of white supremacy and Black inferiority. The Garvey movement, organized in 1920, rapidly became the largest mass movement Black America had ever produced. Its main message was that Black people, Black culture, Black history and Africa were noble and that Black people had created great civilizations that rivaled Western civilization on every front. Garvey preached that Blacks should return to Africa. This praising of things Black flew directly in the face of white hegemonic beliefs. Large numbers of African Americans were receptive to this message. Otherwise the Garvey movement could never have developed into a major mass movement.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a major literary movement that carried a similar message. This movement produced what has come to be characterized as protest literature. It aimed at creating a “New Negro” who was proud of her Black heritage and prepared to fight for Black liberation. This protest theme was clearly represented in lines of Claude McKay's poem, “If We Must Die” where he declared, “Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe/ Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave/ And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!” (McKay 1963:31).

During this period Black protests accompanied the proliferating Black protest literature. Jaynes & Williams found that “between 1929 and 1941, Northern Blacks organized a series of ‘don't buy where you can't work’ campaigns in which white owned ghetto businesses were boycotted unless they agreed to hire Blacks” (Jaynes & Williams 1989). But it was a movement organized just a decade prior to the explosion of the modern civil rights movement that was the clearest harbinger of things to come. In the early 1940s A Philip Randolph organized the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). Randolph had be-

come convinced that a mass nonviolent movement of African Americans was the central force needed to overthrow racial inequality. Throughout 1941, Randolph, Black leaders, and organizers across America worked to build a Black nonviolent direct action movement (Garfinkel 1969). It was named the March on Washington Movement because Randolph decided to target racial discrimination in the defense industries by marching on Washington and the White House by the thousands. Such a mass march, he reasoned, would embarrass the nation and President Roosevelt who were in the midst of fighting racism abroad during World War II. On the eve of the March Randolph and Black leaders throughout the nation had organized thousands of Blacks who were prepared to march on Washington. The March never occurred because Roosevelt suspected that it was a real possibility that thousands of Blacks would march on his White House. On June 25, 1941 he issued an Executive Order that banned racial discrimination in the nation's defense industries. Thus, the very threat of protest by a massive Black nonviolent direct action movement bore fruit in the early 1940s.

Two sharply contrasting developments occurred in the early 1950s that severely threatened the Jim Crow system. They were the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case and the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955. In the *Brown* case the NAACP won a major Supreme Court ruling that declared racially segregated schools unconstitutional (Kluger 1975). This ruling literally swept away the legal grounds on which Jim Crow stood. African Americans were filled with hope by the ruling, believing that finally it was realistic for them to believe that legal racial segregation was on its deathbed. Morehouse College President, Benjamin Mays, captured the Black reaction when he stated "we all underestimated the impact of the 1954 decision... people literally got out and danced in the streets... The Negro was jubilant" (Mays Interview 1978). The Southern white power structure had a completely different reaction. They rebuked the Supreme Court for its decision, vowing never to integrate the schools nor to dismantle the Jim Crow regime. The *Brown* ruling caused sharp battle lines to be drawn between the white South and African Americans.

In August of 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen year old Black male from Chicago, was lynched in Money, Mississippi for whistling at a white woman (Whitefield 1988). The crime was extremely brutal, and it was a reminder to the Black community that whites would utilize all means, including murder, to uphold Jim Crow. An all-white jury exonerated Till's murderers of the crime. The black response to Till's lynching differed from the usual pattern. Till's mother and the Black press generated national publicity pertaining to the gross injustice of the lynching. Because of the widespread attention this lynching received, the brutality and raw racism of the Jim Crow regime were placed on a national stage where it was debated and denounced.

The generation of young Blacks who would lead the student wing of the modern civil rights movement was coming of age precisely at the time of Till's lynching. This murder played an important role in radicalizing them. They were shocked at the brutality of the crime and outraged when the murderers were allowed to go free by the white judicial system. Many of them began embracing ideas of activism because they themselves felt vulnerable. They were well aware that the white community and many adults within the black community refused to fight for justice. Thus, the Till lynching pushed them toward political activism (see Moody 1968, Ladner 1979, Whitfield 1988). The hope generated by the Brown Ruling and the outrage caused by Till's lynching, helped set the stage for the emergence of the modern civil rights movement.

Structural Prerequisites Of The Civil Rights Movement

Oppressed groups are not always in a position to generate change through social protest. Favorable social conditions play an important role in creating the circumstances conducive to protest. Social movement scholars (McAdam 1982, Tarrow 1994) have asserted that social protest is more likely to occur if there exists a favorable political opportunity structure. Such a structure had developed prior to the rise of the modern civil rights movement. As McAdam has argued (1982), by the time the civil rights movement began to unfold, Blacks had amassed a new level of political power because of the Northern Black vote. That vote could be used to push a Black agenda, especially given its emerging importance in presidential elections.

