Bringing Race and Class Back In:

American Democratization in Comparative Perspective

Shamira M. Gelbman

University of Virginia
shamira@virginia.edu

Prepared for presentation at the Miller Center of Public Affairs' Spring Fellowship Conference
Charlottesville, VA ❁ May 4-5, 2006

The sense that American democracy is uniquely pervasive and vibrant has infused scholarly writing on the United States at least since Alexis de Tocqueville's Jacksonian era report. And yet, the United States' regime type is not as amenable to clear-cut classification as these accounts suggest: While the US is often presented as an "early democratizer," for its status as one of very first countries to introduce unqualified white male suffrage and to organize a competitive mass party system,[1] a number of scholars have emphasized that "[t]he American road to democracy has been a tortuous one," replete with false starts and backpedaling for nearly two centuries after independence.[2] In this view, the United States' maintenance of high barriers to political participation, particularly through racially motivated suffrage restrictions in the southern states, renders it a democratic laggard – or, more precisely, a "democratic exclusivist" or "restricted democratic" regime – that joined the "full democracy" ranks only during the latter part of the twentieth century.[3]

Underlying this classificatory ambiguity is the decidedly racial tenor of American politics, which renders the United States' democratic trajectory qualitatively different from those of the European countries to which it is typically compared. The characteristic "western" pattern of democratization – which features the removal of the economic qualifications that comprised the basis of democratic exclusion and incorporation – therefore does not readily describe the experience of the United States, where racial rather than economic classifications have been the

[1] While this view associated most prominently with the Tocqueville-inspired "liberal tradition" scholarship on American political development (see, e.g. Hartz [1955]; Lipset [1997]), it is also prevalent in some "large-n" cross-national studies of democracy that code the US as a democracy since the early nineteenth century (e.g. Przeworski, et al. [2000]; Boix [2003]).

[2] Therborn (1977) p. 16. The non-teleological nature of American democratization is driven home by Keyssar (2001).

[3] In addition to Therborn (1977), this view is adopted by Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) and González and King (2004), *inter alia*.

primary instrument for restricting political participation.[4] At stake, then, is not merely the arguably semantic task of determining the United States' democratic status, but our understanding of the process of democratization in the American context.

This paper addresses this concern by considering, first, how broadly comparative theories of democratization have fared in their handling of the American case. As the next section demonstrates, these frameworks deal awkwardly with the United States' coupling of early elimination of class-based suffrage qualifications with longstanding race-based disenfranchisement schemes and, consequently, come up short in their explanations of the 1960s enfranchisement of southern blacks. Rather than reject their political-economic approach, however, this paper suggests a modification that shifts the focus of analysis from the patterns of conflict and cooperation among economic classes to the relationship between working class organizations and social movement organizations representing racial minorities. Briefly, it argues that political elites are induced to concede to demands for the de-racialization of democratic participation when confronted by the unlikely but potent collaboration of these forces. Seen in this light, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was not the inevitable product of a relentless trajectory of progressive democratization; rather, it was precipitated by an unlikely and historically contingent coalition of subaltern forces in which the agency of both racially- and economically-defined political actors played a decisive role. Finally, the paper concludes by addressing the implications of this analysis for the doctrine of "American exceptionalism" and the utility and practice of cross-national comparison in the study of American political development.

[4] Indeed, it was at precisely the same time that economic suffrage qualifications were rapidly falling by the wayside that racial qualifications grew increasingly prevalent throughout the United States, with the proportion of states with race-based suffrage restrictions rising from less than a quarter in 1790 to more than seventy-five percent by the mid-1850s (Keyssar 2001: 56). See also Du Bois (1952 [1935]) pp. 6-8.

COMPARATIVE ACCOUNTS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRATIZATION

A spate of regime transitions in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa at the end of the twentieth century – the so-called "third wave" of democracy[5] – has led contemporary students of democratization to focus their explanatory efforts on countries far outside the "Western industrial" universe of cases. Nevertheless, in some influential studies the experiences of established democracies are brought to bear on the possibilities for democratization and democratic consolidation in the developing world, while still other theories of democratization are proffered in terms that convey unhampered generalizability across regional and temporal boundaries.[6]

Because race is not a salient factor in the modal case, however, its implications for the prospects and character of democracy do not usually figure systematically into these broadly comparative analyses. Instead, its effects are downplayed or dealt with on an ad hoc basis, which in turn limits the adequacy and persuasiveness of their explanations of cases like the United States. As the ensuing discussion of two of its most prominent works suggests, this is particularly apparent in political-economic theories of democratization, which place patterns of social and economic relations at the center of their explanations but do not rigorously consider how these dynamics might be altered in societies that feature cross-cutting racial cleavages.

Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy

The progenitor of the political-economic genre in the democratization literature is Barrington Moore, Jr., whose classic *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* was written during the halcyon days of civil rights activism in the United States. In Moore's view, democratization is one of three possible "routes to the modern world" and occurs only where a

[5] Huntington (1991).

[6] For an overview of this literature, see Bunce (2000).

particular constellation of pre-modern class dynamics is present. Particularly crucial in this respect is the presence of a "vigorous and independent class of town dwellers" poised to ally strategically with other class actors against absolutist government; in Moore's resolute terms, "[n]o bourgeois, no democracy."[7] The mere existence of this class, even when coupled with willing and able rural allies, does not produce a democratic regime, however; rather, democracy is forged in the aftermath of a revolutionary upheaval that disrupts traditional social and economic structures to make way for a more equitable allocation of power.

Moore casts the American Civil War as an exemplar of this sort of bourgeois revolution – "the last revolutionary offensive on the part of what one may legitimately call…bourgeois capitalist democracy," in fact – insofar as it briefly united northeastern capitalists and western farmers under the Radical Republican umbrella against the southern plantation elite in a struggle to determine how the federal government apparatus would adjudicate among the regions' competing economic requirements.[8] In contrast to the British Civil War and French Revolution that preceded it, however, the American Civil War did not result in the consolidation of the northerners' democratic agenda. Instead, and despite the Radical Republicans' intention to take down the southern plantation structure through a sweeping program of land redistribution and enfranchisement, the industrial and commercial capitalists upon whom their political clout depended balked at this affront to private property. As a result, the plantation elite promptly reasserted their economic and political hegemony in the South. In short order, sharecropping emerged to replace slavery as the prevailing labor-repressive basis of the plantation economy, and the newly installed "Redeemer" state governments enacted substantial legislative programs

[7] Moore (1966) p. 418.
[8] Moore (1966) p. 112.

designed to enforce racial stratification through the imposition of elaborate segregation and disenfranchisement schemes.

Given this turn of events, the United States' inclusion in the set of "democratic route" cases as a result of the Civil War is somewhat puzzling: Does this truly qualify as an episode of democratization if the *ancien régime* was resurrected so quickly and effectively that, as Moore points out,[9] a century later southern blacks were still deprived of the same basic democratic rights the Radical Republicans had not managed to secure? Moore addresses this concern by invoking a counterfactual scenario:

> One need only consider what would have happened had the Southern plantation system been able to establish itself in the West by the middle of the nineteenth century and surrounded the Northeast. Then the United States would have been in the position of some modernizing countries today, with a latifundia economy, a dominant antidemocratic aristocracy, and a weak and dependent commercial and industrial class, unable and unwilling to push forward toward political democracy.[10]

As dismal as this portrait is, however, it sits uneasily with the story Moore tells about the "classic conservative coalition" of northern capitalists and southern planters that emerged from the embers of the abortive Reconstruction program.[11] That is, even without the conjectural hegemony of the southern plantation system and despite the explosive growth of commerce and industry during the half-century following the Civil War, the post-bellum commercial and industrial class was not an able and willing force for political democracy; instead, it was content to turn a blind eye on the antidemocratic initiatives advanced throughout the South and facilitate their persistence well into the twentieth century.

