

Freedom North Studies, the Long Civil Rights Movement, and Twentieth-Century Liberalism in American Cities

Journal of Urban History
2016, Vol. 42(3) 634–640
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
juh.sagepub.com


Patrick D. Jones (2009). *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. xiii, 318 pp., maps, photos, notes, bibliography, index, \$45.00 (cloth), \$22.95 (paper).

Phyllis Palmer (2008). *Living as Equals: How Three White Communities Struggled to Make Interracial Connections during the Civil Rights Era*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press. x, 299 pp., illustrations, notes, index, \$69.95 (cloth), \$27.95 (paper).

Jerald Podair (2008). *Bayard Rustin: American Dreamer*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield. xiii, 173 pp., photographs, documents, bibliographical essay, index, \$32.95 (cloth).

Thomas J. Sugrue (2008). *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*. New York: Random House. xiii, 720 pp., illustrations, notes, index, \$35 (cloth).

Reviewed by: Brian Purnell, *Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME, USA*

DOI: 10.1177/0096144216635149

Keywords

social movements, interracial, civil rights, Black Power, post-WWII

“For historians and general readers interested in the civil rights movement’s past,” writes Eric Arnesen, “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.” Arnesen’s comment came before the fiftieth anniversaries of major civil rights movement milestones. In 2013 and 2014, the nation paused and remembered those historic moments. During the years that surrounded these anniversaries, “the best of times” for civil rights movement historians got even better.¹

As civil rights movement history flourished, a new subfield appeared. Starting around 2003, more historians studied the civil rights movement in cities outside of the South. Places such as New York, Detroit, Saint Louis, Oakland, and Seattle have joined well-known southern cities, such as Birmingham, Montgomery, Jackson, and Memphis as important sites for civil rights movement history.² Even some southern cities that were ignored in histories of the civil rights movement became settings for new scholarship.³ But since the main focus has been the North, it may be appropriate to call this genre of history, “Freedom North Studies,” after the influential anthology edited by Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard.⁴

Jacquelin Dowd Hall and Nikil Pal Singh’s arguments concerning a long civil rights movement also encouraged growth within Freedom North Studies. Borrowing from Dowd and Singh, historians have expanded their geographic and chronological approaches to civil rights movement

history. Hall, Singh, and others have called for a timeframe of the civil rights movement that starts earlier than 1954 and continues longer than 1965. They have also argued convincingly that neither racism, nor civil rights movement activism, existed solely in the South.⁵ Mississippi historian Charles M. Payne has called attention to northern cities “the most interesting revisionist theme” within civil rights movement scholarship. As soon as one examined seriously the history of the movement outside the South, Payne argued, conventional understandings of this history would fall apart. “Looking at the North,” Payne wrote, “gives us a different way to think about the limits of liberalism, and of antidiscrimination as the end-all of racial policy.”⁶

The books I discuss in this essay contain all of the key themes and subjects associated with Freedom North Studies. The field has largely synthesized around analyses of the promises and disappointments of twentieth-century liberalism through histories of local urban protest movements that rose and fell throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Those protest movements generally called for better housing, desegregated public schools, increased employment and economic opportunities, and power through electoral politics. They sometimes morphed into Black Nationalism, or aligned with anticapitalist revolutionary movements. Sometimes, as Sugrue’s *Sweet Land of Liberty* indicates, those very local movements became part of international and national efforts. Sugrue (382-398) and a handful of other historians have shown this to be the case with the welfare rights movement, which grew out of many black-women-led local urban protest movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.⁷ For the most part, Freedom North Studies show how urban blacks strongly criticized liberalism, or as Sugrue writes, eventually “cast their lot, for better or for worse, with the liberal state” (497). Books within this genre often analyze racism into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Usually they end as Sugrue’s does: with some version of a reminder that, “The struggle for racial equality in the North continues” (543).