The politics of the Cold War was an additional factor making Black protest a viable option. The United States and the Soviet Union were locked in an intense battle to win over newly independent Third World countries, especially those in Africa. The issue of American racism was an impediment to an American foreign policy bent on persuading African nations to align themselves with America. Racism and democracy were opposing ideologies, and Black leaders were aware that America's treatment of Blacks could be a stumbling block in America's quest to become the major superpower. Wide-scale Black protest, therefore, stood a good chance of exposing the contradiction between racism and democracy.

The coming of age of modern communication technologies in the 1950s and early 1960s was another development that could be exploited by a Black protest movement. The widespread use of television was a case in point. As early as 1958, over 83% of American households owned television sets (Sterling & Kittross 1978). These technologies were capable of providing a window through which millions could watch Black protest and become familiar with the issues it raised. Likewise, by the early 1960s communications satellites

were launched into orbit. This development made it possible for Black protest to be viewed globally, thus enhancing its ability to affect the international arena.

A development internal to the Black community also increased the probability that widespread protest could be launched and sustained. This was the great migration that occurred during the period of the two World Wars and that continued throughout the 1950s. During this period large numbers of Blacks moved to cities in both the South and the North. This migration led to institution building especially within the Black Church and community organizations. These were the kinds of institutions through which protest could be organized and supported. The urban setting also provided the Black community with dense social networks through which social protest could be organized rapidly. In short, by the 1950s the Northern Black vote, the politics of the Cold War, the rise of modern communication technologies, and Black mass migration constituted favorable social conditions conducive to the rise of a massive Black movement.

The existence of favorable conditions does not guarantee that collective action will materialize. Agency is required for such action to occur. People must develop an oppositional consciousness that provides them with a critique of the status quo and reasons to believe that acting collectively will lead to change. They must develop the willingness to make sacrifices that may endanger their physical well being or cause them to lose jobs. They must be willing to devote time to collective action that may cause them to neglect or curtail other important but routine activities. Creativity is crucial to social movements because they require new ways of doing things and they thrive on innovations. People who participate in movements have to place themselves in learning situations where they can be taught to act creatively. Structural prerequisites may be conducive to collective action, but without human agency such conditions will not even be recognized, let alone exploited.

THE MODERN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The impact of the civil rights movement on race relations and the nation's social fabric has been monumental. This pivotal movement has had significant influence on social movements in a wide array of countries. The intent here is not to provide a detailed account of the modern civil rights movement. Such accounts are available in the vast literature that has emerged over the last twenty years (e.g. Carson 1981, Sitkoff 1981, McAdam 1982, Blumberg 1984, Morris 1984, Garrow 1986, Bloom 1987, Fairclough 1987, Branch 1988, Lawson 1991, Robnett 1997). The purpose here is to present an analysis of why this movement by a relatively powerless group was able to overthrow the formal Jim Crow system and how it became a model for other protest move-

ments here and abroad. My analysis draws heavily from the previously mentioned literature.

The most distinctive aspect of the modern civil rights movement was its demonstration that an oppressed, relatively powerless group, can generate social change through the widespread use of social protest. For nearly two decades, this movement perfected the art of social protest. The far ranging and complex social protest it generated did *not* emerge immediately. Rather it evolved through time making use of trial and error.

By the mid 1950s Southern Black leaders had not yet fully grasped the idea that the fate of Jim Crow rested in the hands of the Black masses. Even though protest against racial inequality occurred throughout the first half of the century, it tended to be localized and limited in scope. With the exception of the Garvey Movement and A Philip Randolph's March On Washington Movement (MOWM), the mass base of the prior protests was too restricted to threaten the Jim Crow order. Both the Garvey and MOWM movements had limited goals and were relatively short lived. By 1950 the legal method was the dominant weapon of Black protest, and it required skilled lawyers rather than mass action. The legal method depended on the actions of elites external to the Black community whereby Blacks had to hope that white judges and Supreme Court justices would issue favorable rulings in response to well-reasoned and well-argued court cases.

The 1955 Montgomery, Alabama, year-long mass-based bus boycott and the unfolding decade of Black protest changed all this. These developments thrust the power capable of overthrowing Jim Crow into the hands of the Black community. Outside elites, including the courts, the Federal Government, and sympathetic whites, would still have roles to play. However, massive Black protest dictated that those roles would be in response to Black collective action rather than as catalysts for change in the racial order. A decisive shift in the power equation between whites and Blacks grew out of the struggle to desegregate Alabama buses.