Seemingly unconvinced himself, Moore admits that the abolition of slavery did not in fact democratize the American polity – "If the federal government no longer concerned itself with enforcing the fugitive slave laws," he concedes, "it either acquiesced or served as an

---

[9] Moore (1966) p. 146.

[10] Moore (1966) p. 153.

[11] Moore (1966) p. 149.

instrument for new forms of oppression" – and finally addresses the short coda of his U.S. case study to the racial legacy bequeathed by "the peculiarities of American history."[12] Once the racial cleavage of American society is introduced, however, Moore's purely class-based theory of democratization offers little insight into the possibilities for achieving unrestricted democracy in the United States. The class actors identified as necessary agents of democratization are no longer expected to promote the extension of democratic rights across the color line; instead, Moore maintains, "the Negroes are at present almost the only potential recruiting ground for efforts to change the character of the world's most powerful capitalist democracy." The outcome of these efforts, moreover, is deemed indeterminate: "Whether this potential will amount to anything, whether it will splinter and evaporate or coalesce with other discontents to achieve significant results, is quite another story," the conclusion of which apparently could not be adduced from prevailing class relations, as Moore projects only that the "bitter struggle" for racial equality is "likely to ebb and flow for years to come."[13]

Capitalist Development and Democracy

Moore's failure to anticipate the successful enfranchisement of southern blacks might readily be chalked up to the hazards inherent in any attempt to explain historical developments while they are still underway. The same cannot be said for Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John Stephens (hereafter RSS), who wrote *Capitalist Development and Democracy* – an ambitious effort to reconcile divergent strands of democratization scholarship that includes case studies of countries across diverse regions and time periods – with the benefit of nearly thirty years of hindsight on the climax and denouement of the mid-century civil rights movement.

---

[12] Moore (1966) p. 154.

[13] Ibid.

These authors reject Moore's idealization of the bourgeoisie as the pivotal democratic actor. "[F]or every case in which the bourgeoisie included the working-class in the political system," they argue, "there is at least one other in which the bourgeoisie participated in rollbacks of democracy in order to defend economic interests against those classes that used to be called *les classes dangereuses*."[14] Indeed, Moore's own account of failure to implement the Radical Republicans' land reform program in the aftermath of the Civil War suggests precisely such a case: Despite urban capitalists' willingness to constrain the expansion of the plantation economy and its encroachment on their access to labor, he describes, "[i]nfluential Northern sentiment was in no mood to tolerate an outright attack on property, not even Rebel property and not even in the name of capitalist democracy."[15]

Instead, RSS zero in on the working class, which, they maintain, has been "the most consistently pro-democratic force" across time and space.[16] This turn to the working class is intuitively appealing; it makes sense that "those who have only to gain from democracy will be its most reliable promoters and defenders."[17] The working class's support for democracy is not sufficient to ensure its introduction, however;[18] rather, according to the book's "relative class power model of democratization," the ability of the working class to promote democracy depends on its locus in broader "patterns of alliance and conflict in class relations," which are in turn shaped by the implications of economic development for such factors as the organization of

---

[14] Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 58.

[15] Moore (1966) pp. 146-7. The failure of Moore's theory to anticipate this outcome in the American case highlights his more general under-specification of the determinants of class actors' behavior; as Acemoglu and Robinson (2006: 76) point out, even while "Moore's (1966) analysis does incorporate choices – for example, whether the bourgeoisie enters into a coalition with the aristocracy…it is not clear in his analysis what determines whether such a choice is made."

[16] Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 8. A similar statement is made by Therborn (1977) p. 28.

[17] Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 57.

[18] The insufficiency of simply "being pro-democratic" discussed more explicitly by Collier (1999) pp. 16-7.

production, the geographic concentration of the lower classes, and social constructions of class interests.[19]

In this analysis, the United States is classified among "Britain's settler colonies," a subset of the larger class of advanced capitalist countries distinguished for its members' "colonial social structures" and their relatively early achievement of broad suffrage.[20] Even set apart from the Western European cases in this way, however, the US presents problems for RSS from the outset of the case study. To begin with, the case seems at odds with their theorized capitalist development-democracy link, since it historically featured "a significant class of large landholders engaged in labor repressive agriculture, yet the country apparently did become a democracy." This is hastily resolved with the qualification that in fact "the United States did not become a full democracy until late 1965 when the Voting Rights Act of 1965 allowed the federal government to ensure that blacks in the South could exercise the right to vote." Nevertheless, RSS go on to note, "the classification of the United States as a 'restricted democracy' distorts as much as it elucidates," since the "decentralized character of the American state" enabled the coexistence of divergent political forms at the regional and state levels, each reflecting the particular social and economic conditions of its locale.[21] They therefore find it "more appropriate" to adopt a divide-and-conquer strategy for classifying the US's regime type, and "classify the North, and later the West, of the country as a restricted democracy from its colonial origins to the Jacksonian period and as a full democracy thereafter," while treating the South as

[19] Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 60.

[20] Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) pp. 121-2; 139-40.

[21] Rueschemeyer et al. (1992, p. 44) use the term "restricted democracy" to denote a polity in which "the stipulated conditions [for democracy] are met to a large extent, but significant sectors of the population are excluded (for example by suffrage restrictions through literacy or similar qualifications), responsiveness of government is significantly reduced (for example through frequent military interventions or political pacts), and/or limitations of the freedoms of expression and association significantly narrow the range of articulated political positions (for example through the proscription of political parties)."

"a constitutional oligarchy or restricted democracy, depending on the time period and state in question, from its colonial origins to the late 1960s."[22]

Setting aside the questionable empirical validity of these designations,[23] the bifurcation RSS propose takes us only so far toward explaining, rather than merely characterizing, longitudinal changes in the United States' level of democracy. While differences in the northern and southern political economies shed light on the relative disinclination of elites in the latter region to democratize, and while federal decentralization clarifies how it was possible for states in the North and South to maintain divergent suffrage policies, these features of the American polity do not tell us why "full democracy" was finally realized on a nationwide basis during the mid-1960s. For this RSS offer a list of developments – including the mechanization of southern agriculture, the 1930s partisan realignment, and the various economic, political, and ideological effects of the New Deal and World War II – that are alleged to have precipitated the 1965 suffrage expansion. As they note with regard to the 1930s-40s aggrandizement of central state power, however, these factors only ensured that "when the federal government did decide to act in support of black rights, it could do so with greater effectiveness";[24] as such, they do not in fact explain the timing of this decision or its motivation.

It is striking, moreover, that the working class barely enters into RSS's account of democratization in the United States. Far from the ubiquitously democratic protagonist they describe in the book's theoretical chapter, the American working class is brought in only to note that the organizational weakness resulting from its "immigrant character" protected against the

[22] Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 122.
[23] See González and King (2004) p. 206.
[24] Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 130.

emergence of full-blown authoritarianism in the post-Reconstruction period.[25] Meanwhile, the antebellum eras associated with the introduction of universal male suffrage in the North all predate the emergence of working class organization, and it is the mobilization of southern blacks – not workers – that is given credit for the South's transition to "full democracy" during the 1960s.

At first, this does not seem particularly problematic: Just as we would expect the economic underclass to be the most ardent proponent of democracy in polities where economic qualifications comprise the basis of exclusion, it seems sensible that those marginalized because of their race would be most consistently pro-democratic in a racially exclusive political system. This analogy is not carried further, however. Whereas the "relative class power model" carefully situates the working class's capacity to generate democracy in the context of its alliances with other segments of society – since "[t]he working class was…far too weak to achieve by itself democratic rights for the subordinate classes"[26] – RSS make no mention of the civil rights movement's societal allies, and only passing reference to political allies in the national government who, for some unspecified reason, opted to take up the cause of black enfranchisement despite considerable opposition from counter-mobilized state and local forces. In the end, then, it is not clear how – or even if – their cursory account of the enfranchisement of southern blacks is meant to comport with their larger theoretical framework.