Most Freedom North Studies books have been local case studies. *Sweet Land of Liberty* is the first narrative synthesis of the northern civil rights movement. Sugrue’s book reveals a long history of activism against northern racism. He begins in the early 1900s, but twelve of the book’s fourteen chapters focus on the early 1940s through the end of the 1970s, which covers many of the high and low points of twentieth-century American liberalism.

Despite the many twists and turns toward Black Nationalism and anticapitalist radicalism that African American activism takes during these four decades—and Sugrue’s book pays some attention to many of these ideas and movements—*Sweet Land of Liberty* gives a solid and sweeping overview of how activists pushed American liberalism to deal directly, forcefully, and sometimes effectively with northern, urban forms of racism. Ultimately, twentieth-century liberalism tried hard to create and enforce a civil rights agenda in housing, employment, education, welfare, and economic development. At every step of the way, black activists pushed and prodded government. Over the decades, they fought to pass stronger antidiscrimination laws in employment. They demanded more protections against racial discrimination in areas where racism invaded social life, such as private housing markets. They forced local and federal administrations to orchestrate bigger and bolder plans to redress historic injustice: affirmative action in employment; school desegregation through metropolitan bussing programs; and a massive “Freedom Budget” as part of a domestic Marshall Plan to address poverty and unemployment in cities. Sugrue indicates victorious moments, but ultimately his national story of the northern civil rights movement confirms what many political historians have said about liberalism for the past twenty years: on matters of racism, liberalism did not and could not go far enough. It did not have widespread, massive, positive effects.⁸

In some areas—the tremendous increase in the number of black elected officials, the gains in government employment that black people make through affirmative action, the slight expansion of a black middle and wealthy class, the opening of many labor unions to black workers—the northern civil rights movement achieved victories. But in far too many other areas of American life, it did not. For example, housing segregation worsened over time. Sugrue shows how, “opening the suburbs proved to be one of the greatest failures of post war racial liberalism” (243).

Racism in housing was rampant, and at times violent, throughout the country, even in states that had aggressive open housing laws and antidiscrimination investigation commissions. Connected to residential separation, the northern movement proved ineffective on the public education front. Public schools in northern cities are just as segregated and struggling today as they were in the 1960s. And African Americans' economic situation at the end of the northern movement is bleak. Sugrue writes how today, "the starkest racial disparities in the United States are in wealth" (539), but what is even more sobering is how, "without the War on Poverty and the rise of black elected officials, black economic gains would be even fewer" (542). Sugrue's quote of Urban League leader Whitney M. Young Jr. speaking in 1963 proved apropos then and is worth considering today: "On an economic level the hard but simple fact . . . is that the past of the Negro exists in the present" (255).

The synthesis of Freedom North Studies in *Sweet Land of Liberty* does not have neat, clear, progressive endings. In some ways, this makes the story difficult to pass down to new generations of students who are so used to each era of American history ending on positive notes. Still, for anyone who teaches civil rights movement history, this book is an indispensable tool. Thanks to *Sweet Land of Liberty* and to the growing field of Freedom North Studies, northern cities should never again be omitted from the national story of the civil rights movement, nor should they be tacked on to the end of the story as the place where the liberal, interracial movement died at the hands of racial separatism and rising conservatism. The civil rights movement had a long, hard fight in northern cities. All of those movements' complexities deserve to be part of how we teach and learn the history of twentieth-century liberalism.

The books by Jones, Palmer, and Podair show ways that historians intensively examine larger themes present in Sugrue's book. For prose that is enjoyable and exciting to read, Jones's *The Selma of the North* is simply one of the best examples of Freedom North Studies. Overall, *Sweet Land of Liberty* does not give readers detailed depictions of places. In parts it does; but at 543 pages of text, with coverage of dozens of different cities and suburbs, the book cannot communicate a great deal of specificity and nuance. Readers come away from it knowing much about racial discrimination in the building trades industries in Philadelphia, St. Louis, and New York, and housing discrimination and school segregation in Chicago, Levittown, New Rochelle, and New York City. But Sugrue's large synthesis provides scattered discussions of specific places. It cannot capture the ways that racism in New York City differed from racism in Chicago, which differed from racism in Philadelphia, which differed from racism in St. Louis. That is where Jones's book excels. His case study of the history of civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee narrates wonderfully how a robust black freedom movement arose in that city, and the specific, unique characteristics of that movement.