The Montgomery bus boycott revealed that large numbers of Blacks—indeed an entire community—could be mobilized to protest racial segregation. The Montgomery boycott demonstrated that protest could be sustained indefinitely: the boycott endured for over a year. The boycott revealed the central role that would be played by social organization and a Black culture rooted in a protest tradition, if protests were to be successful. The Black Church, which had a mass base and served as the main repository of Black culture, proved to be capable of generating, sustaining, and culturally energizing large volumes of protest. Its music and form of worship connected the masses to its protest tradition stemming back to the days of slavery.

Out of Montgomery came the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the first highly visible social movement organization (SMO) of direct

action protests. It was both church based and structurally linked to the major community organization of the Black community. A young Black minister, Martin Luther King, Jr., who came to personify the role of charismatic leader, was chosen to lead the movement. Finally, it was the boycott method itself that shifted power to the Black masses, for it required that large numbers of individuals engage in collective action. The requirement that the boycott adopt nonviolent direct action was crucial, for it robbed the white power structure of its ability to openly crush the movement violently without serious repercussions. The mass media, especially television, radio, and the Black press, as well as communication channels internal to the Black community, proved capable of disseminating this new development across the nation. A ruling by the Supreme Court, that declared bus segregation in Alabama unconstitutional, sealed the victory for the movement. It was clear, however, that the ruling was in response to Black protest and that Jim Crow could be defeated if the lessons of the Montgomery movement could be applied in movements across the South which targeted all aspects of racial segregation.

For more than a decade, such movements did occur across the South. Numerous local communities throughout the South, supported by the national Black community and sympathetic whites, perfected the use of mass-based nonviolent direct action. The disruptive tactics included boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, mass marches, mass jailings, and legal challenges. The 1960 student sit-ins at segregated lunch counters were especially important because within a month these protests had become a mass movement, which spread throughout the South and mobilized an important mass base. That base initially consisted largely of Black college students but also came to include high school and elementary students. The sit-in tactic was innovative because other tactics spun off of it, including “wade ins” at segregated pools, “kneel-ins” and “pray-ins” at segregated churches, and “phone-ins” at segregated businesses.

The sit-in movement was also critical because it led to the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC), which became a social movement organization of students through which local communities were organized and mobilized into social protest (Morris 1984). This organization increased the formal organizational base of the movement, which already included the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, and numerous local movement organizations. The sit-in movement and SNCC constituted the framework through which large numbers of white college students came to participate in the civil rights movement.

It was during the early to mid 1960s that the modern civil rights movement became the organized force that would topple Jim Crow. In this period highly public demonstrations occurred throughout the South and came to be increasingly strengthened by Northern demonstrations that were organized in sup-

port. These protests created a crisis because they disrupted social order and created an atmosphere that was not conducive to business and commerce in the South (Bloom 1987). They often caused white officials to use violence in their efforts to defeat the movement. By this time Martin Luther King Jr. had become a national and international charismatic figure. As James Lawson put it, "Any time King went to a movement, immediately the focus of the nation was on that community...He had the eyes of the world on where he went. And in the Black community, it never had that kind of person...It gave the Black community an advantage [that] it has never had" (Lawson 1978).

The intensity and visibility of demonstrations caused the Kennedy Administration and the Congress to seek measures that would end demonstrations and restore social order (Morris 1984, Schlesinger 1965). The demonstrations and the repressive measures used against them generated a foreign policy nightmare because they were covered by foreign media in Europe, the Soviet Union and Africa (see Fairclough 1987, Garrow 1986). As a result of national turmoil and international attention, the Jim Crow order was rendered vulnerable.

The Birmingham, Alabama, confrontation in 1963 and the Selma, Alabama, confrontation in 1965 generated the leverage that led to the overthrow of the formal Jim Crow order. In both instances, the movement was able to generate huge protest demonstrations utilizing an array of disruptive tactics that caused social order to collapse. The authorities in each locale responded with brutal violence that was captured by national and international media. The Birmingham movement sought to dismantle segregation in Birmingham and to generate national legislation that would invalidate racial segregation writ large. Because the Birmingham confrontation was so visible and effective it engendered additional protests throughout the South. Within ten weeks following the Birmingham confrontation, "758 demonstrations occurred in 186 cites across the South and at least 14,733 persons were arrested" (Sale 1973:83).

The goal of the 1965 Selma movement was to generate the necessary pressure that would lead to national legislation that would enfranchise Southern Blacks. The Selma confrontation commanded the same level of attention as the confrontation in Birmingham. Over 2,600 demonstrators were jailed, and on March 21 thousands of people from across the nation initiated a highly visible march from Selma to Montgomery. During the confrontations two Northern whites and a local Black demonstrator were murdered by Alabama lawmen. As in Birmingham, the Selma confrontations outraged the nation and drew widespread international attention. Once again the movement had maneuvered the Federal government into a corner where it had to play a role in resolving a crisis.

