

Reading: Civil Rights History and Mythology

History is almost always controversial. Inevitably, historical events are selected, recorded, and remembered through the lenses of historians with their own world views and cultural backgrounds, using sources which also have biases. Historians sometimes come to a consensus of sorts about historical truth – and that consensus generally conforms to the political and social norms of the day. As the culture changes or evolves, so does the consensus history.

An example of this might be the portrayal of Native Americans in American history. Up until the mid-twentieth century, it would have been difficult to find history that presented “Indians” as determined and ingenious survivors of European aggression, rather than savages attacking whites at every opportunity. This was, of course, reflected in fiction, movies, comic books, and television as well as in history books. It was also reflected in government policy, which continued to dismantle indigenous people’s cultures and failed to address poverty on Native American reservations.

What do we know about the American civil rights movement? Some might describe it this way:

- The movement began in the mid-1950s with the Montgomery Bus Boycott and ended sometime after the passage of the Civil Rights Acts, and the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968.
- African-Americans protesting segregation in the South were often attacked by police and white mobs.
- Rosa Parks was tired after a hard day’s work and refused to give up her seat on a bus.
- Dr. Martin Luther King’s leadership and non-violent strategy led to the movement’s success.

While these elements tell an essential portion of the history of the civil rights movement, historian Jeanne Theoharis, in her book *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*, considers some of what has been left out or distorted.

The civil rights movement in the North

The civil rights movement was not just a Southern affair – just as slavery was not just a Southern institution.

Much of the focus of civil rights movement history has focused on the heroic struggle in places like Selma and Montgomery, Alabama; Biloxi and Jackson, Mississippi; and Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Dozens of churches and homes were bombed, hundreds beaten and jailed. And yet the marchers and picketers and freedom riders persisted. Heroes were many: Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, John Lewis, Rosa Parks, Diane Nash, and many, many others. For a decade, national attention was focused on the struggle to end segregation in the South.

The media paid much less attention to the civil rights movement in the North, where people of color were also fighting to desegregate schools, end job and housing discrimination, and challenge police violence.

New York City. In New York City, African-American activists fighting segregation were not necessarily met with dynamite and firehoses, but often faced off with entrenched bureaucracies, polite refusals, calculating politicians, and a media wedded to the status quo. Neighborhoods were segregated by way of red-lining, blockbusting and discriminatory lending practices. (See the glossary at the bottom of the

reading for definitions.) Businesses openly discriminated in hiring. Schools were segregated—with Black schools overcrowded, in poor condition, and offering fewer academic choices than white schools.

Beginning before *Brown v. Board of Education*, parents attempted to integrate New York City schools. The school board said the segregation was “natural” and not the result of government policy. They went so far as to institute double shifts in Black high schools to avoid integration. For years, Black parents campaigned to end segregation. They formed organizations, picketed, lobbied their representatives, met with school officials, went to the press, and took the City to court. On February 3, 1964, almost half a million students boycotted school in protest of the City’s refusal to create a plan for desegregated schools.

Boston. In September 1974, Boston went through a traumatic series of events that is known as the “Boston Busing Crisis.” As the result of a lawsuit filed by Boston parents, a federal judge ordered the City to integrate its schools. The plan involved busing students among different neighborhoods to achieve a racial balance. The reaction of white Bostonians was angry, often racist, and sometimes violent. At some previously white schools, mobs attacked Black students attempting to enter the building. According to historian Jeanne Theoharis, the Boston Busing Crisis was not actually about busing, and it wasn’t a “crisis” (given that political crises are sudden and short-term events). In fact, the Black community in Boston, as in New York, had been protesting unequal schools for decades. Black schools were overcrowded, in poor condition, understaffed, and academically inferior to white schools. Over half the schools in the city had one or zero Black teachers.

And, as in New York, the segregation wasn’t accidental or “natural.” School zoning maps were so contrived that in some areas Black and white students living on the same block were sent to different schools. The media and politicians labeled the “crisis” as having erupted as a result of the court decision, effectively ignoring the disparity in schools, the purposeful segregation, and the long history of parent activism to address the problem.