Implications for the Study of American Democratization

At first glance, the lesson from both Moore's and Rueschemeyer et al.'s attempts to reconcile the American experience with political-economic theories of democratization seems to be that further efforts along these lines should be forsaken since, in González and King's words,

[25] Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 132.
[26] Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) p. 59.

"[a]ny research strategy based on class analysis underestimates the centrality of other sociological cleavages in American politics…[particularly] the racial and ethnic divisions."[27] As an alternative, scholars who approach the issue of democratization in the US from an American political development perspective have by and large abandoned frameworks that revolve around societal relations in favor of "state-centered" or "historical institutionalist" explanations that attribute over-time variation in the United States' democratic character to such factors as "stateness,"[28] party building and jurisprudence,[29] and policy sequencing.[30]

And yet, it is not clear why an appreciation of the significance of race in American politics necessitates a turn away from class or, for that matter, why "bringing the state back in" is necessarily better suited to elucidate the implications of the American racial order for the country's political development. If anything, one would imagine that a race-sensitive theory of democratization would place society – since it is, after all, the locus of the relevant racial cleavages – at the forefront of its analysis. Instead of rejecting the application of political-economic theorizing to the United States off the bat, therefore, we might take a closer look at how the insights of this genre might be tweaked to accommodate cases in which racial stratification overshadows traditional economic cleavages.

THE WORKING CLASS AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES

At the heart of both the historical institutionalists' rejection of existing political-economic treatments of American democratization and the critique advanced in this paper is the sense that the comparative literature's characterization of the United States as simply an "advanced

---

[27] González and King (2004) p. 198.
[28] González and King (2004).
[29] Valelly (2004).
[30] Mettler (2006).

industrial" country or a "settler colony" does not capture the American polity's irrevocably racial timbre. Instead, the United States is more appropriately cast as a "racial order," or a "societ[y] where racial differences are formalized and socially pervasive," such that "[o]ther identities and forms of differentiation…must contend with a powerful social schism" between dominant and subordinate racial groups.[31] Several scholars have remarked upon this profound effect of racial stratification on the interests and behavior of political actors in the United States, particularly in the context of electoral coalition formation and political party building.[32] Here, though, the focus is on the consequences of pervasive racial cleavages for the democratic proclivities of social class actors: Specifically, how and why do the organization and preferences of dominant-race workers in racial orders differ from those described in political-economic treatments of comparative democratization? How did these dynamics play out in the American case in particular? And finally, what were their implications for the civil rights movement's capacity to attract allies in its struggle to secure black enfranchisement?

The (Non)-Democratic Preferences of the Bounded Working Class

The expectation that the working class plays an important part in the democratization process is held by a number of scholars who, in addition to Rueschemeyer and his coauthors' emphasis of the intuitiveness of workers' support for democracy, highlight the working class's capacity, especially in comparison to other subaltern groups, to influence the decisions of the political elites responsible for implementing democratic reform.[33] Thus, we are told of labor's

---

[31] Greenberg (1980) pp. 29-30. For accounts of the origins of the American racial order see Cell 1982; Frederickson 1981; and Marx 1998.

[32] Most instructive here is Frymer's (1999) demonstration of the implications of racial cleavage for US parties' conformity to the expectations of conventional theories of party competition.

[33] There is considerable variation within this literature as to the necessity and sufficiency of the working class's pro-democratic activity for actual democratization outcomes; these range from Therborn's (1977, p. 28) contention that the working class is the "common, consistent force" across divergent patterns of democratization, such that "[i]n a certain sense, different patterns may be said to express the different allies necessary for the success of the working-

"special place among the forces of civil society," which stems from both its distinctive organizational features and its capacity to "disrupt the economy directly" and reshape "conditions of employment and the character of labor-management relations" for the long term. Even in largely elite-driven regime transitions, therefore, the working class can significantly alter the pace and terms of negotiations.[34]

This picture is more complicated in racial orders, however, as overriding racial divisions undermine both the willingness and capacity of the working class to promote democratization. In this vein, Stanley Greenberg conceptualizes racial orders' dominant-race workers as comprising what he calls a "bounded working class," which "includ[es] in varying proportions an 'aristocracy among the working class' [comprised of artisans and skilled laborers] and a 'lower stratum' [comprised of unskilled workers in mass industries]…both set off from the [racially] subordinate wage-earning population of the 'proletariat proper.'"[35] Both of these working class segments, Greenberg argues, have incentives to resist the erosion of racial hierarchy. For artisans and skilled workers in particular, "there is a consonance between their own efforts to establish a monopoly of skills and the racial barriers that legitimize and facilitate the exclusion of subordinate, unskilled workers."[36] Even while they may object to state encroachments on their autonomy to control the supply of skilled labor, therefore, these relatively privileged workers and their representative organizations tend not to oppose the maintenance of racially discriminatory policies.

---

class struggle for democracy," to Collier's (1999, p. 167) finding that her "comparative analysis does not support the general proposition that working-class pressure is a decisive or even necessary, no less sufficient factor in democratization."

[34] Valenzuela (1989) p. 447. See also Adler and Webster (1995).

[35] Greenberg (1980) p. 277.

[36] Greenberg (1980) p. 275.

Unskilled workers, on the other hand, cannot lay claim to the artisans' skill scarcity trump card; as such, they typically benefit from broadly inclusive industrial unionization. As Greenberg notes, however, industrial unions are "inescapably political," as a consequence of their dependence on a supportive legal and economic climate for the achievement of their workplace goals.[37] Consequently, multiracial organization may be too risky for unskilled workers in a racial order to undertake, as it cuts "against the tenor of the society: often against the inclinations of the dominant workers directly involved, and almost always against the prevailing sentiments in the [racially] dominant section and the general direction of state policy," which then override the benefits of racially inclusive unionization.[38] Rather than embrace multiracialism, therefore, dominant-race workers frequently opt for strategies that "create artificial skill scarcity, limit undercutting, and reduce the supply of subordinate workers" – each of which, Greenberg emphasizes, "requires an elaborate state machinery for policing employers and the labor market and controlling the movements of subordinate workers."[39] This in turn fosters a vicious circle wherein unskilled workers' organizational strategies are both derived from and sustained by racial hierarchy; it often remains in their interest, therefore, to reject multiracialism once they have embarked upon a racially-exclusive path and to oppose subsequent efforts to mitigate racial stratification.[40]

This description of bounded working class behavior is something of an "ideal type," approximated perhaps most closely in South Africa, where a rigidly race-segregated working class organization was centrally coordinated and enforced by the state from the early stages of

---

[37] Greenberg (1980) p. 282.
[38] Greenberg (1980) pp. 284-5.
[39] Greenberg (1980) p. 285.
[40] Greenberg (1980) pp. 286-7. See also Arnesen (1994); Green (2000); and Montgomery (2000).

the country's economic development well into the late twentieth century.[41] In the United States, in contrast, the bounded working class model requires some flexibility in its application.[42] As the remainder of this paper details, the American labor movement closely resembled the upper stratum of Greenberg's bounded working class for much of its early history, with a highly protectionist craft unionism policy in which a combination of overtly discriminatory membership rules and ostensibly race-neutral closed shop, apprenticeship, and licensing requirements proved expedient for preventing the entry of blacks into the skilled workforce.[43] At various points, however, a second, more congenial face of organized labor emerged and – often in spite of substantial resistance from particular segments of its rank-and-file – brought opportunities for working class organizations to ally with civil rights activists in their struggle for black enfranchisement.