Because of the Birmingham movement and its aftermath, the Federal government issued national legislation outlawing all forms of racial segregation

and discrimination. Thus, on June 2, 1964 President Johnson signed into law the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Similarly, to resolve the crisis created by Selma, the Congress passed national legislation that enfranchised Southern Blacks. Johnson signed the 1965 Voting Rights Bill into law on August 6, 1965. The 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Bill brought the formal regime of Jim Crow to a close.

By overthrowing Jim Crow in a matter of ten years, the civil rights movement had taught the nation and the world an important lesson: a mass-based grass roots social movement that is sufficiently organized, sustained, and disruptive is capable of generating fundamental social change. James Lawson captured it best when he concluded, "Many people, when they are suffering and they see their people suffering, they want direct participation... So you put into the hands of all kinds of ordinary people a positive alternative to powerlessness and frustration. That's one of the great things about direct action" (Lawson 1978). Structural opportunities helped facilitate the rise of the modern civil rights movement, but it was the human agency of the Black community and its supporters that crushed Jim Crow.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Scholars of social movements have increasingly come to recognize the pivotal role that the civil rights movement has played in generating movements in America and abroad. A consensus is emerging that the civil rights movement was the catalyst behind the wave of social movements that crystallized in the United States beginning in the middle of the 1960s and continuing to the present (see Evans 1980, Freeman 1983, Morris 1984, 1993, Adam 1987, McAdam 1988, Snow & Benford 1992, Tarrow 1994, Groch 1998). This body of literature has shown that movements as diverse as the student movement, the women's movement, the farm workers' movement, the Native American movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the environmental movement, and the disability rights movement all drew important lessons and inspiration from the civil rights movement. It was the civil rights movement that provided the model and impetus for social movements that exploded on the American scene.

A myriad of factors were responsible for the civil rights movement's ability to influence such a wide variety of American social movements. The ideas that human oppression is not inevitable and that collective action can generate change were the most important lessons the civil rights movement provided other groups. As Angela Davis (1983) has pointed out, the Black freedom struggle in America has taught other groups about the nature of human oppression and important lessons about their own subjugation. This was certainly the

case with the civil rights movement, and this message was amplified by the great visibility accorded the movement by mass media, especially television.

The legal achievements of the civil rights movement were crucial to its capacity to trigger other movements. The 1964 Civil Rights Act was paramount in this regard for it prohibited a wide array of discriminations based on race, color, religion, national origin, and sex (Whalen & Whalen 1985). The modern women's movement was first to take advantage of this aspect of the Civil Rights Act because women in Congress had to struggle to get the word "sex" included in the legislation precisely because its opponents recognized that the incorporation of sex would have far ranging implications for the place of women in society. The general point is that this legislation, and others generated by the civil rights movement, created the legal framework through which other groups gained the constitutional right to demand changes for their own population and they were to do so in the context of their movements for change.

A repertoire of collective action, as Tilly (1978) has pointed out, is crucial to the generation of protest. It was the civil rights movement that developed the repertoire utilized by numerous American social movements. This movement sparked the widespread use of the economic boycott, sit-ins, mass marches and numerous tactics that other movements appropriated. It also developed a cultural repertoire including freedom songs, mass meetings, and freedom schools that would also be utilized by a variety of movements. New movements could hit the ground running because the Black movement had already created the repertoires capable of fueling collective action.

The civil rights movement also revealed the central role that social movement organizations played in mobilizing and sustaining collective action. Organizations like SCLC, NAACP, CORE and SNCC were very visible in the civil rights movement and were the settings in which a variety of activists including women and students were drawn into civil rights activism. These social movement organizations provided the contexts that served as the training ground for activists who would return to their own populations to organize social movements.

Social movement theory has not developed a viable framework for understanding why at certain moments in history oppressed groups are able to develop the moral courage and make the extraordinary sacrifices that collective action requires. But the fact that African Americans were willing to be beaten, jailed, and killed for their activism while exuding unprecedented levels of dignity surely played an important role in encouraging other groups to confront authorities in their quest for change. As we glance backward, it becomes exceedingly clear that it was the civil rights movement that fertilized the ground in which numerous American social movements took root and flowered into widespread collective action.

The American civil rights movement has had an impact beyond the shores of America. Many of the same reasons the civil rights movement influenced American social movements, appear to also be the source of its influence on international movements. The major exception is that the civil rights movement did not serve as the training ground for many of the activists who initiated movements outside the United States. What is clear, however, is that numerous international movements were influenced by the US civil rights movement.

