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# CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORIOGRAPHY: TWO PERSPECTIVES

*The following two essays are adapted from papers given at the Historical Society's June 2008 conference at the Johns Hopkins University.*

## RECONSIDERING THE “LONG CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT”\*

Eric Arnesen

For historians and general readers interested in the civil rights movement's past, these are indeed the best of times. Every month, it seems, new books roll off the presses of university and trade publishing houses, while academic journals and television documentaries present specialized or general interpretations to their respective audiences. For a number of years since its initial release in 1987, the PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize* established the narrative of the movement between 1955 and 1965, a narrative that prevailed more in the broader culture than in the academy. Today, for the serious readers of history, if not necessarily the general public, that narrative has, to some extent, become more complex and certainly far richer. Studies of prominent and obscure movement leaders, local organizations, high politics and public policy, black power, urban violence, anti-movement repression, and individual communities fill shelf after shelf. Keeping up with the outflow of new literature is a full-time job for scholars committed to comprehensive reading in this field.

Perhaps the most significant development in recent years has been historians' insistence that the civil rights movement did not spring into being out of nothingness in either 1954 or 1955. They now advance the notion of the “long civil rights movement” to capture the history of the *movement before the movement* (that is, prior to its so-called “classical” stage), a movement in its own right that cannot be reduced simply to that of “prelude” or “seedtime” for what was to follow. In Steven Lawson's view, the new “consensus view” is that the movement “did not suddenly spring up in 1954 or 1955.”<sup>1</sup> New scholarship, Glenn Feldman has recently written, offers an “ongoing challenge to traditional periodization of the civil rights movement

by highlighting the considerable ferment in race relations during the 1930s and 1940s . . . . The ‘backing up’ of the movement represents an advance in scholarship.”<sup>2</sup> These are views that are now widely shared.

Not surprisingly, scholars who argue for a reconceptualization of civil rights chronology express a discomfort with the *Eyes on the Prize* or

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“Montgomery to Memphis” narrative that brought knowledge of the movement to a generation of PBS viewers and students. That narrative, they suggest, misrepresents the movement, cutting it off from its very roots with the wrongheaded implication that protests against racial inequality only began in 1955. An aside: I was perhaps naively startled when I made reference to the *Eyes on the Prize* series to the students in my U.S. history survey class just over a year ago. As it turned out, *none* of my students had heard of the series, much less seen it (even though PBS recently rebroadcast it and released a new DVD set for in-school use). So much for narrative hegemony. My lament is: *If only*. I suppose I'd be satisfied if my students had, in fact, absorbed the chronologically misleading *Eyes* framework. At least it would be . . . something. But the critics' larger point remains: for all of their visual power and moral storytelling, the *Eyes* documentaries do not link the Montgomery-and-beyond movement to strands of protest that preceded it.

One of the most prominent proponents of the “long movement,” Jacqueline Dowd Hall, has insisted that the “story of a ‘long civil rights movement’ that took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s” is a “more robust, more

progressive, and *truer* story” of civil rights.<sup>3</sup> There are many historians who agree with her. The notion of a “long civil rights movement” has clearly caught on. The theme this year at Harvard's Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History is “Race-Making and Law-Making in the Long Civil Rights Movement”; there are now courses on “the long civil rights movement” at universities, and the seal of approval of foundation money has guaranteed the concept a long shelf life. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation recently awarded the University of North Carolina Press and UNC a three-year \$937,000 grant for a project, “Publishing the Long Civil Rights Movement,” that will embrace “print and digital publications” and foster “interdisciplinary civil rights scholarship.”<sup>4</sup>

In the academy, the notion of the “long civil rights movement” has become a widely accepted and rather unquestioned one, subject to little debate or theoretical scrutiny. Despite, or, rather, because of the consensus that has quickly emerged over the concept, a brief pause here to consider its analytical underpinnings and historiographical consequences seems in order. In what follows, I raise several questions about the “long civil rights movement” in the hope of sparking an overdue conversation.

For instance, what, precisely, is a movement? A generation ago, Nelson Lichtenstein and Robert Korstad noted that the venerable labor historian E.P. Thompson once observed that “most social movements have a life cycle of about six years,” a period constituting a “window of opportunity” during which they make their impact.<sup>5</sup> The classical phase of the modern civil rights movement generally fits this description: after its initial splash during the Montgomery boycott, civil rights activism fermented largely below the surface until the student sit-ins erupted in 1960. For all of their programmatic and stylistic differences, the multiple groups of the early 1960s—Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Congress

\* I would like to thank Alex Lichtenstein, David Chappell, Katrin Schultheiss, and Lawrence Glickman for their criticisms of an earlier draft of this essay.

of Racial Equality (CORE), etc.—shared an activist orientation and determination to topple the racial status quo. But by the time President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the movement had irreparably fragmented, its agendas and leaders increasingly at odds.