Forging a Bounded Working Class in the Post-Reconstruction United States

Like so many features of American politics, labor organization in the United States has traditionally exhibited considerable geographic variation. Nevertheless, white workers and labor organizers nationwide have long struggled with the quandary posed perhaps most starkly to white wage laborers in the postbellum South: "were [they] to be bound to the black laborer by economic condition and destiny, or rather to the white planter by community of blood?" Overwhelmingly, they opted for the latter and "clung frantically to the planter and his ideals…[and] sought redress by demanding unity of white against black, and not unity of poor against rich, or of worker against exploiter."[44] This tendency is explained in part by the "habit of

[41] Greenberg (1980) chapters 13-14; see also Feinstein (2005) chapters 3-4 and Simons and Simons (1983).

[42] Indeed, Greenberg applies his framework to just a single southern state (Alabama) rather than attempt to cover the United States as a whole.

[43] Spero and Harris (1931); see also United States Commission on Civil Rights (1961) pp. 128-133.

[44] Du Bois (1952 [1935]) p. 130.

whiteness" – lower class whites' conditioned impulse to frame their economic interests in racial terms – that had developed within the white working class during the antebellum period and "survived to ensure that white workers would be at best uncertain allies of Black freedom."[45] Compounding this psychological inclination was the more tangible threat of competition stemming from the sudden influx of blacks into the wage-labor force, which led white workers of all skill levels to fear for the security of their livelihoods and rush to protect their immediate economic interests.[46]

There were, to be sure, some indications that working class solidarity might possibly prevail over white workers' racist sensibilities. Most prominently, the Knights of Labor (KOL) – the first of a series of large-scale working class federations that have dominated labor politics in the United States – recruited members of all races from its inception in the late 1860s. While many of the KOL's locals organized on a segregated basis, several, including some in the South, were mixed.[47] Workers of both races participated jointly in KOL demonstrations, strikes, and Labor Day events across the country, leading to journalistic reports of "harmony prevail[ing] between white and black workmen"; "colored and white fraternizing as if it had been a common thing all their lives"; and even "grand stride[s]" being taken by the labor movement against racial segregation.[48] It seemed, therefore, that organized labor would remain at the forefront of the

---

[45] Roediger (1999 [1991]) p. 177.

[46] Greenberg (1980) pp. 337; 339-41. As Foner (1976, p. 17) describes, the threat was particularly acute for unskilled workers, whose demands were increasingly refused by employers who were "confident that they could replace [white] strikers with blacks, and at lower pay." Skilled workers, meanwhile, could not resort to their usual means of protection, since "[m]any ex-slaves…had gained experience in the army, freemen's camps, and relief associations."

[47] Sanders (1999) p. 40; Foner (1976) p. 48. As Foner (1976: 49) describes, this was true across skill levels, as "[e]ven the trade union element within the Kinghts of Labor, which had long excluded Negroes from locals, became somewhat imbued with the idea of labor solidarity…[and] lowered the barriers against Negro craftsmen in several locals or, where the hostility of the white membership made this impossible, organized them in separate locals."

[48] Cleveland *Gazette,* July 17, 1886; *John Swinton's Paper*, May 16, 1886 and September 19, 1886, quoted in Foner (1976) pp. 50-1.

struggle for racial equality, as even the black press hailed the KOL as having "done more to abolish the color line, south and north…than all politicians and special friends of freedom."[49]

By the late 1880s, however, this apparent racial camaraderie began to unravel, as detractors within both the black and white labor communities railed against the KOL's handling of racial issues. On one side stood several black leaders who came out in opposition to blacks' membership in the burgeoning labor movement. For some, the problem lay with the KOL's toleration of segregation within its local union organizations; in their view, the benefits black workers might reap from unionization were outweighed by the segregated basis upon which their inclusion was achieved. Others, meanwhile, felt that multiracial unionism did not help to overcome the problems specific to the black working class, especially racial discrimination in hiring and entry into the skilled professions. Rather than join the KOL, therefore, these leaders urged blacks to "fill the places of striking white workers on the ground that blacks were usually denied the opportunity to work under any conditions and could thus gain entrance to some formerly closed occupations."[50] At the same time, racist elements, especially in the South, rose up to oppose the KOL's racially inclusive mobilization. The prospect of black working-class organization, they claimed, imperiled the very fabric of American society: Not only did the Knights' multiracialism threaten to subvert the color line that "God Almighty has himself drawn,"[51] but unionized blacks would inevitably "become the blind instruments of some bold Communist…[in which case] their proverbial cunning and superstition would render them an element far more dangerous…than the white brotherhood of Knights."[52] Even more potent than

---

[49] *Globe and Lance*, December 23, 1886, quoted in Foner (1976) p. 63.

[50] Foner (1976) p. 51. Included among these black leaders were Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, as well as a number of "itinerant black ministers" who "called on workers to avoid unions that discriminated against blacks and stand with the employers who provided job opportunities," see Greenberg (1980) pp. 337-8.

[51] Louisiana Governor Samuel Douglas McEnery, quoted in Foner (1976) p. 60.

[52] "Organizing Negro Assemblies," *New York Times*, April 21, 1886.

these rhetorical appeals, moreover, were the "special sectional weapons," incensed southerners used to counter black and multiracial union activity, including "vigilante terrorists, lynchings or the threat of lynchings, the militia, and, of course, blatant, hysterical appeals to racist feelings."[53]

The combination of these forces resulted in black workers' growing disinclination to maintain their affiliation with the Knights of Labor and, in turn, increasing influence for racist whites within the organization.[54] With this – and as the KOL grew increasingly opportunistic in its struggle for survival in the face of mounting competition from alternative labor movement organizations – the Knights' commitment to interracial working class solidarity deteriorated. In response to calls for the KOL to speak out against the use of violence to demobilize black union activity, for example, Grand Master Workman Terence Powderly instead "lectured…black editors about the evils of strikes…and urged them to tell black Knights that 'cooperation is the true remedy for the ills of industry.'"[55] During the 1890s, the KOL became even more blatant in its willingness to kowtow to pressures from its racist constituents, first by ignoring black workers' formal requests for its condemnation of racial discrimination and, finally, by declaring its support – and even taking steps to begin fundraising – for the deportation of American blacks to Africa as a means for alleviating racial tension in the United States.[56]

The Knights of Labor's failure to swim against the tide of racial antagonism, it has been argued, "imprinted the labor movement with racism, establishing a norm that increased the likelihood that subsequent union-building would succumb to rake-and-file racism."[57] It might be more accurate to view the Knights' aborted attempt at multiracial unionism as symptomatic of

---

[53] Foner (1976) p. 58.

[54] Foner (1976) p. 62. These trends were bolstered by the KOL's expulsion of "the more radical white Knights" in an effort to deflect the charges of "radical anarchism" that were being mounted against the organization.

[55] Foner (1976) pp. 61-2.

[56] Foner (1976) p. 62.

[57] Cable and Mix (2003) p. 189.