A similarity that movements share across the world is that they usually must confront authorities who have superior power. The major challenge for such movements is that they must develop a collective action strategy that will generate leverage enabling them to engage in power struggles with powerful opponents. The strategy of nonviolent direct action was first developed by Gandhi in South Africa and then used by Gandhi in the mass movement that overthrew British colonialism in India. Gandhi's use of nonviolence was important to the civil rights movement because some key leaders of the civil rights movement—James Farmer, Bayard Rustin, James Lawson and Glenn Smiley—had studied Gandhi's movement and became convinced that nonviolence could be used by African Americans. Additionally, Gandhi became a hero and a source of inspiration for Martin Luther King Jr. It was the American civil rights movement that perfected and modernized nonviolent direct action. Because of this achievement, the civil rights movement was the major vehicle through which nonviolent direct action was spread to other movements internationally. Nonviolent direct action has enabled oppressed groups as diverse as Black South Africans, Arabs of the Middle East, and pro-democracy demonstrators in China to engage in collective action. Leaders of these movements have acknowledged the valuable lessons they have learned from the civil rights movement (see Morris 1993). As Tarrow (1994) has pointed out, nonviolent direct action is a potent tool of collective action because it generates disruption and uncertainty that authorities must address. Tarrow captured how nonviolent direct action has spread domestically and internationally following the civil rights movement when he wrote:

Although it began as a tool of nationalist agitation in the Third World, nonviolent direct action spread to a variety of movements in the 1960s and 1970s. It was used in the Prague Spring, in the student movements of 1968, by the European and American Peace and environmental movements, by opponents of the Marcos regime in the Philippines and of military rule in Thailand and Burma (Tarrow 1994:109).

As McAdam (1995) has argued, it is possible that the lessons of the civil rights movement crossed national boundaries through complex diffusion processes. Although McAdam leaves the mechanisms of diffusion unspecified, interviews by the author with leaders of the movements in South Africa,

China, and the West Bank provide insights. Mubarak Awad, one of the central leaders of the Intifadah Movement on the West Bank, conveyed that they absorbed the lessons of America's nonviolent direct action civil rights movement by acquiring films on the Black movement and Martin Luther King, and showing them on Jordanian television so that the lessons of that movement could be widely disseminated and applied (1990). Shen Tong, one of China's 1989 pro-democracy leaders revealed that "my first encounter with the concept of nonviolence was in high school when I read about Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi" (1990). Patrick Lekota, a leader of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, explained that many of the leaders of the National African Congress gained their knowledge of the Black movement when they studied in the United States and that literature concerning the civil rights movement was widely spread in South Africa where "it was highly studied material" (1990). Similarly, in the early days of the Solidarity movement in Poland, Bayard Rustin, a major tactician of the civil rights movement, was summoned to Poland to give a series of colloquia and speeches on how nonviolent direct action worked in the civil rights movement. Summarizing the responses, Rustin stated, "I am struck by the complete attentiveness of the predominantly young audience, which sits patiently, awaiting the translation of my words" (Rustin, undated report). Additionally, leaders of these movements indicated that King, the charismatic leader who won the Nobel Peace Prize, was another important factor that fixed international attention upon the civil rights movement.

Because the civil rights movement developed a powerful tactical, ideological, and cultural repertoire of collective action available to a worldwide audience through mass media and an extensive literature, it has served as a model of collective action nationally and internationally. Awareness of the civil rights movement is so widespread globally that oppressed people in distant lands seek out knowledge of its lessons so they can employ it in their own struggles. Diffusion processes are important in this regard, but they merely complement the active pursuit of information pertaining to the civil rights movement by those wishing to engage in collective action here and abroad. The national anthem of the civil rights movement, "We Shall Overcome," continues to energize and strengthen the resolve of social movements worldwide.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In a recent book (1993), the sociologist James McKee explored the question as to why no sociological scholar anticipated the civil rights movement and Black protest that rocked the nation throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. After an

extensive examination of the literature, he argued that this failure could not be attributed to the lack of theory or empirical data because the sociology of race relations had a wealth of both. Rather, he maintained that it was the assumptions underlying these theories that prevented sociologists from anticipating the civil rights movement. He argued that prior to the movement, sociologists viewed Southern rural Blacks as a culturally inferior, backward people. He concluded that “there was a logical extension of this image of the American Black: a people so culturally inferior would lack the capability to advance their own interests by rational action...Blacks were portrayed as a people unable on their own to affect changes in race relations...” (1993:8). In short, the study of race relations lacked an analysis of Black agency.

Collective behavior and related theories of social movements, which dominated the field prior to the 1970s, were similar in that they lacked a theory of Black agency. The problem was even more pronounced for theories of social movements prior to the civil rights movement, for those theories operated with a vague, weak version of agency to explain phenomena that are agency driven. Those theories conceptualized social movements as spontaneous, largely unstructured, and discontinuous with institutional and organizational behavior (Morris & Herring 1987). Movement participants were viewed as reacting to various forms of strain and doing so in a non-rational manner. In these frameworks, human agency was conceptualized as a reactive agency, created by uprooted individuals seeking to reestablish a modicum of personal and social stability. External uncontrollable factors were in the driver seat, directing the agency encompassed in collective action.