The “long” movement proponents tend to do away with Thompson’s temporal restrictions by collapsing chronological boundaries, blurring the differences between very different organizations, approaches, and strategies, and reducing the heterogeneity of black protest politics into a chronologically expansive phenomenon known as the “black freedom movement.” Take, for instance, the claims of Glenda Gilmore, the Yale historian whose *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights* appeared late last year. Gilmore locates the origins of civil rights in the 1920s. Like Hall, she seeks to overturn the “simplified story broadcast across the nation on black-and-white televisions” in the 1950s, a story that has the movement starting “when it burst into white people’s living rooms, brought to them by white media.” That movement may have been new to white folks, but, she adds, “African Americans knew better,” for in the “three decades that followed World War I, black Southerners and their allies relentlessly battled Jim Crow.”<sup>6</sup>

Was this, in fact, the case? Did African Americans know better? Did they “relentlessly” battle Jim Crow after World War I? A small number of black Southerners and an even smaller number of whites participated in campaigns against the segregationist order, but the vast majority did not. And for those on the front lines, activism itself came in fits and starts. But does the existence of individual activists or even a small and often stigmatized left-wing organization allow us to talk about a movement or suggest an ongoing, relentless struggle? As it turned out, the communists Gilmore celebrates did not really create a civil rights *movement* at all, much less one that compared in size or influence to the movement of the “classical” phase.

Why, however, start the story merely during World War I? Why not extend it back in time to embrace the unprecedented levels of black migration to the North—itsself a form of protest—during the Great War? Or to Ida B. Wells and the black clubwomen’s movement’s struggles against lynching? Or to protests against disfranchisement? Or Union League efforts to protect Reconstruction’s gains? Or black abolitionists’ challenges to the Fugitive Slave Act and the evils of chattel slavery? Or recently enslaved Africans’ uprisings on board slave ships during the Middle Passage? In fact, some have done precisely this. Almost three decades ago, Vincent Harding published *There Is a River: The Black Freedom Struggle in America*. As a young activist in the South during the early 1960s, Harding was impressed by the men and women he encountered. They were a “revelation,” he recalled, “witnesses who had been standing their sometimes solitary ground in harsh and threatening circumstances for a long time; people who refused to lose hope,” who helped to “prepare the way for the

great outpouring of the freedom movement” by serving as “human bridges between the past and the future.” They taught him that there was “a significant history behind what we called ‘The Movement,’ a long time of surging toward freedom.” Indeed, Harding *ended* his study with the Reconstruction era. He reflected upon the “brutal, magnificent struggle, reaching over more than three centuries, over thousands of miles, from the sunburned coasts of the homeland to the cold and dreary trenches near. . . Fort Wagner.” Tracing the “freedom struggle of black people in this country, beginning before there was a country,” he sought to convey its “long, continuous movement, flowing



“Scottsboro Boys” in jail at Birmingham, undated. Langston Hughes papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

like a river.”<sup>7</sup> That long movement was very long indeed.

The notion of “the black freedom movement” extending back centuries has a certain undeniable political appeal today. It provides current demands for social and racial justice with an honorable and long lineage. And indeed, any lecture class in African-American history and many U.S. history surveys rightly emphasize the multiple traditions of resistance that characterize the broad sweep of African-American history. Yet despite its popularity and classroom utility, the notion tends to reduce very different approaches and agendas to a too simple common denominator, minimizing the importance of chronology, precise periodization, and even conflicting agendas and demands. One can appreciate the deep traditions of black protest politics while simultaneously rejecting the adjective “freedom” as too expansive to have much concrete descriptive meaning.

