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History 220 – North of Jim Crow, South of Freedom
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March 18, 2019

Examining the Historical Context of Northern Racial Liberalism

In this essay I want to elaborate on Hall's assessment of how politicians and the media have confined the civil rights movement to an uplifting narrative which aims to protect American exceptionalism. By focusing on the hidden aspects of the civil rights movement, I hope to scrutinize the way in which northern racial liberalism and civil rights activism interact. I also want to demonstrate the complexity of civil rights by focusing on the way in which African-Americans used the language of race liberals (particularly during the era of McCarthyism) to test the authenticity of their discourse.

The First Great Migration was influenced greatly by the idea that the North was the promised land; as we discussed in class, African-Americans made the decision to migrate from the South during the 1920s and 1930s. Because the North was free of de jure racial inequality, African-American migrants viewed it as an alternative to the obvious form of Southern white supremacy. Furthermore, there had already been a hidden migration prior to what historians officially call the First Great Migration – as the historian Kevin Boyle records, the black upper class in Detroit primarily consisted of people who were northerners by birth and who were often Canadian-born progeny of fugitive slaves.¹ I would argue that the black elite did not face the struggle of families like Ossian Sweet because they were small proportionally and did not challenge the status quo; thus segregation increased as migration continued from the South.

¹ Boyle, p. 116.

Race liberals such as the educated head of the Detroit Urban League blamed increasing segregation entirely on a lack of respectability in saying that “white people are the judges and colored people are being judged”.² Certainly, the civil rights advocate Du Bois knew there was an invisible color line in the North in mentioning comprehensive statements presented to the United Nations by the NAACP and the National Negro Congress; in this essay I argue that the question of legal remedies and the long freedom struggle is truly a question of citizenship because legal remedies are often not enough.³

Another thing we talked about is the idea of black agency and the tremendous role that African-Americans played in holding politicians to their word when they claimed to support civil rights. In her historical book on the development of a system of managing inequality, Miller argues that as segregation increased, white liberals such as Frank Murphy used language which seemed racially blind but implicitly associated African-Americans with slum areas.⁴ Sugrue focuses on this within the framework of the New Deal and Roosevelt’s commitment to provide public housing while simultaneously deferring it to the local level.⁵ While civil rights groups protested, Sugrue demonstrates how War on Poverty programs were created to solve poverty via behavioral modification.⁶ Both historians seem to agree that because northern race liberals’ discourse did not explicitly refer to African-Americans, state policies intended to support the long freedom struggle were insufficient and cases of discrimination and residential segregation

² Boyle, p. 119.

³ Described in Manan Desai’s article on Du Bois

⁴ Miller, p. 107.

⁵ Sugrue, p. 60.

⁶ Ibid., p. 264.

continued despite efforts made by the African-American community to follow Victorian notions of respectability. Although life had been made nearly impossible in the South due to a de jure system of lynching and sharecropping, life in the North did not seem much better because of the fact that local governments and homeowners' associations either dismissed or actively fought against the issue of integration, thus preventing true economic assimilation from taking place.

While northern racial liberalism implicitly associated African-Americans with the devaluation of property, historians like Wolcott also mention how racial integration was thwarted at the local level – despite the Supreme Court's declaration that zoning ordinances restricting certain residents on the basis of race were unconstitutional, the 1923 *Parmallee v. Morris* decision upheld the use of private restrictive covenants.⁷ Because real estate agents could exclude residents on the basis of their racial identification, African-Americans were not granted full citizenship rights in practice. It is interesting to note how the Ossian Sweet trial forced the Sweet family to become race representatives; Wolcott describes Ossian Sweet's words at face value when he says "I saw the mob and I realized I was facing the same mob that had hounded my people throughout our entire history," which demonstrates his interpretation of events in a racialized context.⁸

But I believe this assessment of Ossian Sweet flattens him as a character – I would say that Ossian Sweet was striving to be seen as an equal. Based on Boyle's account, Ossian Sweet wasn't motivated entirely by achieving outward signs of success but by being called Doctor

⁷ Wolcott, p. 135-36.