Resource mobilization and political process models of social movements reconceptualized social movement phenomena as well as the human agency that drives them. The civil rights movement and the movements it helped spur, were pivotal in the reconstruction of social movement theory. The civil rights movement provided a rich empirical base for the reexamination of social movements because the structures and dynamics of that movement could not be reconciled with existing social movement theories. Central themes of current social movement theory—the role of migration and urbanization, mobilizing structures including social networks, institutions and social movements organizations, tactical repertoires and innovations, dissemination of collective action, culture and belief systems, leadership, the gendering phenomenon and movement outcomes—have been elaborated in the context of the civil rights movement because those structures and processes were germane to that movement.

Theories prior to the civil rights movement had argued that migration and urbanization were vital to collective action because they produced the social strain and ruptured belief systems that drove people into collective action to reconstitute the social order. Scholars of the civil rights movement (Oberschall

1973, McAdam 1982, Morris 1984) have produced convincing evidence to the contrary. Black migration and urbanization facilitated the civil rights movement because it led to the institutional building and the proliferation of dense social networks across localities and across neighborhoods in cities through which the movement was mobilized and sustained. This finding helped solidify the proposition that migration and urbanization may facilitate social movements because of their capacity to produce and harden the social organization critical to the production of collective action.

The social organization underlying collective action encompasses a movement's mobilizing structures. These structures include formal and informal organizations, communication networks, local movement centers, social movement organizations and leadership structures. Morris (1984) and McAdam (1982) developed detailed analyses of the crucial role that Black churches, colleges and informal social networks played in the mobilization and development of the civil rights movement. Morris (1984) demonstrated that the civil rights movement was comprised of local movements and that it was local mobilizing structures that produced the power inherent in the civil rights movement. To capture this phenomenon, he developed the concept of "local movement center" and defined it as the social organization within local communities of a subordinate group, which mobilizes, organizes, and coordinates collective action aimed at attaining the common ends of that subordinate group. Without those mobilizing structures, it is doubtful that the movement would have been able to consolidate the resources required to confront and prevail over white racists and powerful state structures. These findings helped to discredit arguments maintaining that movements were spontaneous and discontinuous with pre-existing social structures.

The civil rights movement afforded scholars the opportunity to examine the fundamental role played by social movement organizations (SMOs) in the creation and coordination of collective action. That movement was loaded with SMOs operating at the local and national levels. By examining these SMOs, scholars (Morris 1984, Barkan 1986, Haines 1984) have assisted in the development of an interorganizational analysis of social movement organizations. Morris analyzed how each of the major SMOs of the civil rights movement shaped collective action by carving out its own spheres of organizational activity and producing the leaders, organizers, and tactics that provided the movement with its power and dynamism. At the interorganizational level, these organizations engaged in competition, cooperation, and conflict. What has been learned from this interorganizational standpoint, is that when SMOs compete and cooperate they can produce greater volumes of collective action by sharing knowledge, and resources and by triggering tactical innovations. SMOs can be destructive to social movements when they engage in intense conflict and generate warring factions. This appears to have been the case in

Albany, Georgia in 1962 when the movement failed to reach its goals because of the conflict between SCLC and SNCC (see Morris 1984:239–250). By examining the civil rights movement, Haines (1984) demonstrated how interorganizational relations between SMOs can affect the outcomes of a movement because the agenda of radical organizations can cause authorities, because of their fear of radical alternatives, to concede to the demands of moderate SMOs. Research prior to the civil rights movement tended to conceive SMOs as by-products of social movements and thus as not germane to their causation and outcomes. The visibility of SMOs in the civil rights movement and their obvious centrality, have helped scholars to reconceptualize the role of SMOs and give them the theoretical attention they merit.

The civil rights movement has served as a rich empirical base for the analysis of social movement tactics. The widespread use and development of non-violent direct action tactics is one of the crowning achievements of the civil rights movement. The labor movement and other grassroots movements of the 1930s adopted versions of some of the tactics—the sit-down strike, freedom songs, labor schools, community-based organizing—that would be used by the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, it was the civil rights movement that expanded these tactics and employed them in contexts where they would have enormous impact world-wide. Indeed, the importance of the tools of nonviolent direct action and especially the sit-in, which the civil rights movement utilized and made famous around the globe, led Tarrow to declare that these tactics were “perhaps the major contributions of our century to the repertoire of collective action” (Tarrow 1994:108). Several formulations by scholars examining the tactical repertoire of the civil rights movement have been developed. In an analysis of the 1960 sit-ins, Morris (1981) demonstrated that this tactic spread rapidly because of the mobilizing structures already in place by 1960, and because the tactics of nonviolent direct action fitted into the ideological and organizational framework of the Black church, which preached against violence and extolled the virtues of redemptive suffering.

