

Book Review

Rebellion in Black and White: Southern Student Activism in the 1960s

Robert Cohen and David J. Snyder, Eds. Foreword by Dan T. Carter

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The collection was sparked by the conference *Student Activism, Southern Style* held at the University of South Carolina (USC) in Columbia, South Carolina, in 2010. The event marked the 40th anniversary of the takeover of the USC Student Union by students protesting the Kent State massacre and the United States military's invasion of Cambodia. It is reiterated throughout the collection that much of what we know as the Civil Rights narrative ignores the myriad local efforts that precipitated the well-publicized bombings, assassinations, and legal challenges to segregation. The volume focuses on the "long civil rights movement" in the South that began on Historically Black College and University (HBCU) campuses long before the 1960s, and whose impact extended afterward. But the volume also goes beyond that to describe counterculture efforts and "New Left" efforts by whites. The book consists of a foreword by Dan T. Carter, an introduction by Robert Cohen, and 12 chapters divided into four sections. The four main parts of the book are called a) *Early Days: From Talk to Action*, b) *Campus Activism Takes Shape*, c) *A Cultural Revolution and its Discontents*, and d) *Black Power and the Legacy of the Freedom Movement*. There is also a historiographical reflection by Doug Rossinow, and an afterword by David T. Farber.

In "Freedom Now!" the first essay in part I, author Wesley Hogan suggests that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) created a pedagogy for action that was adopted by northern would-be activists. Wanting to move from talk to action so that they could be more directly involved, northern students wanted to do something beneficial but, since they were white and unfamiliar with southern politics, did not know how. The New Left (composed of youth who were largely white and from northern states) learned lessons of rebellion from black youth and adults in 1964, which was known as Freedom Summer.

The chapter by Joy Williamson-Lott titled "Student Free Speech on Both Sides of the Color Line in Mississippi and the Carolinas," examines the public institutional control and curtailment of freedom of speech, the press, and the right to assemble. This case study focuses on student government associations in various colleges in Mississippi: the University of Mississippi in University, Mississippi Vocational College in Leflore County, Alcorn University in Lorman, the Mississippi State University of Agriculture and Applied Science in Oktibbeha County, Jackson State College in Jackson, Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, and Mississippi Valley State University in Itta Bena. Often citing a fear of communism, white administrators and police authorities

enacted speaker bans and scrutinized the content of student newspapers. Student sit-ins were sometimes met with institutional expulsion. Nevertheless, Lott concludes that the end result was an expansion of students' First Amendment rights on their campuses.

Chapter three, by Erica L. Whittington, is a case study of "Interracial Dialogue and the Southern Student Human Relations Project" (or Southern Project), which operated from 1958-1968. Similar to the Highlander Education model of leadership for social justice, approximately 20 white and black southern students came together for three-to-four weeks in the summer to study at a college campus outside the South. Under the guise of fostering tolerance and empathy and teaching conflict resolution, the seminars featured readings and discussion about desegregation on colleges and universities as well as segregationist materials produced by the white supremacist Citizens Council. For most of its history, the organization held true to its purpose of providing "interpretive background" and allowing "interracial, interpersonal experience" so that participants could view themselves as "citizens of the nation and the world" (p. 91).

In "Moderate White Activists and the Struggle for Racial Equality on South Carolina Campuses," Marcia G. Synnott focuses on the South Carolina Council on Human Relations (SCCHR) in the early 1960s. By recruiting moderate white students and encouraging black students' demands for equality, she argues that it was able to ease the transition of South Carolina into the desegregation period. The council was at its strength prior to the formation of more radical organizations like the SNCC and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Synnott suggests that although the leadership of these groups benefited by being transformed through their involvement in the SCCHR, they remain largely unknown organizations.

Beginning Part II, Jeffrey A. Turner describes the rise of black and white student protest in Nashville in a chapter of the same name. The essay, not surprisingly, focuses on Fisk University and Vanderbilt University. Known as the upper South, Nashville was a mix of racial progressiveness and intolerance. On the other hand, there was little direct contact between Fisk and Vanderbilt students, as both institutions had members of high socioeconomic classes, and as a result, were more focused on college and fraternity life and classroom issues than race-based concerns. The president of Fisk, Stephen J. Wright, was supportive of restaurant sit-ins. Black activist James M. Lawson, Jr. at Vanderbilt prompted slow change on a typically white southern campus. Neither campus showed an indication of wanting to work together, however.

In "Student Radicalism and the Antiwar Movement at the University of Alabama," Gary S. Sprayberry describes student discontent as concentrated on the cultural conservatism of the university itself. Students demonstrated against a repressive police force, lack of free speech, and, especially for women, antiquated *in loco parentis* rules. Off campus, however, a more socially progressive area had flourished by the late 1960s. Protests became focused on the oppressive treatment of African Americans and restrictions on women students. Police and state troopers were relentless in their brutal treatment of students. After a long hot summer, the administration modified its stance. Progress was made on restructuring the police force, loosening restrictions on free speech and women's activities, and hiring additional black faculty during this nascent period of resistance.

Christopher A. Huff turns to a milder form of protest in "Conservative Student Activism at the University of Georgia." From 1965-1970, Young Americans for Freedom opposed non-violent techniques, resulting in them comparing the SDS to communism, and trying to have "radicals" expelled from the campus. The moderate conservatives, however, disagreed with the white supremacists on the issue of race. A variety of other small groups came and went that

opposed everything from mandatory school busing to the band director's decision to stop playing the song "Dixie." But, as campus politics diversified, the conservatives formed a political party in order to confront liberals on campus, and eventually became more concerned and familiar with issues regarding abortion, feminism, and homosexuality. But, in a place where regional identity and white privilege trumped everything else, it was the decision on "Dixie" that caught everyone's attention.