The Selma of the North begins with the Milwaukee's industrial economy during the early 1900s and how it attracted southern black workers. From there, readers see how African Americans become enmeshed in labor strife and how housing segregation created a black community in the city's "Inner Core." Jones shows how black protest in Milwaukee during the civil rights era started in the 1950s around a deadly incident of police brutality, during which the white officer who shot a black man dismissed his victim as, "just a damn nigger kid anyhow" (33).

From there, Jones's narrative unfolds a slow boil of black activism—around education, employment, and especially open housing. Milwaukee activists put pressure on the government to protect black people from destructive forms of racism. Jones highlights a small but vigorous Black Catholic presence in the city, which propelled the charismatic and militant Italian American priest James Groppi to the forefront of the local Black Freedom Movement. Groppi participated in protests with tens of thousands of Black Milwaukeeans. They confronted brutal waves of white citizens and police officers. Groppi mentored the local NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) Youth Council's (YC) and its Commandos, a security force that used self-defense to protect nonviolent protestors. Violence flared in Milwaukee in 1967 in

the wake of another police brutality case, but Black activists reorganized around a massive open housing campaign. When the Milwaukee movement turned toward Black Power, Jones writes that Black Power politics there, “defy easy characterization and challenges a number of fast assumptions about the civil rights movement” (234). In Milwaukee, Black Power did not force Groppi from his connection to black activists. Jones argues that, “The YC’s ability to reconcile race pride and community empowerment with integrationist goals, such as open housing, indicated a much more fluid connection between concepts like ‘integration’ and ‘Black Power’” (234). And in Milwaukee, the most violent and angry voices during the Black Power era originated with whites. Jones rightly states that such naked racial hatred demands that historians reconsider who the most dangerous and militant citizens in late-60s cities really were. *The Selma of the North* is one of about a dozen case studies that works well with Sugrue’s detailed synthesis. Books like Jones’s enable historians to reinterpret the geography of the civil rights movement, the movement’s political issues, its major participants, and its legacies.⁹

Rather than focus on one city, *Living as Equals* concentrates on one theme of the civil rights era: integration. It contains three long historical essays, two on interracial (black–white) communities and one on a multicultural, multiracial (Anglo–Chicano–black) activist movement in San Antonio, Texas. Together, these essays argue that the civil rights era “inspired some white Americans to become new kinds of white people” (13): white people who defined their racial identity through active partnership with, not opposition against, racial and ethnic minorities.

Palmer’s case studies confirm two major lessons from *Sweet Land of Liberty’s* conclusion. “First, there is no straight line from a transformation of attitudes and public discourse,” Sugrue writes, “to an increase in racial equality” (540). Palmer’s chapter on an interracial housing movement in Washington, D.C., and each of her essay’s many references to racially segregated public schools illustrate this fact. No matter how much the white people in Palmer’s book believed in racial equality, and even worked to try and create it, at every step they faced hard, almost insurmountable political and economic barriers that blocked their efforts. Sugrue’s second lesson that Palmer’s case studies prove is that the social, political, and economic changes that actually did happen for African Americans in cities during the long civil rights movement—

the destruction of Jim Crow in public accommodations; the opening of employment, especially in the public sector; the growth in black political power—none of these was solely or primarily the result of a shift in white attitudes. Rather, they were a result of decades of activism and policy making—boycotts, pickets, agitation, riots, lobbying, litigation, and legislation. (540)

Palmer’s three essays reveal that whites had to have skin in the game for interracial and multicultural communities to work. They had to organize, fight, and be willing to forego many of the cultural comforts and social privileges that came with their whiteness. Palmer shows the difficulties whites faced in making these decisions. Even when whites dedicated themselves to the hard work of integrated life, those projects struggled to succeed. *Living as Equals* outlines what these whites tried to accomplish, and how difficult those efforts were.