Even the busing aspect of the crisis was misrepresented. Anti-integration voices—including most of the City Council—framed the issue as a problem with busing. It was as if busing was a new and burdensome grievance forced upon students attending familiar, harmonious neighborhood-based schools. In fact, before the “busing crisis,” 85 percent of Boston students were bused to their schools—often to implement racially divided schools.

Urban Uprisings

The massive urban uprisings (or “riots”) in predominately Black communities during the late 1960s are often portrayed as separate and apart from the civil rights movement. Media attention to the rebellions in Watts (Los Angeles), Detroit, Chicago, and other northern cities inevitably focus on the level of violence and the particular spark that ignited each upheaval.

In most cases that spark was an instance of police violence. In Watts, it began with an argument after an African-American man was pulled over in a traffic stop. Over the course of six days, 34 people were killed and over 1000 injured in the unrest. In Newark, the spark was the police beating of a Black taxi driver. Twenty-six people were killed in four days of violence.

Preceding every “urban riot” were decades of protests, boycotts, organizing, lobbying, and other lawful activism—in other words, a civil right movement. In Detroit, four years before the uprising, almost 200,000 people participated in a march to protest inequality in schools, housing, and jobs. In Los Angeles, before Watts, 76 community organizations had united to demand an end to school segregation.

They presented detailed data to the school board and they marched, sat-in, “studied-in,” and “sang-in” when facts seemed not to help.

“In my travel in the North, I was increasingly becoming disillusioned with the power structures there. I encountered the tragic and stubborn fact that in virtually no major city was there a mayor possessing statesmanship, understanding, or even strong compassion on the civil rights question, Many of them sat on platforms with all their imposing regalia of office to welcome me to their cities and showered praise on the heroism of Southern Negroes. Yet when the issues were joined concerning local conditions, only the language was polite; the rejection was firm and unequivocal.” — Martin Luther King

Who Was Important in the Movement

Just as the exclusion of northern civil rights history tends to narrow the scope and significance of the movement, so too does the emphasis on a handful of heroic individuals. It doesn't diminish Rosa Parks' courageous actions or Martin Luther King's leadership to recognize the thousands of ordinary people meeting in homes and churches, organizing protests, writing leaflets, going door-to-door, performing personal acts of resistance, marching, sitting-in, making phone calls, writing letters to the editor, lobbying politicians, creating art and music, picketing, and boycotting.

Rosa Parks had been an activist for a dozen years before she was arrested for not giving up her seat on the bus. And she was a leader of the bus boycott after her arrest, and continued her activism for the rest of her life—much of it in the (northern) city of Detroit.

Popular history of the civil rights movement also leaves out or downplays the role of women. Coretta Scott King was not simply the loyal and loving wife of a civil rights leader. She was a steadfast advocate for equality and progressive change before her marriage and after MLK's assassination. Her activism had a broad scope. She was a founder of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy and active as well in the NAACP, Women's Strike for Peace, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and the campaign for third-party presidential candidate Henry Wallace. Her opposition to the war in Vietnam pre-dated her husband's, and it was at her urging that Reverend King began to speak out more on international issues.

Perhaps the most influential behind-the-scenes organizer in the civil rights movement was Ella Baker. Baker was a leader of the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for over twenty years before her crucial role in forming the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960. She mentored leaders almost too numerous to list, including such iconic figures as Rosa Parks, Dianne Nash, Stokely Carmichael, Julian Bond, and Bob Moses. It was both her style and her philosophy to promote participatory democracy and rely less on hierarchical leadership.

“You didn't see me on television, you didn't see news stories about me. The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders.” — *Ella Baker*

Sexism hampered the promotion of women to leadership positions and downplayed their work at the time, as well as nearly erasing them from civil rights history. But leaders such as Fannie Lou Hamer (of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party), Gloria Richardson (a leader of the “Cambridge Movement”), Diane Nash (a leader of the Nashville sit-ins), Anne Braden (a radical white ally), Septima Clark (“Queen Mother” of the civil rights movement) and many others were able to persist despite the obstacles

thrown at them. So too, did the women who showed up to do all the essential tasks of organizing—from fundraising to registering voters to sitting-in.

Sanitizing Leaders and Movements

Both Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King had their activism sanitized in a national memory which makes statues and holidays possible and at the same time hides some unpleasant truths.