⁸ Ibid., p. 144.

Ossian H. Sweet, the greatest mark of respect he could imagine.⁹ Ossian Sweet knew that his aspirations were unrealistic given the circumstances of his time. I would argue that he should be seen not as a mere hero but as Boyle portrays him – a man who wanted to be respected instead of respectable.

Historians generally acknowledge the way in which black agency allowed racial egalitarianism on paper to be tested. We had laws which did not actually result in the abolition of discriminatory practices in reality as exemplified by the theatre, where African-Americans were sent to the balcony section on the top row. One thing that stood out to me in our class discussions was the way in which African-Americans embraced the policies of ghettoization that developed following the dark ages of Detroit. Baldwin alludes to this and also draws attention to the effect of respectability politics on the community. When respectable blacks (who were respectable in terms of manners and behavior) dissociated themselves from the larger community by linking leisure behaviors with class rather than racial identification, they also tried to reform the behavior of black migrants and show that not all blacks were alike.¹⁰

I would argue that Baldwin's focus on respectability politics is essential because it demonstrates how respectability divided the black community and gave civil rights activists the detriment of working within a framework set by white standards of black behavior. By doing so, respectability politics was a crucial element of northern racial liberalism because it blamed African-Americans for their own plight in the form of cultural arguments that were deemed politically useful.

⁹ Boyle, p. 86.

¹⁰ Baldwin, p. 97.

Furthermore, African-Americans such as Ossian Sweet were not treated as equals just because they behaved and acted according to white middle class virtues. When marginalized groups attempt to engage in a standard of behavior which reflects the values of the dominant culture, they essentially make a old value-based argument that falls apart in the face of an informal color line. Referring to the way in which white contribution had negatively influenced black envisions of a metropolis, historian Frederic H. H. Robb wrote that the New Negro does not seek philanthropy but an opportunity.¹¹ The media narrative generally misinterprets this emphasis on economic self-sufficiency and community rights as an admission that nothing needs to be done about the ongoing inequalities that continue to this day.

While I agree with Hall's desire to reinforce the moral authority of people who fought for change, I also want to attribute much of civil rights progress to the grassroots movements that developed communally. As we discussed, much of the long civil rights movement took place at a local level and this is not recognized – for example, the names of the black workers who petitioned their employers for equal working conditions and wages is not mentioned. In 1919, predominantly black members of the ILA followed longshoremen in a strike.¹² So although black working-class employees were often viewed by industrialists as strikebreakers and bulwarks against the threat of immigration, they played an important role in the labor movement whether or not they were unionized. This demonstrates the true purpose of uplift; when African-Americans choose to rely on their own cultural and economic constructs, their conditions are improved.

¹¹ Baldwin, p. 7.

¹² King, p. 69.

However, I believe that racial uplift is essentially manipulated by race liberals such as Henry Ford; rather than helping to achieve moral equivalency in the eyes of white people or changing opinions of migrants as backward, the industrialists treat black uplift opportunistically. For economic reasons and out of a dislike for Communist influence in the age of McCarthyism, the Ford Motor Company essentially treats its workers as replaceable parts and gradually ensures that they become dependent. As in the case of Willis Ward, northern race liberals absolved themselves of responsibility by appealing to property rights and downplaying the long-lasting impact of slavery's legacy. As a response, African-Americans were able to construct elements of the black metropolis within their own confinement in cities like Harlem.

While the *New York Age* editorial extensively criticized vice activity and the moral character of real estate tenants, immoral behavior continued.¹³ So another contradiction of northern racial liberalism takes place; race liberals simultaneously disregard and take advantage of African-Americans' pursuit of community rights. We talked about slumming – that is, white people visiting black neighborhoods and red light districts for a variety of reasons including simple curiosity. I would argue that northern racial liberalism also benefitted these communities because it encouraged a cultural exchange as well as patronage of black establishments which essentially benefitted the construction of the black metropolis, however temporary. Whether or not it was for economic reasons, northern race liberals began to interact more with African-American communities and take interest in their cultural contributions just as their European counterparts took artistic inspiration.