In an analysis of tactical innovations within the civil rights movement, McAdam (1983) examined how tactical innovations increased the collection action of that movement and affected its outcomes. He argued that once authorities learn to neutralize a tactic, movement leaders had to devise a new tactic or risk a decline in collection action and the defeat of the movement. A study by Morris (1993) confirmed the important role of tactical innovation but took issue with McAdam as to how the process worked in the civil rights movement. He found that the tactical innovation process of the civil rights movement consisted of activists developing and adding new tactics to existing ones and employing them dynamically. The use of multiple tactics increased the possibility of generating a crisis, which served as the leverage to achieve movement demands. A great deal more theoretical work on movement tactics

is needed and the civil rights movement will continue to provide a rich terrain for such theorizing.

The development of cycles of protest is intimately related to the development of tactical and cultural repertoires. Tarrow (1994:154) has defined a cycle of protest as “a phase of heightened conflict and contention across the social system.” During such phases, collective action diffuses rapidly from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors and it generates “sequences of intensified interactions between challengers and authorities” (p. 154). A cycle of protest occurred in the United States following the civil rights movement when numerous movements—antiwar, women, farm workers, Native Americans, gay and lesbians, etc.—sprang into action. This cycle was not limited to national boundaries; it was also replicated in Europe during the same period. A major theoretical task is to explain the cycles of protest (McAdam 1995). The civil rights movement has figured prominently in such theorizing because it was the initiator movement that set this cycle in motion. Tarrow (1994) and McAdam (1995) have utilized the case of the civil rights movement to argue that such cycles are likely to occur when there exists an initial movement that has been successful in developing a repertoire of tactical, organizational and ideological lessons that can be transplanted to other movements under conditions favorable to social protest. Because the civil rights movement provided such a clear example of a protest cycle initiator, it continues to inform scholars about the processes by which a “family of movements” burst on the social scene.

CULTURE AND CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Social movement scholars are increasingly coming to recognize that cultural factors weigh heavily in collective action (see Morris & McClurg Mueller 1992). In order for people to be attracted to and participate in collective action, they must come to define a situation as intolerable and changeable through collective action. To do so they develop injustice frames (Gamson 1992) and undergo cognitive liberation (McAdam 1982). Black cultural beliefs and practices were pronounced in the civil rights movement, and they affected strategic choices in that movement and figured significantly in the cycles of protest that it helped trigger. Morris (1984) analyzed how Black music, prayers, and religious doctrines were refashioned to critique Black oppression and to promote solidarity and to function as a tool of mobilization for the civil rights movement.

David Snow and his colleagues (1986, 1992) have produced the most compelling formulation as to why belief systems are germane to collective action. Parts of their analysis rest squarely on dynamics of the civil rights movement. Snow and his colleagues (1986) argued that framing processes constitute one

of the major avenues through which collective action is generated, disseminated, and sustained. For them, frame alignment is the key process because it refers to “the linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals and ideology are congruent and complementary” (1986:484). Thus, SMO leaders are able to recruit and mobilize movement participants through creative ideological work whereby frames are bridged, amplified and extended. Snow & Benford’s (1992) concept of an innovative master frame is explicitly derived from an analysis of the civil rights movement. Master frames are generic frames of meaning and one of their variable features is their capacity to generate “diagnostic attribution, which involved the identification of a problem and the attribution of blame or causality” (Snow & Benford 1992: 138). When an innovative master frame becomes elaborated it “allows for numerous aggrieved groups to tap it and elaborate their grievances in terms of its basic problem-solving schema” (p. 140). Snow & Benford argued that the civil rights movement developed an elaborate civil rights master frame. That master frame was so significant because its “punctuation and accentuation of the idea of equal rights and opportunities amplified a fundamental American value that resonated with diverse elements of Americans society and thus lent itself to extensive elaboration” (p. 148). Because of its master frame, they argued that the civil rights movement was able to play a pivotal role in generating cycles of protest. More theorizing is needed on the central role that culture plays in social movements, and the civil rights movement will continue to be a key reservoir for such work because much of what it has to teach scholars about culture and collective action remains untapped.

GENDER AND CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Rosa Parks is known as the mother of the civil rights movement because her refusal to give a white man her seat on a segregated bus sparked the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. Parks’ resistance and civil rights activity were not unlike those of countless Black women such as Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hammer, and Diane Nash (see Crawford et al 1990, Barnett 1993, Payne 1994, Robnett 1997). Black women played crucial roles in the civil rights but they did so in the context of a society and a movement characterized by high levels of patriarchy. Morris (1984) detailed the roles that Black women played in the origins of the civil rights movement, and he discussed how their contributions were restricted by male sexism within the movement.