Republican candidates for president (such as Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump) who have opposed almost all goals of the civil rights movement were able to say they supported Rosa Parks on the ten dollar bill. On the same day as the dedication of a statue of Parks in the nation's Capitol, the Supreme Court was limiting enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. President Trump gave the Pope a book of King's writings in the same week as he introduced a budget slashing social services for poor people.

Both Parks and King were advocates for broader change than simply desegregation of public facilities. Martin Luther King opposed the Vietnam War, was a leader of the Poor People's Campaign, which called for broad, systemic economic change, and was assassinated while in Memphis to support striking sanitation workers. Rosa Parks was active in the anti-war movement, the anti-apartheid movement, and the fight against U.S. intervention in Central America. The myths that enable the media and politicians on all points of the political spectrum to celebrate the lives of Parks and King (and the civil rights movement in general) also serve to downplay the issues they fought for and narrow the focus of their activism.

The Use & Misuse of Myths

Myths are useful. As they become a part of a national identity, they serve a purpose – but not always a positive one. The celebrations and commemorations connected to the civil rights movement remind us of what has been just and good about our nation. The work and prominence given to heroes like MLK and Rosa Parks has helped people recognize that racism and segregation are wrong.

But the distortion of our history and creation of heroes can also lead to complacency, and a sense that all is now well; that the battles have been fought and won. Theoharis argues that civil rights mythologies can lead us to believe in our nation's "progress and national redemption" — and stymies our understanding of the true persistence of racism. This includes an enormous racial wealth gap, police violence against people of color, mass incarceration, continuing housing segregation, education inequality, and more. There's a national holiday for Martin Luther King, a whole month devoted to Black history, and Malcolm X is on the 33-cent stamp. But racism and profound racial inequity persists.

Civil rights movement mythologies also shape our ideas of what a good movement should be: led by a few heroic leaders with "achievable" goals and using nonviolent tactics. This model of a virtuous movement allows politicians and pundits to condemn Black Lives Matter and other struggles as too angry, too disruptive, too decentralized, and too unwilling to put forth reasonable, limited demands. Further, tributes and memorials to great leaders overemphasize their significance and underemphasize the role of regular people taking action. The civil rights movement, as is true of all movements, was and is made up of people working together and acting collectively in a sustained way. Failing to recognize the role of ordinary people not only distorts the actual history and understanding of the movement, but also suggests that for ordinary people, making political change is a spectator sport – that our role is to sit back and observe what great leaders will do next. It relieves us of the responsibility to be actively involved in working to right the wrongs we see in the world.

Glossary

Blockbusting: A practice in which the real estate industry worked to frighten whites into selling their homes in racially-mixed neighborhoods.

Brown v Board of Education: The Supreme Court decision that determined that school segregation was unconstitutional.

De facto segregation: Segregation exists in fact, but is not officially sanctioned.

De jure segregation: Segregation is officially sanctioned and in accordance with the law.

NAACP: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded in 1909.

Redlining: The practice within the real estate industry of denying loans to people in low-income and African-American neighborhoods.

SNCC: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was the student/youth civil rights organization that provided much of the energy and people power for the voter registration and desegregation struggles of the early 1960s

Discussion

1. Jeanne Theoharis writes that: “These two freedom fighters [Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King] have been turned into Thanksgiving parade balloons—floating above us larger than life; unthreatening, happy patriots. Asking little of us, they bob along proud of our progress.” What is Theoharis saying? Why the image of the parade balloons? What is meant by the last line?
2. Compare the civil rights movement of the 1960s to Black Lives Matter. What are some differences? What are some similarities? How does “accepted wisdom” about these two movements compare to the reality, as you understand it? Is the accepted wisdom accurate? Why or why not?
3. How significant is the election of a Black president in the civil rights struggle? Explain.
4. President Obama said in 2007 that “The previous generation, the [Bob] Moses generation, pointed the way. They took us 90 percent of the way there. We still got that 10 percent in order to cross over to the other side.” Do you agree with President Obama that the civil rights movement achieved 90% of its goals? Why or why not?
5. What is the responsibility of ordinary people to work toward civil rights and justice for everyone? What is the responsibility specifically of white people to work toward civil rights for everyone?
6. The author of *A More Beautiful and Terrible History* writes: “Rosa Parks has been trapped on the bus.” What does she mean?