American labor organizers' perennial ambivalence on racial issues, however: As would be true of its successors, the KOL leadership's support for "[racial] unity in strikes, labor demonstrations, picnics, assembly halls, and the election of blacks to office in predominantly white locals" was constrained by a "reluctance…to antagonize Knights who were not prepared to grant equality to black members and its unwillingness to take steps to eliminate restrictions barring Negroes from entrance to industry and apprenticeships."[58]

The KOL's declining support for racial equality during the late 1880s and 1890s roughly paralleled the organization's eclipse by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which would virtually monopolize labor organization well into the twentieth century. In contrast to the KOL – which had sought broad-based organization, advocated substantial reforms to the capitalist wage system, and did not shy away from extensive political activity – the AFL was decidedly oriented towards craft unionism and single-mindedly committed to an agenda that was relatively conservative in its scope and largely restricted to workplace issues.[59] The result was a substantial departure from the KOL's racially inclusive policies: Despite early nondiscrimination assurances from AFL leaders and even some public displays of interracial solidarity during the 1890s, "the craft orientation…and the policy of limiting union organization to skilled craft workers nullified the lofty principle of racial equality and led inevitably to the abandonment of the black worker even during the AF of L's early years."[60]

Another distinctive feature of the AFL that contributed to the further deterioration of organized labor's multiracial aspirations during the early twentieth century was its emphasis on preserving considerable autonomy for its affiliated unions. To the extent that the federation took

[58] Foner (1976) pp. 52-3.
[59] See, e.g. Sanders (1999) chapter 3.
[60] Foner (1976) p. 70.

a stand against racial discrimination in union membership, therefore, its enforcement was largely limited to persuasion and rhetorical condemnation. By the early years of the twentieth century even these efforts fell the wayside, as the AFL leadership turned a blind eye on affiliates' blatantly discriminatory membership policies, repeatedly ignored requests to ensure the representation of black workers in the union hierarchy, and refused to speak out against the newfangled southern suffrage policies that threatened to disenfranchise white workers as well as blacks on the grounds that the AFL had no business interfering in the "internal affairs" of southern states and localities.[61]

The Great Migration of the early twentieth century, meanwhile, ensured that discriminatory union policies would become as prevalent in the North as they already had the South. As southern black émigrés streamed into northern urban centers, the locus of white working class discrimination shifted northward as well, so that Northeastern and Midwestern cities became "[t]he primary American arena for competitive race relations in the economic sphere."[62] Faced with the same dilemma southern poor whites had confronted in the wake of the Civil War, northern white workers responded by erecting barriers to black workers' entry into their workplaces and unions in order to prevent undercutting by this new source of competition. As a result, by the 1920s working class race relations reached its nadir, with the mainstream organized labor movement across the country "so widely committed to segregation as to make the unions that did not exclude or separate members of colour those in need of explanation."[63]

Thus, on the eve of the Great Depression, organized labor appeared to be a most unlikely participant in the incipient struggle for racial equality; in W.E.B. Du Bois' assessment, the

---

[61] Foner (1976) chapters 5-6.

[62] Frederickson (1981) p. 221.

[63] Montgomery (2000) p. 16.

AFL's success at mitigating racial discrimination to in its own ranks was "indefensible," and its leadership had blatantly ignored overtures by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to work jointly to obtain reforms that would benefit the constituents of both organizations.[64] Just a few years later, though, this dismal situation showed signs of turning around, as the political winds shifted in a direction that finally enabled "organized labor [to take] on the character of a powerful and assertive social movement that burst the ordinary limits that had confined unions in language, self-understanding, scope, and practices to restricted workplace-based concerns in a modest minority of workplaces."[65] Part and parcel of this rejuvenated labor activism was a growing split between the AFL's craft and industrial wings, which culminated in 1935 in the breakaway formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). In contrast to the AFL, the CIO adopted an overtly non-racial approach to organization, which, in addition to the recruitment of members across the racial divide, entailed a hands-on effort to replace the "culture of trade" that had permeated the pre-Depression labor movement with a new "culture of unity," in which the commonalities among members of the working class would be made to override gender, ethnic, and racial differences that had traditionally divided them.[66]

Even while the CIO was picking up steam in its efforts to build a unified industrial union movement, however, the industrial workforce was undergoing a process of "unprecedented homogenization" as exceedingly high rates of unemployment undermined the racialized wage

---

[64] "The AF of L and the Negro," *Crisis* (July 1929) p. 241.

[65] Farhang and Katznelson (2005) p. 3. The New Deal government's favorable disposition toward labor was, of course, a key factor in the overall resurgence of the labor movement during this period; as Frederickson (1981: 227) points out, though, the revival of multiracial unionism during the 1930s and 40s was made possible by such factors as "the decline in [black] migration from the South during the depression years, the resulting stabilization of the ghetto, and the massive shift of blacks to the Democratic Party," all of which mitigated white rank-and-file workers' hostility to multiracial unionization.

[66] Cohen (1990) p. 333. See also Rosen (1968).

scales that had developed during the previous half-century.[67] The onset of World War II, moreover, resurrected ethnic and racial tensions within both American society in general and the working class in particular.[68] As such, the 1930s turn away from racially exclusive unionization did not automatically bring the labor and civil rights movements into cahoots; rather, a "newly assertive working-class whiteness" ruled out the possibility of a smooth transition to multiracial industrial unionism and ensured the dilution of any commitment by organized labor to the black civil rights struggle well into the latter part of the twentieth century.[69]

Opportunity Lost? Labor-Civil Rights Cooperation in the Postwar Era

The first substantial breakthrough in the relationship between organized labor and the burgeoning civil rights movement came during the mid-1940s, when a number of factors conspired to produce a potent, but ultimately fleeting, alliance of labor and civil rights movement forces. Particularly significant here were the implications of the wartime economy for the composition and organization of the working class: As unemployment diminished in response to wartime production demands, the Great Depression's "homogenizing effect" on the American workforce was gradually reversed, instilling both civil rights and labor movement organizations with a newfound appreciation for black workers' relevance to their respective struggles.[70] Some of the impetus for cooperation during this period came from the major civil rights organizations at the time – the NAACP and the National Urban League (NUL) – which had become "more friendly toward labor" during the preceding decade. These organizations were not well equipped

---

[67] Montgomery (2000) pp. 15-6. He describes the workforce of this period as comprised "overwhelmingly [of] men with families to support, who were white, between the ages of 25 and 45, and graduates of more than eight years of schooling." According to Cable and Mix (2003, p. 195), the number of unemployed blacks during the 1930s was "more than 50% higher than that for native Whites and significantly higher than for foreign-born Whites…[as] White workers displaced Blacks even in common labor."

[68] Montgomery (2000).

[69] Sugrue (1995) p. 552.

[70] Montgomery (2000) p. 22.

to tackle the challenges facing postwar working-class blacks, however.[71] Instead, it was the newly invigorated industrial labor movement that took the lead in advancing efforts to overcome southern reticence toward democratization.

Numerically speaking, the AFL remained the preeminent labor federation during the postwar period.[72] Nevertheless, the "audacious programme" articulated by the CIO at its 1946 convention – which included demands for "statutory prohibition of racial discrimination and democratization of the American South" as a first step toward the achievement of comprehensive economic reforms – fostered a climate of labor activism that at last seemed poised to challenge the racial foundations of American democracy.[73] The most prominent campaign undertaken during this period was the CIO's "Operation Dixie," an ambitious union membership drive described by CIO president Philip Murray as "almost a holy crusade" that would bring "'the political and economic emancipation' of one million workers in the Deep South and the consequent eradication of the poll tax and racial discrimination."[74] Not to be outdone – or, more likely, not to be overtaken by its rival's swelling membership ranks – the AFL followed suit and kicked off its own unionization campaign in the South later the same year.[75]

Between the two federations – and despite considerable opposition from southern employers and political elites – union membership grew significantly in the South, so that by the run-up to the 1948 election, it appeared that organized labor was "on the verge of a major breakthrough" in its quest to recast Southern society and undermine its non-democratic

[71] Korstad and Lichtenstein (1988) p. 787.
[72] Tomlins (1979).
[73] Montgomery (2000) pp. 20-1.
[74] Quoted in Walter W. Ruch, "CIO Will Seek End of South's Poll Tax," *New York Times*, April 11, 1946, p. 30.
[75] On the CIO's impact on racial attitudes within the AFL, see Rosen (1968).

practices.[76] Its impact was most patent at the local level, where southern union organizations participated in voter education and registration campaigns and, in doing so, contributed to the election of several liberal-oriented public officials.[77] By 1948, moreover, the political effect of these activities extended up into the national level, as the leadership of the major labor unions and federations worked in concert with civil rights and liberal organizations to compel the national Democratic Party to include an unprecedentedly strong civil rights plank in the party's 1948 platform.