Finally, much of the new scholarship on the “long movement” comes in a distinctive political flavor, one that reflects both the orientation of the activists it celebrates and the disposition of its historians as well. Of course, one can certainly group under the general rubric of the “long movement” myriad approaches to protest, including the “don’t buy where you can’t work” campaigns of the 1930s or the March on Washington movement of the early 1940s, for instance. In fact, some scholars, present company included, have. But by and large, many proponents of the “long movement”

have something else in mind: namely, a civil rights activism strongly inflected by the organized Left and/or a Left-labor civil rights alliance, with “Left” in this instance being defined as membership in the Communist Party or participation in its orbit. In Gilmore’s view, much credit goes unabashedly to American communists, black and white, who “redefined the debate over white supremacy and hastened its end.” It was the communists “who stood up to say that black and white people should organize together, eat together, go to school together, and marry each other if they chose.” Rejecting all compromise, party members were a “catalyst for change and . . . a force that moved Socialists and liberals to action,” particularly during the Popular Front years in the late 1930s.<sup>8</sup> She is hardly alone in so arguing.

For Gilmore, Hall, and others, the Great Depression and the 1940s gave rise to “a powerful social movement sparked by the alchemy of laborites, civil rights activists, progressive New Dealers, and black and white radicals, some of whom were associated with the Communist party,” in Hall’s words. This movement was not “just a precursor of the modern civil rights movement,” she concludes. “It was its decisive first phase.”

Referred to as “civil rights unionism” or the “Black Popular Front” by its historians, this alliance of progressives was based in leftist trade unions and led or influenced by the Communist Party and its allies. The agenda it promoted—of union rights, workplace democracy, full employment, antiracism in employment and housing, broad social welfare programs, and anticolonialism—was decidedly to the left of mainstream civil rights or labor organizations. Its distinctive quality was its fusing of racial and class concerns; it was the “link between race and class”—both “expansively understood”—[that] lay at the heart of the movement’s political imagination,” Hall insists.<sup>9</sup>

That alliance, however, proved short-lived and its demise was not merely unfortunate but tragic in the eyes of these historians. Its radical agenda is said to have perished along with the leftist movement when conservative employers and government officials deployed a powerful, indeed “virulent” anticommunism to tar progressive reformers with the red brush, to crush progressive unions, and to red-bait progressive reformers into silence or conformity. By the time the red scare and the “long backlash” (Hall’s term) had done their work, the class-race nexus had been broken, radical ideas were driven underground or out of ideological business, civil rights unionism’s “institutional base” had been weakened, and organized labor had tacked right. Even though advocates of this view acknowledge—reluctantly, it seems to me—that the Cold War created real opportunities for less radical advocates of civil rights to promote their cause, they ultimately conclude that “civil rights look less like a product of the Cold War and more like a casualty.”<sup>10</sup> Anticommunism had “stifled the social democratic impulses that antifascism and anticolonialism encouraged, replacing them with a Cold War racial liberalism that, at best,

failed to deliver on its promise of reform . . . and, at worst, colluded with the right-wing red scare to narrow the ideological ground on which civil rights activists could stand.”<sup>12</sup> When a new generation of activists emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, they were cut off from their predecessors. In many cases they were unaware of earlier struggles, and their agenda of legal and voting rights appeared anemic in comparison.

Does the communist Left deserve the credit that long civil rights movement proponents bestow upon it? And are they correct in identifying the communist Left-labor alliance as the very heart of the mid-century movement? To the first question I would respond: only in part. It is certainly true that in many instances Left-led unions directed the charge against discrimination in the workplace and the community, and the Communist Party emerged with the reputation, in the words of one historian I spoke with, as “the only show in town” on the race front. To say nothing beyond this, however, misrepresents the party’s actual record. The party heroes celebrated as the heart of the Left-labor alliance by the “long movement” scholars were, from the outset, fatally flawed by the party’s fundamentally antidemocratic structure and its subservience to the Soviet Union. Party members proved more than willing to subordinate civil rights or even betray their black supporters when the party line instructed them to do so.<sup>13</sup> Their multiple and self-inflicted failures are as important a part of the story as their heroic efforts. If scholarly proponents of the “long movement” are correct in identifying the real and at times significant role played by the Communist Party, they weaken their case by underestimating the party’s flaws and refusing to explore the ways in which the Communist Party also undermined, at times, the very movement it claimed to support.