¹³ Ibid., p. 127.

In Detroit, the local government's insistence on working within the boundaries imposed by the "free market" emphasized the rights of manufacturers over the demolition of black residential communities which already existed there.¹⁴ The Detroit branch of the NAACP turned once again toward legislative remedies after being discouraged by a gradualist political climate and a decrease in grassroots support.¹⁵ Sugrue's portrayal of how civil rights activism was perceived as inherently anti-American brings a valuable contribution to our perception of the extent to which outside support for civil rights was limited. At the same time that many white race liberals expressed their commitment to racial progress, it is arguable that even the Communist party among others (who were supporting civil rights) did so out of the association between class and race. In essence, anti-liberals explicitly condemned African-American progress while the majority of northern race liberals did not truly support civil rights for its own sake.

Miller's analysis of the NAACP's remedies for increases in segregation and prejudice is more optimistic than Sugrue's, but it emphasizes the idea that the NAACP was working within the framework set by northern race liberals. For example, Miller states that in its first bulletin the NAACP stated that African-American Detroiters should do everything in their power to secure justice. The methods by which they were to secure justice included maintaining cleanliness and not arranging children's hair in corn rows in order to gain a more favorable judgment of the race. Miller's interpretation is that discourses invoking respectability politics

¹⁴ Sugrue, p. 164.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 171.

imply that unrespectable individuals are undeserving of full citizenship.¹⁶ What this means in practice is that the NAACP had resigned itself to a limited set of beliefs about what it could and could not do. In essence, this meant that the organization was acting in response to the non-specific but racially motivated policies imposed by the white city council. As we discussed, these policies lacked racialized language but they disproportionately affected African-Americans.

Moreover, Boyle's discussion of the basis of white supremacy is likewise important to our understanding of the civil rights struggle because it demonstrates the pathological nature of white supremacy. As Boyle notes, the governor of South Carolina Ben Tillman believed that he would rather find one of his daughters killed by a tiger or bear than to be told that she had been "robbed of the jewel of her maidenhood by a black fiend." Boyle makes a fuller contribution because he emphasizes how whites were afraid of moral, economic, and sexual losses in the face of African-American migration.¹⁷

Understanding what civil rights activists were protesting allows us to see the way in which northern racial liberals were trying to maintain the existing power structure out of a sense of fear. Civil rights activism seeks to dispel the notion that African-Americans are inherently evil and thus resolve the sense of fear that pervades both parties. Boyle's humanization of Ossian Sweet helps in this regard, and his narration that he was "never safe from the mindless fury of the mob" demonstrates the way in which the mob mentality of the northern Jim Crow

¹⁶ Miller, p. 61.

¹⁷ Boyle, p. 65.

created an atmosphere of fear and at times surpassed any notion of lawfulness and respectability.¹⁸

I want to argue that civil rights groups were co-opted by northern race liberals such as Detroit mayor Frank Murphy as well as his opponent Bates who wanted foremost to advance their political progress and position while distancing themselves from the overt racism of Southern whites. In essence, race liberals contributed to the cause by shifting discourse toward class-based arguments but were primarily unwilling to fully commit themselves to the cause of helping the black working-class.

Boyle also emphasizes how northern racial liberals' premise that integration was undesirable wreaked havoc on their communities as well. He recounts how real estate agents would spread the word, neighbors would leave, and property values would plummet when African-Americans tried to move into white neighborhoods.¹⁹ As a response to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's description of how civil rights has been contained, I want to suggest that all the historians we have discussed made a contribution to illuminating the misrepresentation of civil rights in popular consciousness. By developing the frameworks of anti-liberalism, northern racial liberalism and an old settler mentality which resists change, they create more understanding.

¹⁸ Boyle, p. 97.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

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