Already by this point, however, the emergent spell of cooperation was fading. Among the leading causes of this decline was the anti-communist fervor that swept across the country during this period, which led mainstream organizations in both the labor and civil rights camps to distance themselves from the communism-tainted forces that participated in their postwar alliance. It, moreover, brought the CIO closer in line with the AFL's more conservative and racially-exclusive bent in order to stave off accusations of communism within its ranks.[78] At the same time, the favorable political atmosphere that had emboldened the labor movement to reach beyond its traditional conservatism during the immediate postwar period was increasingly replaced by one dominated by an anti-labor legislative coalition comprised of Southern Democrats and Republicans.[79] Almost as soon as it came into view, therefore, the promise of a labor-led assault on the racial underpinnings of American democracy receded into the shadows.

---

[76] Korstad and Lichtenstein (1988) p. 800.

[77] Korstad and Lichtenstein (1988: 792-3) recount the example of Winston-Salem, NC, where tobacco industry unionists "inaugurated citizenship classes, political rallies, and citywide mass meetings…challenged the power of registrars to judge the qualifications of black applicants…insisted that black veterans vote without further tests….[and] encouraged the city's blacks to participate in electoral politics." As a result, not only did they overcome "strong conservative opposition" to secure the reelection of Congressman John Folger, but "after black registration had increased some tenfold in the previous three years…Kenneth Williams…bec[ame] the first black city official in the twentieth-century South to be elected against a white opponent."

[78] Foner (1976) chapter 19.

[79] Farhang and Katznelson (2005). The Republican-Southern Democrat coalition dates back into the "Second New Deal" of the late 1930s (see, e.g. Milkis 1993). Nevertheless, Farhang and Katznelson point out, it was not until the

Opportunity Regained: The 'Coalition of Conscience' and the Voting Rights Act of 1965

The late 1950s and 1960s saw a resurgence of the civil rights-labor alliance, albeit in a manner that even more fully reflected the Janus-faced character of organized labor's support for racial equality: On the one hand, developments in the broader political arena brought the goals of the labor and civil rights movements in line, leading to the formation of a "national coalition of conscience" that united labor and civil rights organizations in an alliance that worked impressively to promote an agenda aimed at achieving political and economic justice in the United States. At the same time, though, pressure from organized labor's rank-and-file obliged union leaders to temper their activist impulses and cut back on their involvement in the civil rights struggle. As such, to the extent that a coalition of labor and civil rights movement forces held sway during this period, its dynamics were quite different from that of the postwar years. In particular, while the previous decade's activist spell had been largely spearheaded by forces within organized labor, the labor movement's retreat during the 1950s meant that it would no longer be at the forefront of the democratization struggle; instead, organized labor was a hesitant but usually willing partner to the civil rights organizations that rose to prominence during this period and led the charge against racial discrimination and disenfranchisement.[80]

An important event that set the tone for the labor-civil rights relationship during this period was the reunification of the AFL and CIO in 1955. Among the provisions listed in the

---

1940s that this coalition took on a specifically anti-labor cast in response to the "tight labor market" that emerged during World War II, its consequences for unionization rates in the South, and the postwar efforts of non-southern Democrats to bolster wartime provisions for federal oversight in employment practices.

[80] A telling example of this dynamic is A. Philip Randolph's response to a request for his cooperation in bringing the AFL-CIO on board in support of an amendment to an education bill that would stipulate cooperation with the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling for states receiving federal aid for public school construction; according to Randolph, "the fact is, not enough noise is being raised by Negroes throughout the country against the nefarious propaganda of [southern senators] against the United States Supreme Court, the federal government and Negroes" to convince AFL-CIO officials that the amendment – which was introduced in contravention to the Eisenhower administration's request that the bill be passed without controversial amendment attempts – merited their backing. January 30, 1956, letter from A. Philip Randolph to Charles Wesley Burton; Meier and Bracey (1990) reel 1.

merger agreement were affirmations that "[t]he merged federation shall constitutionally recognize the right of all workers, without regard to race, creed, color or national origin to share in the full benefits of trade union organization," and that "[it] shall establish appropriate internal machinery to bring about, at the earliest possible date, the effective implementation of this principle of non-discrimination."[81] Both promises were fulfilled at the AFL-CIO's constitutional convention held in December of that year: The agreement's non-discrimination clause was incorporated essentially verbatim to the list of "Objects and Principles" in the new federation's constitution, which further stipulated the creation of a Committee on Civil Rights (CCR) that would be "vested with the duty and responsibility to assist the Executive Council to bring about at the earliest possible date the effective implementation of the principle stated in this constitution of non-discrimination."[82] The AFL-CIO's Resolutions Committee's statement on civil rights went beyond these assurances of non-discrimination within the labor movement, moreover: In addition to reiterating the constitutional pledge to eradicate discrimination in affiliated unions, it declared the AFL-CIO's support for extensive federal government action to do away with racial inequality, including "an effective and enforceable fair employment practices act," a revision of congressional rules to facilitate the passage of civil rights legislation, a "peaceful and effective transition to an unsegregated American educational system" in keeping with the Supreme Court's recent *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and congressional legislation "making lynching a federal crime" and "invalidat[ing] state laws requiring the payment of a poll tax as a prerequisite to voting."[83]

---

[81] "Agreement for the Merger of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations," signed February 9, 1955; reprinted in AFL-CIO (1955) pp. liv-lvi.

[82] The text of the constitution is reprinted in AFL-CIO (1955) pp. xxxviii-liii.

[83] AFL-CIO (1955) p. 110.

Civil rights leaders were nevertheless skeptical of the depth of the new federation's commitment to civil rights for a number of reasons. At the top of the list were observations of an apparent double standard in the AFL-CIO's handling of different offenses by affiliated unions and members: Whereas the federation "dealt swiftly with any affiliate charged with Communist influence, and it sometimes acted vigorously when charges of corruption arose…constitutional bars to black membership, de facto patterns of exclusion from favored jobs, and maintenance of segregated locals and lines of seniority drew only endless palaver and pious declarations of good intentions."[84] This sentiment was bolstered by the appointment of a CCR chairman who, as charged in an NAACP report, was the only AFL-CIO standing committee chairman who was "not a member of the Federation's Executive Council and/or the president of an international union," and consequently was "not in a position to impose a policy upon an international or local union" so that "[m]ore often than not, his efforts [on behalf of black workers] are fruitless."[85] Finally, the AFL-CIO's admission of two unions with racial membership restrictions in their constitutions contributed to mounting tensions between labor and civil rights organizations, particularly since A. Philip Randolph was the only Executive Council member to oppose their entry; thus, while perhaps aware of the pragmatic justification for the decision to incorporate these unions, "Negro leaders could hardly believe that such CIO civil rights stalwarts as James

[84] Zieger (1986) p. 174. In its report on Employment, the US Commission on Civil Rights (1961, pp. 141; 215 fn75) notes that "[e]xpulsion has never been used to implement the civil rights policies of the AFL-CIO" and offers a possible rationale, stemming from the federation's decentralized structure: "In most instances union discrimination occurs at the local level, and it is unlikely that the AFL-CIO would expel an international for the conduct of some of its locals. Since expulsion gets rid of an offending union rather than the offensive discrimination, the AFL-CIO apparently believes that it can exert more pressure on a recalcitrant union through persuasion than through expulsion."