To the second question—was the communist Left-labor alliance the heart of the mid-century movement?—the answer is a clear no. “Long movement” scholars significantly overstate the influence of the Communist Party’s contribution to the broader civil rights coalition. Attributing much of the era’s activism to communists, fellow travelers, and general sympathizers, they downplay or neglect the activist strains that remained independent of, or even hostile toward, the Communist Party. As Dorothy Sue Cobble has shown, left-leaning women trade unionists had no monopoly on early labor feminism, and Kevin Boyle has illustrated the ways non-leftist black unionists fought aggressively and sometimes successfully to use the United Auto Workers’ anti-discrimination machinery to further their cause while the national union contributed mightily to federal legislative reform.<sup>14</sup> In my own *Brotherhoods of Color*, I sketched out the perspectives and crusades of numerous black railroad unions, communist and non-communist alike, to advance a civil rights unionism in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>15</sup> In her important study of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and grassroots activism in the 1930s, Beth Tompkins Bates has shown that non-commu-

nists played a vital role, along with party members, in building the National Negro Congress, while in her excellent monograph on Pullman porters, she demonstrates that it was the non-communist Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), more than any other union, that laid the groundwork for the upsurge in black unionization during the Great Depression.<sup>16</sup> My point is not to dismiss communist contributions to labor and civil rights; it is, rather, to suggest that revisionist scholars have been too quick to assign most credit to the party,



A. PHILIP RANDOLPH  
International President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

Undated photograph. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

and it is to insist on placing communists in a larger context to which non- and anticommunists contributed their share as well.

“Long movement” scholarship runs the risk of substituting a romantic and overly celebratory narrative for a much messier and more complicated civil rights past. Our purpose, Jacqueline Hall has argued, is to “honor the movement” and “reinforce the moral authority of those who fought for change in those years.”<sup>17</sup> Many of those activists are certainly entitled much honoring and celebrating, but is that our primary purpose as scholars of civil rights? On what basis does one decide whom to honor? And does honoring the movement require us to serve as its cheerleaders? Politics is not always a heroic business; politicians and activists alike have been known to get down in the mud, directing their indignation not only against the “system” but at each other as well. The imperative to “honor” runs into more than a little difficulty when the contentiousness of political engagement is fully explored.

The hostile relationship between the Communist Party and anticommunist A. Philip Randolph

is a case in point.<sup>18</sup> The long-time socialist who had once been called the most “dangerous Negro in America” served as the president of the BSCP from the 1920s through the 1960s and, from his union base, undertook wide-ranging campaigns against various facets of racial inequality. It was his threat to bring 100,000 blacks to the nation’s capital to protest discrimination in employment and the armed forces during World War II that earned him a reputation as the nation’s most prominent black leader. During the war, Randolph continued to lead numerous demonstrations and protests against segregation, which he deemed “wholly untenable and indefensible,” especially while the nation was ostensibly fighting to end fascism abroad. These efforts made his a household name in black communities across the country.

So where do Randolph and his non-communist allies fit into the new narrative of the long civil rights movement? The quick answer: awkwardly, when they fit at all. Randolph campaigned aggressively against alliances with communists long before the rise of McCarthyism made it popular to do so. When party members hijacked the National Negro Congress (NNC) and hitched its star to Soviet foreign policy in 1940, Randolph, then NNC president, reverted to his earlier anticommunist instincts. The break was deep and bitter. His personal experiences had demonstrated conclusively that the party was the agent of a foreign power that put Russia’s needs above all others. In his eyes, it constituted a “sinister menace”<sup>19</sup> and from that point onward, he declared ideological and organizational war against the Communist Party and all it stood for.

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The “long civil rights movement” is a concept with possibilities—but also problems. On the positive side, it offers us a single term to embrace the many individuals and organizations challenging racial inequality prior to the mid-1950s, about whom historians—if not the general public—have long been aware. On the negative side, much of the new scholarship remains romantic and one-sided, overemphasizing the contributions of the communist Left, ignoring the party’s less savory practices, and neglecting or minimizing non-communist and anticommunist activists. At a minimum, we need to recognize the limits and failures, as well as successes, of earlier struggles and include a broad swath of non- or anticommunists into the pantheon of activists in the “long” movement. Such recognition and inclusion would produce a story that is certainly messier than our current one; one might add that it would also be “more robust” and “truer”—if not necessarily more “progressive,” in Hall’s language—than our existing revisionist narratives.

And what of the movement’s classical, post *Brown v. Board of Education* phase? It would be unfortunate if, in their rush to spotlight earlier struggles for racial justice, scholars contributed to a redirection of academic and popular attention away

from the modern movement.<sup>20</sup> That movement *was* distinctive. It was significantly larger than its predecessors; it was visible nationally and consistently in a way unmatched by earlier organizations; it attained a genuinely mass character; it provoked a violent backlash of unprecedented proportions; and it ultimately succeeded in toppling legalized segregation and enfranchising black Southerners. Its failure to solve the more intractable problems of economic and social inequality may not be attributable to its allegedly narrow agenda, the “sidelining” of “independent black radicals” by the forces of “[p]ersecution, censorship, and self-censorship,” or the loss to “memory” of the lessons of “an earlier, labor-infused civil rights tradition,”<sup>21</sup> as “long movement” writers suggest. Rather, the persistence and even worsening of some problems amid dramatic improvement in other areas may have more to do with the political and ideological forces that have continually vexed all social movements in America that advance a class perspective.