Recent studies (Barnett 1993, Payne 1995, Robnett 1997) examining the role of women in the civil rights movement have sought to understand how the movement itself was gendered and how this reality affected movement dynamics. Payne and Barnett analyzed how Black women played pivotal organizing

roles, often behind the scene, that enabled the movement to perform the multifaceted, mobilization and organizational tasks crucial for wide-scale collective action. These studies, however, make it clear that these women performed these duties not because of natural inclinations to work behind the scene. They did so because they were dedicated to the goals of the movement and because male-dominated hierarchies limited the types of contributions they could make.

Robnett's study (1997) has produced some important insights on how gendering affected the civil rights movement. She found that despite the sexism, the contributions of many Black women encompassed a great deal more than backstage organizing. Black women constituted the bridge leaders of the civil rights movement. Bridge leadership is "an intermediate layer of leadership, whose tasks include bridging potential constituents and adherents, as well as potential formal leaders, to the movement" (Robnett 1997:191). Because these women were excluded from formal leadership positions because of their gender, they could act in more radical ways than men, given their allegiances to the grassroots and their freedom from state constraints. Given the structural location of this leadership it had more latitude to do the movement's emotional work which increased its mobilization capacity and generated greater strategic effectiveness. The majority of bridge leaders in the civil rights movement were Black women because that "was the primary level of leadership available to women" (Robnett 1997:191). Scholars such as Robnett have just begun to unpack the gendering dynamic of movements. The civil rights movement provides a rich empirical case for the continuance of this work because it was a movement in which women and men converged in their activity for the sake of liberating a people.

LEADERSHIP AND CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Two theoretical issues thrust up by the civil rights movement have not received much attention. We do not have a theory that explains the relationship between preexisting protest traditions and the rise and trajectory of new social movements. Black leaders from previous movements played important roles in the civil rights movement. The expertise of leaders such as Ella Baker, A Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and Septima Clark supplied the movement with vision and technical knowledge pertaining to collective action. By the time of the modern civil rights movement, the NAACP had developed a sophisticated legal strategy to attack racial segregation. This strategy became one of the central features of the nonviolent direct action movement. A pre-existing Black culture containing a variety of oppositional themes supplied the modern movement with much of its cultural content and anchored it to the cultural traditions of the Black community. There can be little doubt that this

preexisting protest tradition help to solidify this movement and affected its trajectory from the outset. A theoretical formulation of preexisting protest traditions is needed for a comprehensive understanding of movement emergence and outcomes.

Current social movement theory has made little progress in the analysis of social movement leadership. Movement scholars have too readily assumed that movement leadership is a matter of common sense not requiring theoretical analysis (see McAdam et al 1988:716). The civil rights movement reveals, however, that movement leadership is a complex phenomenon that remains relatively unexplored theoretically. Morris (1984) found that charismatic leadership played a key role in the civil rights movement but functioned differently from the way it was characterized in Weber's classic formulation, given that it was rooted in preexisting institutions and organizational structures. Robnett's (1997) finding concerning bridge leadership reveals the complex composition that leadership structures can assume in movements and the way such structures are shaped by durable practices in the larger society. Additional theorizing is needed to uncover the processes by which individuals are chosen to become movement leaders and how factors internal to the movement constrain the strategic options available to them. The social class of leaders appears to be important in determining leadership style and the degree to which they can be successful in mobilizing movement participants across social classes. Thus, as the civil movement reveals, movement leadership is a complex variable phenomenon that should receive attention from social movement scholars.

LOOKING BACKWARD TO MOVE FORWARD

By looking back we can appreciate the tremendous contributions the civil rights movement has made to social change and to the reconceptualization of an intellectual discipline. Because of that movement and those it triggered, social movement scholars have had to formulate new ideas and rethink why and how social movements continue to reshape the social landscape. As Gamson put it:

If there hadn't been a civil rights movement there might not have been an anti-war movement, if there hadn't been these movements there might not have been an environmental movement. Without these movements there wouldn't have been people coming into the field who were receptive to a new orientation (Morris & Herring 1987:184).

The civil rights movement helped trigger a paradigmatic shift in the field of social movements and collective action. It did not do so alone, for other historic and contemporary movements worldwide have provided empirical puzzles that have assisted in the reconceptualization of the field. But the intellectual work based on the civil rights movement has been substantial and transfor-

mational. This movement has provided scholars with empirical and theoretical puzzles that should continue to push the field forward until new path—breaking social movements arise and shake up the field once again.

I close by returning to McKee's issue regarding Black agency. The civil rights movement revealed that that agency resides in Black social networks, institutions, organizations, cultures, and leaders, and in the creativity of a people who have had to engage in a chain of struggles to survive relentless oppression and to maintain their dignity. What is more, that movement helped other groups to locate their own agency, who then harnessed it in activities that have generated important changes in America and the world.

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