[85] NAACP, "Racism within Organized Labor: A Report of Five Years of the AFL-CIO, 1955-1960," quoted in Marshall (1965) p. 56.

Carey and Walter Reuther had voted for the admission of organizations with constitutional race bars."[86]

These tensions that emerged in the wake of the AFL-CIO merger continued to fester into the early 1960s. In response to the AFL-CIO's civil rights shortcomings, A. Philip Randolph led the creation of the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), a nationally organized committee of black unionists that would work to combat racial discrimination within mainstream organized labor. Under the auspices of this new organization, Randolph presented the AFL-CIO's executive council with an exhaustive inventory of its affiliates' discriminatory practice and recommended strong action on the part of the federation leadership to castigate or even expel unions that persisted in such behavior. In response, the AFL-CIO censured Randolph, citing his ostensible responsibility for "the gap that has developed between organized labor and the Negro community" and his ties with some of the more militant civil rights organizations.[87] When not one member of the Executive Council – not even Walter Reuther, who was widely considered to be the staunchest ally of the civil rights movement within the federation – voted against Randolph's censure, members of the civil rights community were outraged and accused the AFL-CIO leadership of "an incredible cover-up" for the federation's "refusal to recognize the unassailable facts of racial discrimination and segregation inside organized labor" and its "evasion…of its own responsibility in fighting racism within affiliated unions."[88]

Even while the labor and civil rights organizations appeared to be growing apart as a result of these disagreements, however, exogenous forces that would rally both movements around similar objectives were underway. Particularly effective in this regard was southerners'

---

[86] Marshall (1965) p. 57.

[87] AFL-CIO President George Meany, quoted in Foner (1976) p. 335.

[88] NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins, quoted in Foner (1976) pp. 335-6.

vehement reaction to the Supreme Court's momentous school desegregation ruling in 1954.[89] One effect of this "massive resistance" was to unite the labor and civil rights movements against a common enemy. As Bayard Rustin, an activist who worked closely with Randolph in the black union movement as well as a number of civil rights organizations, pointed out,

> [the White Citizens'] Councils' prejudice against Negroes, Catholics, and Jews is superficial in comparison with their main objective – to castrate the labor movement …The situation is as critical for all American labor as it is for the Negro…As the South becomes more and more an industrial center, it takes little imagination to see how an unorganized, company-unionized South would undermine the unions throughout the whole nation.[90]

This possibility was not lost on the AFL-CIO leadership, which was still reeling from the conservative coalition's assault on the headway it made during the 1930s and 40s. By the early 1960s, moreover, organized labor's status within the Democratic Party coalition was threatened, as conservative politicians in the South – most notably Alabama's George Wallace – began to entice large numbers of southern union members away from the Democratic Party's mainstream.[91] At this point, then, the enfranchisement of southern blacks came to be increasingly perceived as a necessary condition for the revitalization of labor during the 1960s; as the lead article in a 1962 issue of the federation's monthly periodical put it, "emancipation of the Negro voter could help to re-shape and liberalize our political structure and make possible a new and greater level of development for the entire nation…Enfranchise the Negro voter and there is a real chance of breaking the conservative grip on the Congress."[92]

A turning point finally came in 1963, when the NALC joined forces with the "Big Six" civil rights organizations to coordinate a massive "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" set to take place at the end of that summer. Inspired by A. Philip Randolph's 1941 March on

---

[89] On the Southern reaction to *Brown*, see especially Bartley (1969).

[90] Bayard Rustin, "New South…Old Politics," *Liberation*, October 1956, reprinted in Woodward (1971) pp. 92-98.

[91] Draper (1994); Montgomery (2000).

[92] Charles Steinberg, "The Southern Negro's Right to Vote," *American Federation* 69:7 (July 1962) p. 6.

Washington Movement,[93] the primary objectives of the 1963 project were to force a legislative breakthrough for civil rights and mitigate economic inequality more broadly. It was, moreover, intended to foster an atmosphere of unity across the representative organizations of the various movements associated with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party coalition.

This vision of a unified front was nearly shattered in the run-up to the March, when, at AFL-CIO president George Meany's behest, the federation's Executive Council refused to endorse the demonstration, opting instead to "make its own major contribution to victory [in the civil rights struggle] by continuing its all-out legislative effort on Capitol Hill and its efforts in cooperation with other like-minded groups to bring an end to segregation and inequality of opportunity in the local communities of America."[94] Nevertheless, the AFL's Industrial Union Department disregarded the Executive Council's condemnation and, under Walter Reuther's leadership, came out in support of the March. As a result, and despite the Executive Council's disapproval, the 1963 March on Washington represented "the largest mobilization of trade unionists in American labor history," with an estimated 40,000 union members in participation and one-fifth of its leadership comprised of union officials.[95] Finally, despite its earlier misgivings, the AFL-CIO's Executive Council was outspoken in its support for the pending civil rights bill and encouraged the federation's affiliates to push actively for its successful passage to

---

[93] On the first March on Washington Movement and its policy results, see Garfinkel (1959); Kesselman (1948); Kryder (2000); and Ruchames (1971 [1953]).

[94] AFL-CIO Executive Council statement, quoted in John D. Pomfret, "AFL-CIO Aloof on Capital March," *New York Times*, August 14, 1963; Draper (1994, p. 4) points out that there was genuine cause for concern among AFL-CIO leaders that "the march would go awry and set back civil rights legislation then pending in Congress," and that similar apprehension among NAACP leaders suggests that the Executive Council's decision did not necessarily reflect a lack of commitment to civil rights. Walter Reuther and A. Philip Randolph – the two dissenting Executive Council members – nevertheless found the statement to be "a masterpiece of noncommittal noncommitment," "so anemic…you'd have to give it a blood transfusion to keep it alive on its way to the mimeograph machine," and even "evidence of a lack of recognition of existing racial and social realities." See Pomfret, "AFL-CIO Aloof" and "AFL-CIO to Shun Rights March," *Chicago Tribune*, August 14, 1963.

[95] Foner (1976) pp. 349-50.

the extent that even southern AFL-CIO councils were motivated to "def[y] segregationist forces within their affiliates and [come] out in favor of the House-approved version of the bill."[96]

This is not to suggest that the dissension that characterized the late 1950s relationship between organized labor and the civil rights movement organizations fully dissipated in the wake of the March on Washington. Indeed, with some civil rights organizations – especially the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) – taking on an increasingly militant cast and mounting pressure for more revolutionary action from the "Black Power" wing of the movement, even the most radical union organizations and leaders grew uneasy. The United Auto Workers' (UAW) response to the SNCC-led Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) challenge to the all-white slate of delegates that was supposed to represent Mississippi at the Democratic Party's 1964 convention is exemplary of this dynamic: Although UAW President Walter Reuther at first stood behind the MFDP plan, he became increasingly skeptical as the convention date approach and, when President Lyndon Johnson called upon him to step in and put an end to the disruption, he insisted that the MFDP delegates accept an arrangement that essentially subverted the entire purpose of their challenge.[97]

Even with such setbacks, however, labor and civil rights organizations persisted in their joint pursuit of effective voting rights legislation. For both labor and civil rights activists, this achievement was perceived to be among the most significant impediments to the realization of their larger goals: Perhaps more obviously, Black leaders viewed suffrage rights as a necessary condition for racial equality since, it was thought, further civil rights breakthroughs would come as a consequence of blacks' political representation. For labor leaders, meanwhile, political democracy in the South was seen as a necessary first step in the transition to a more working-

[96] Foner (1976) p. 350; see also Draper (1994), and Greenberg (1980) p. 355.
[97] Boyle (1995) pp. 192-6.

class-friendly political economy. In this way, even union officials who did not favor black political equality *per se* believed that for substantial economic change to occur, the southern electorate would have to be recast so as to break the conservatives' stranglehold on Congress.[98] Thus, by the time the voting rights campaign was unleashed in Selma in 1965, the coalition demonstrated its organizational prowess by rallying its diverse membership around a single, forcefully articulated goal.