Steven Lawson has recently raised a “cautionary flag” about extending the movement’s chronological boundaries too readily back in time. Civil rights campaigns proceeded in “fits and starts” in many places. For the movement to have “any contextual meaning” requires that it be “seen as a distinct and coherent part of the longer freedom struggle.”<sup>22</sup> David Chappell endorses Lawson’s reservation and takes it a step farther. “The various scholarly extensions” of chronology “neglect the testimony of participants who saw the 1955–1965 period as special. They also ahistorically skip over long periods of inaction, making the subject amorphous.” Perhaps their political commitments or aspirations put long movement scholars on the “defensive,” he muses, as though “their saying that the civil rights movement lived and died like any other historical phenomenon would prevent would be activists from reviving it.”<sup>23</sup> As Lawson, Chappell, and others suggest, it is possible—and necessary—to appreciate the distinctiveness of the modern phase of the movement while simultaneously recognizing its deeper roots. Recent scholarship on the “long” dimensions of struggles for civil rights has unquestionably broadened our understanding of the politics of race in the United States. But we need to pay closer attention to its proponents’ political assumptions, choice of subjects, and specific interpretations. In the absence of that scrutiny, I would suggest that the enthusiastic consensus on the utility of the newly dominant version of the “long movement” framework is premature.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Lawson, *Civil Rights Crossroads: Nation, Community, and the Black Freedom Struggle* (University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Feldman, “Prologue,” in Feldman, ed., *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South* (University of

Alabama Press, 2004), 1, 2. Also see Kevin Boyle, “Labour, the Left, and the Long Civil Rights Movement,” *Social History* 30 (2005): 366-67; Patricia Sullivan, “Forward,” in Feldman, ed., *Before Brown*, xii.

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91 (2005): 1235.

<sup>4</sup> “Mellon Foundation Funds Interdisciplinary Civil Rights Scholarship.” Monday, January 28, 2008 at <http://uncnews.unc.edu/news/humanities-and-social-sciences/mellon-foundation-funds-interdisciplinary-civil-rights-scholarship.html>

<sup>5</sup> Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 75 (1988): 786-811.

<sup>6</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (W.W. Norton, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), xiii-xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, 331, xviii-xix.

<sup>9</sup> Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> Hall, “Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1245, 1246.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, “Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1249.

<sup>12</sup> Hall, “Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1248, 1249.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Arnesen, “No ‘Graver Danger’: Black Anticommunism, the Communist Party, and the Race Question” and “The Red and the Black: Reflections on the Responses to ‘No Graver Danger,’” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 3, No. 4 (Winter 2006): 13-52, 75-79. Also see Eric Arnesen, “Passion and Politics: Race and the Writing of Working-Class History,” *Journal of the Historical Society* 6 (2006): 323-356.

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*

(Princeton University Press, 2005); Eric Arnesen, “Evaluating the Missing Wave,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2, No. 4 (Winter 2005): 48-51; Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968* (Cornell University Press, 1995); Kevin Boyle, “‘There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can’t Heal’: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Automobile Workers, 1940-1960,” *Labor History* 36 (1995): 5-23.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Beth Tompkins Bates, “A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933–1941,” *American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 340–377; Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Hall, “Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1235.

<sup>18</sup> For accounts of Randolph’s life, see: Eric Arnesen, “A. Philip Randolph: Labor and the New Black Politics,” in Arnesen, ed., *The Human Tradition in American Labor History* (Scholarly Resources, 2003), 173-191; Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

<sup>19</sup> “The Danger of Communists and Communism to Labor and the Negro,” *The Black Worker* (December 1948), 5.

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Joseph Crespino, who articulated this point at the 2008 meeting of the Southern Historical Association, for this formulation.

<sup>21</sup> Hall, “Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1253-54.

<sup>22</sup> Lawson, *Civil Rights Crossroads*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> David Chappell, “Civil Rights: Grassroots, High Politics, or Both?” *Reviews in American History* 32 (2004): 568.

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