The three chapters that constitute part III are less well connected to each other than those of parts I and II. Kelly Morrow's chapter "Sexual Liberation at the University of North Carolina" (UNC) localizes the national movement of the 1970s that would eventually come to define a new model of sexuality, less secretive, less shaming, and, in some ways, less punitive. Morrow defines the men and women involved as "sexual liberation activists" (p. 196). By the fall of 1964, the university began to admit female freshmen. The passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibited "discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity" (The United States Department of Justice, 2015, para. 1), by Congress in 1972 spurred changes along with the availability of the oral contraceptive (known as The Pill) in 1960. UNC student health services discouraged its use, and abortions were not available to pregnant women. Takey Crist, a UNC graduate and medical doctor, crusaded to oppose the university's position on pregnancy and abortion. In the late 1960s, he began to disseminate information on human sexuality and health issues. He and several colleagues created in 1970 a sexuality handbook tailored to UNC and titled *Elephants and Butterflies*, which was a precursor to the well-known Boston Women's Health Collection *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published in 1971. A peer counseling service was instituted in 1971 and expanded to include lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues in its mandate in 1973. The chapter argues that, rather than the stereotypical free love of the 1970s, the sexual liberationists at UNC were more focused on "sexual knowledge, gender equality, and the acceptance of diverse sexual identities" (p. 211).

In "The Counterculture as Local Culture in Columbia, South Carolina," Nicholas Meriwether describes a space known as The Joyful Alternative—a "combination clothing boutique, bookstore and head shop" (p. 218) founded by former USC graduate student Dale Alan Bailes—as an example of cultural resistance. Influenced by historian David Farber's interpretation of the 1960s, the author defines the counterculture as distinct from the civil rights movement, antiwar protests, or Black Power, suggesting that the meaning of the term is more likely to be found in local venues rather than national ones. The author does not definitively answer the question as to the meaning of counterculture but leaves the reader wondering if such places occurred as a result of the transplantation of ideas from San Francisco, California, to rural areas and small cities, given that Bailes spent time in San Francisco.

In "Government Repression of the Southern New Left," Gregg W. Michel discusses the formation in 1967 of a chapter of the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. Members were nonviolent in their practices, adopted anti-war stances, and advocated for civil rights. The SSOC dissolved in 1969, after four years of having their activities recorded by police authorities, false information planted about its leadership, and disrupted protests. The *Freedom of Information Act* of 1966 helped reveal government records that showed the impressive level of complicity of officials at all levels to quash dissent, particularly by white Mississippian protesters, from 1964-1969. Michel includes the national efforts of the COINTELPRO-New Left but returns to Mississippi when discussing the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a segregationist government entity, in 1956. Unwittingly, COINTELPRO's preserved the history of the SSOC. The actions of spying,

surveilling, and establishing student files provide a record of the efforts of the police and protestors. According to Michel, it shows “that, in the Southern context, any type of dissent would bring down the heavy hand of state authority” (p. 248)

Part IV opens with the essay by Jelani Favors titled “North Carolina A&T Black Power Activists and the Student Organization for Black Unity.” The essay expands our knowledge of the nascent Black Power ideology on HBCUs with A & T positioned at the center of activism and race consciousness fostered by black academics. By 1970s, “Greensboro had become...the center of Black Power in the South” (p. 267). Specifically, the Student Organization for Black Unity (SOBU) was built on earlier organizations that addressed, among others, poverty, public housing, and police brutality. The SOBU gathered on campus in May 1969. At nearby Dudley High School, a militant student government leader had been elected who was not allowed to serve. Protests broke out, and the National Guard routed students at A & T who were in support of the Dudley protests. In 1972, the SOBU became the Youth Organization for Black United, broadening its original focus but also reflecting the fractures within the groups and the divisions over ideological direction.

“Black Power and the Freedom Movement in Retrospect” was written by Cleveland Sellers, Jr., a member of the SNCC and its program director from 1965-1967. He affirms that writers have condensed the Civil Rights narrative to 1955-1968, bookended by the bus sit-in of Rosa Parks and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Sellers argues that such a narrow view is a *raison d’être* for works like this book that focus on local struggles. He reiterates, again, that the long civil rights movement “inspired a ‘movement of movements’ that defies any narrative of collapse” (p. 284).

In his remarks on “Historiographical Reflections,” Doug Rossinow questions the following: a) whether the label New Left can be effectively applied to both African American and white student rebellion, and b) how to describe ideologically the activism of these essays. Youth alienation for blacks did not always resemble that for whites; he concludes that while whites and blacks occasionally worked together to protest the status quo, the line of political identity separated them. While he reminds us of the particular southern context, the book fails to define that context in a way that could tie the essays together more cohesively.

Two prominent texts serve a unifying function for this collection. Jacquelyn Down Hall’s (2005) interpretation of the long civil rights movement makes room for local efforts that preceded and succeeded the events of the 1960s, thus broadening the historiography of the movement. Van Gosse’s (2004) work on the New Left underscores the descriptions of youth rebellion in the collection. But it remains to be debated whether rebellion and resistance are in fact the same and whether it looks the same to black and white youth.

References

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