In light of this development, the increasing convergence of New Left, labor, and civil rights activists around social democratic ideals was a particularly worrisome development for political elites whose already-tenuous hold on power seemed to be under assault from all sides. While the promulgation of the "Triple Revolution" manifesto, signed by various student and civil rights leaders, labor officials, and left-leaning social scientists, was the first important indication of this move, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Nobel lecture in December 1964 and his subsequent reflections on European social democracy suggested that even less radical activists embraced a program of major economic overhaul. Finally, in 1965, even the AFL-CIO – which was acknowledged to be among the most conservative of the left/liberal organizations for its leadership's general unwillingness to pursue reform outside mainstream institutional channels – adopted resolutions in support of economic planning that went beyond anything called for by Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program.[99] By the time the voting rights campaign had sparked a national public outcry over black disenfranchisement, therefore, federal government officials found themselves facing demands for major economic restructuring in addition to political liberalization.

---

[98] Boyle (1995) p. 198; Draper (1994) p. 169.

[99] Boyle (1995) p. 201.

CONCLUSION

For much of its history, the American labor movement was far from a bastion of democratic agitation, at least in part as a consequence of entrenched racial animosity within the working class. As the foregoing case study suggests, however, the overarching objectives of the labor movement sometimes coincided with those of the organizations at the forefront of the struggle to secure blacks' civil and political rights. When this occurred, the possibility of collaboration between the two movements was enhanced and, with it, their capacity for extracting concessions from the federal government. In this way, the American working class participated in the United States' twentieth century transition from racially restricted to full democracy to an extent that is not often appreciated by students of democratization.

While a full explication is beyond the scope of this paper, this finding carries implications for the study of American political development more broadly. In particular, it suggests a move away from the tendency to declare the United States "exceptional" for its failure to match European patterns of political development and insist that entirely new frameworks be developed for its analysis. Rather, it might be worthwhile to consider how the experience of the United States – as a result of being so profoundly shaped by its racial heritage – differs in systematic ways from other, less racialized advanced industrial polities. At the same time, it proposes to look beyond the usual Western European suspects for appropriate comparison cases; instead, the lessons of American political development may prove more instructive for and more validly comparable to those of other countries in which ascriptive classifications govern the distribution of political power and authority.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Acemoglu, Daron and James A. Robinson. 2006. *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Adler, Glen and Eddie Webster. 1995. "Challenging Transition Theory: The Labor Movement, Radical Reform, and Transition to Democracy in South Africa," *Politics and Society* 23: 75-106.

AFL-CIO. 1955. *Report of the 1st Constitutional Convention: Proceedings*. New York: American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Arnesen, Eric. 1994. "'Like Banquo's Ghost, It Will Not Go Down': The Race Question and the American Railroad Brotherhoods, 1880-1920," *American Historical Review* 99: 1601-1633.

Bartley, Numan V. 1969. *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South during the 1950s*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Bensel, Richard Franklin. 1990. *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boix, Carles. 2003. *Democracy and Redistribution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boyle, Kevin. 1995. *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Bunce, Valerie. 2000. "Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Generalizations," *Comparative Political Studies* 33: 703-734.

Cable, Sherry and Tamara L. Mix. 2003. "Economic Imperatives and Race Relations: The Rise and Fall of the American Apartheid System," *Journal of Black Studies* 34: 183-203.

Cell, John W. 1982. *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cohen, Lizabeth. 1990. *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Collier, Ruth Berins. 1999. *Paths Toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Draper, Alan. 1994. *Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954-1968*. Ithaca: ILR Press.

Du Bois, W.E.B. 1952 [1935]. *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. Philadelphia: Albert Saifer.

Farhang, Sean and Ira Katznelson. 2005. "The Southern Imposition: Congress and Labor in the New Deal and Fair Deal," *Studies in American Political Development* 19: 1-30.

Feinstein, Charles H. 2005. *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination and Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foner, Philip S. 1976. *Organized Labor and the Black Worker 1619-1973*. New York: International Publishers.

Frederickson, George M. 1981. *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frymer, Paul. 1999. *Uneasy Alliances: Race and Party Competition in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Garfinkel, Herbert. 1959. *When Negroes March: The March on Washington Movement in the Organizational Politics of FEPC*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

González, Francisco E. and Desmond King. 2004. "The State and Democratization: The United States in Comparative Perspective," *British Journal of Political Science* 34: 193-210.

Green, Venus. 2000. "The 'Lady' Telephone Operator: Gendering Whiteness in the Bell System, 1900-70," chapter in *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa*, edited by Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Greenberg, Stanley B. 1980. *Race and State in Capitalist Development: Comparative Perspectives*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Hartz, Louis. 1955. *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.

Huntington, Samuel P. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Keyssar, Alexander. 2001. *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*. New York: Basic Books.

Kesselman, Louise Coleridge. 1948. *The Social Politics of FEPC: A Study in Reform Pressure Movements*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.

Korstad, Robert and Nelson Lichtenstein. 1988. "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 75: 786-811.

Kousser, J. Morgan. 1974. *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Kryder, Daniel. 2000. *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State during World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1997. *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. New York: Norton.

Marshall, Ray. 1965. *The Negro and Organized Labor*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Marx, Anthony W. 1998. *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa, and Brazil*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Meier, August and John Bracey, eds. 1990. *The Papers of A. Philip Randolph*. Bethesda: University Publications of America.

Mettler, Suzanne. 2006. "Unfinished Work: American Democratization, Citizenship, and Processes of Political Change," paper presented at the American Politics Workshop, University of Virginia, February 18, 2006.

Milkis, Sidney M. 1993. *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System since the New Deal*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Montgomery, David. 2000. "Empire, Race and Working-Class Mobilizations," chapter in *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa*, edited by Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Moore, Barrington. 1966. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Przeworski, Adam, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi. 2000. *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roediger, David R. 1991 [1999]. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Revised edition. Verso: London and New York.

Rosen, Sumner M. 1968. "The CIO Era, 1935-55," chapter in *The Negro and the American Labor Movement*, edited by Julius Jacobson. Garden City: Anchor.

Rueschemeyer, Dietrich, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens. 1992. *Capitalist Development and Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ruchames, Louis. 1971 [1953]. *Race, Jobs, and Politics: The Story of the FEPC*. Westport: Negro Universities Press.

Sanders, Elizabeth. 1999. *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Simons, Jack and Ray Simons. 1983. *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*. London: International Defence and Aid Fund.

Spero, Sterling D. and Abram L. Harris. 1931. *The Black Worker*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sugrue, Thomas J. 1995. "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1964," *Journal of American History* 82: 551-578.

Therborn, Göran. 1977. "The Rule of Capital and the Rise of Democracy," *New Left Review* 103: 3-41.

Tomlins, Christopher L. 1979. "AFL Unions in the 1930s: Their Performance in Historical Perspective," *Journal of American History* 65: 1021-1942.

United States Commission on Civil Rights. 1961. *Commission on Civil Rights Report: Employment*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

Valelly, Richard M. 2004. *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Valenzuela, J. Samuel. 1989. "Labor Movements in Transitions to Democracy: A Framework for Analysis," *Comparative Politics* 21: 445-472.

Whitby, Kenny J. 1997. *The Color of Representation: Congressional Behavior and Black Interests*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Woodward, C. Vann, ed. 1971. *Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books.

Woodward, C. Vann. 1991 [1951]. *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zieger, Robert H. 1986. *American Workers, American Unions, 1920-1985*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.