One of Palmer’s main arguments is that “to be a different sort of white person inevitably required being a different kind of man or woman” (16). Her first essay highlights week-long summer Brotherhood camps for teenagers sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Palmer discusses the camps in two different time periods: 1957–1967, when the camps largely functioned as incubators for political dialogues on democracy; and 1968–1974, when the camps fostered multicultural dialogues on personal identity. In the first period,

the camps offered a moment to try out behaviors outside the existing racial hierarchies of white power and black subordination or of white centrality and Mexican American and Asian American marginality, and the gender roles integral to the racial ordering. (35)

Campers discussed politics and the meaning of democracy. They talked and listened to one another and lived in integrated cabins. They danced, held hands, sang, and kissed across racial and ethnic lines. During the later years, the focus and culture of the camps shifted. Rather than work to build integrated communities through dialogue on ways to diminish racial and ethnic differences, the Brotherhood camps encouraged campers to work together for “a nation built on the respectful negotiation of racialized difference” (66). During both phases of the camp, young white people arrived with biases and ignorance they absorbed from their highly segregated social worlds. The camps recruited participants from public schools, which were almost completely segregated by race and ethnicity. Living in integrated communities had a lasting effect on the participants Palmer interviewed, especially the whites.

Her other essays focus specifically on two cities: Washington, D.C. and San Antonio, Texas. These essays show how creating a stable interracial residential community and a multicultural political community required a tremendous amount of sacrifice on the part of whites. In the essays on Neighbors, Inc., the interracial homeowners’ organization in Northwest, D.C., white homeowners waged war against blockbusting realtors. They fought against urban renewal projects that favored suburbs. They created interracial, middle-class communities to show other potential white buyers that having middle-class black neighbors would not plummet property values. They tried, but mostly failed, to create racially integrated local public schools.

The essays on San Antonio span the years 1948 to 1983. They uncover the challenges inherent in political coalitions where Anglos shared power with a large population of Chicanos and a smaller population of African Americans. These essays demonstrate how whites moved, with difficulty, from positions of paternalism and assumed political dominance over Mexican Americans and blacks to genuine power sharing. By the 1980s, Palmer shows how some whites “gave up the old Anglo stance of distance and dominance for new relationships, learning a new form of politics” based on “democratic, egalitarian, productive tension of building relationships and sharing governance” (236).

Living as Equals works to “retrieve relationship building as essential to democratic life and to show that such a goal was not invariably escapist or easy” (238-239). It also emphasizes the ways “that people make history. Our choices matter” (245). One strength of *Freedom North Studies* is that this scholarship reveals a range of political choices people made in their efforts to fight against northern, urban forms of Jim Crow racism. They worked in interracial, integrationist groups. They utilized direct action protest. They joined Black Nationalist organizations. They developed radical economic critiques. They ran for political office. They worked within organized labor. They organized community development corporations. Some made demands of the government. Others rejected working within the system. Whatever choices northern and urban activists made, they invariably involved some analysis of whether or not a liberal government was capable of fixing problems associated with racism and poverty.

Northern civil rights movement history unfolded through local organizations; therefore, this history does not feature a grand spokesman (or spokeswoman) whose oratory and activism captured the zeitgeist of all the different local and regional movements. Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to launch an open housing movement in Chicago and failed. Malcolm X captured the imagination of many northern activists; but his untimely assassination in 1965 cut short his direct leadership of a mass movement in the North. Northern, urban civil rights movement history lacks a central leader, which is another challenge the genre faces breaking into the mainstream American consciousness.

But perhaps Bayard Rustin is such an individual who illustrates the diverse ideas, tactics, and organizations that influenced northern, urban civil rights movements. Jerald Podair’s short book is a wonderful introduction to Rustin’s long life as an activist. Podair shows how Rustin moved from being an anti-Communist Socialist union organizer to a pacifist critic of World War II, to a civil rights and labor rights activist, to a fierce critic of Black Power and Black Nationalism, to a

humanistic-minded Cold Warrior and champion of American democracy against international Marxist–Leninist revolutionary movements, to, at the end of his life, a public advocate for gay rights. Rustin did not champion all the different political positions that appear in the long northern civil rights movement. But his life did intersect with them. More than any public figure, Rustin’s activism may provide the best window into all the different ways northern Black Freedom activists navigated and negotiated the contradictions and complexities of twentieth-century American liberalism.

Rustin consistently believed that jobs and economic justice for the poorest Americans would benefit everyone irrespective of race or ethnicity. He championed a Freedom Budget for All Americans (82–87, 139–142) in October 1966, which, Podair summarizes, “called for the federal government to spend \$100 billion during the succeeding ten years on the most generous array of social services the nation had ever offered” and had the “stated goal was to end poverty permanently in the United States” (82–83). During the New York City school strikes of the late 1960s, Rustin’s steadfast belief in strong labor unions put him on the side of the mostly white United Federation of Teachers and against the mostly black opponents of the union. Four years prior, however, Rustin helped lead some of the largest demonstrations for racial integration of New York City’s public schools. At different moments, because he was gay, Rustin was rebuked and rejected by his homophobic allies in pacifist and labor organizations. But in the 1960s and 1970s, Rustin became a true political insider, advising Presidents, working all around the world for human rights, and advocating humanistic beliefs that no person should suffer from racism, poverty, or political repression.

In Rustin’s 1943 letter to his draft board, in which he rejected military conscription, Rustin concluded that “it is always timely and virtuous to change—to take in all humility a new path” (121). This sentiment captures best how Freedom North Studies, and histories of the long civil rights movement in American cities, invite new approaches to the long, complicated, and unfinished history of racism and liberalism in America.

Author’s Note

The author would like to thank Timothy J. Gilfoyle for his inestimable patience and David Goldfield for writing the right words that motivated me to finish this long-overdue essay.

Notes

1. Eric Arnesen, “Reconsidering the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement,’” *Historically Speaking* (April 2009): 31. Some of the recent books that commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of major moments of civil rights movement include William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013); Gary Younge, *The Speech: The History behind Martin Luther King Jr’s Dream* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013); Clay Risen, *The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014); Todd S. Purdum, *An Idea Whose Time Has Come: Two Presidents, Two Parties and the Battle for the Civil Rights Act of 1964* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014); Aram Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power and the Meredith March against Fear* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014). The PBS series, *American Experience*, also produced several new documentaries on civil rights movement history: *Freedom Summer: Mississippi, 1964* (2014); *The March: The Story of the Greatest March in American History* (2013); *Freedom Riders* (2011). Some historians have also started examining what happened to the civil rights movement after its heyday in the 1960s passed. See, David L. Chappell, *Waking from the Dream: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Shadow of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Random House, 2014); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
2. James Ralph, *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Robert O. Self,

- American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Josh Sides, *LA City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008); Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggles in St. Louis, 1936-1975* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Joan Singler, Jean Durning, Bettylou Valentine, and Maid Adams, *Seattle in Black and White: The Congress of Racial Equality and the Fight for Equal Opportunity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); Jacobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Brian Purnell, *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).
3. Peter Levy, *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003); Tracey K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky, 1945-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010); Benjamin Houston, *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).
 4. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), and Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
 5. Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1233-63; Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1-14, esp. 5-6. For a critique of this argument see Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Civil Rights Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (2007): 265-88; and Eric Arnesen, *op. cit.*
 6. Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), xvii.
 7. Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggle against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University Press of Pennsylvania, 2007); Lisa Levinstein, *A Movement without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
 8. Gary Gerstle, "Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 579-86; Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).
 9. See note 2.

Author Biography

Brian Purnell is associate professor of Africana studies and history at Bowdoin College. He is the author of *Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings: The Congress of Racial Equality in Brooklyn* (University Press of Kentucky, 2013). He is researching and writing on a history of community development corporations in Brooklyn, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, and efforts to unmake black ghettos in those cities.