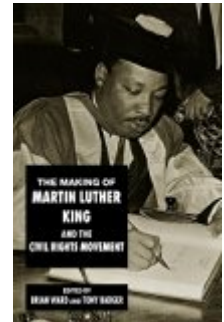


**Brian Ward, Tony Badger, eds..** *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*. Washington Square: New York University Press, 1996. xii + 230 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-9295-7.



**Reviewed by** Nahfiza Ahmed

**Published on** H-Pol (October, 1997)

On the cover of this book is a rarely seen photograph of Martin Luther King, Jr. signing the visitor's register at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne after receiving an honorary degree in November 1967 from that institution. To celebrate King's only visit to the United Kingdom, a three-day conference entitled the "Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Conference on Civil Rights and Race Relations" was held at Newcastle in October 1993. This book is the product of that conference and draws together, in four sections, various papers presented by scholars from both sides of the Atlantic. What draws one's attention from the start is its revisionist flavor reflecting a new and exciting time in the historiography of the American Civil Rights Movement and its significance elsewhere in the world. Since the early 1980s, scholars have begun to express dissatisfaction with what the editors, Ward and Badger, call 'the classic' historiography of the movement which tends to focus on the leadership of King, the impact of groups such as the Student Non-violating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (p. 1). The period given most attention

is usually 1954-65 when direct-action campaigns led to the triumphs of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. This has been at the expense of uncovering how the movement took shape on the local level and obscures from the record the significant achievements of local activists in the struggle for African American equality. *The Making of Martin Luther King* does not actually have a single essay which deals with this memorable crusader for human rights, but does represent a serious attempt to take account of the new approaches now being considered by historians, thus offering new directions for future research.

The book is divided into four sections entitled "Origins," "Responses," "Representations," and "Comparisons". In section one, three British historians, Adam Fairclough, John Kirk, and John White, examine the roots of black protest in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Alabama respectively. In Louisiana, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) formed the backbone of the emerging civil rights movement in the state during the 1940s and 1950s. This

organization, often criticised for its bureaucratic and slow-moving nature, through its network of branches across the South, launched the black leadership which would later overthrow the institution of segregation. Fairclough acknowledges that the New Deal, labour unionism, and wartime black militancy combined to challenge white supremacy in the South, yet it was the NAACP that capitalized on these trends. As a consequence, the organization laid the foundations for the successful protest of the 1960s. In Louisiana, the local branches produced a number of African Americans who made a career out of civil rights, most notably, Alexander Pierre Tureaud. To Fairclough, the 1940s were a crucial phase in the struggle for black equality and not just a prelude to the direct-action era of the 1960s. His research on the NAACP urges us to re-think the role and importance of this organization in the formulation of black protest after World War II.

In contrast, John Kirk's paper turns to a state where the traditional dominance of the NAACP in civil rights was lacking and where blacks formed their own alternative civil rights organization. W. H. Flowers is the central figure in the Arkansas civil rights movement of the 1940s. After returning from Washington, D.C., where he received his legal training, to his home state, he had a determination to improve the condition of his race during World War II. This, according to Kirk, was to change the static nature of black protest in Arkansas. In 1940, Flowers established the Congress of Negro Organizations (CNO), which demonstrated the desire among local blacks to forge a new "activist" agenda and fill the void left by the lack of NAACP activity (p. 33). Flower's failure to obtain funds from the NAACP headquarters to set up more branches in Arkansas forced him to seek the assistance of local black civic and fraternal organizations. In doing so, he was able to formulate a more local civil rights platform which would avoid the bureaucracy of the NAACP and respond quickly to local concerns. The CNO's biggest success lay in voting. In 1940, only 1.5 percent of Ar-

kansas blacks were registered to vote; by 1947, this had risen to 17.3 percent. However, after this it was clear that CNO was too diverse and unable to secure its original goal of "widespread organized political participation" (p. 34). Kirk has placed the spotlight on an early example of black leadership and community initiative which did not rely on the NAACP.

John White does much to restore the important role played by E. D. Nixon in the establishment of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the group responsible for directing the bus boycotts of 1955-56. Although Nixon was extremely active in civil rights during the two decades or so before the bus boycotts triggered by Rosa Parks' arrest, his achievements have tended to be overshadowed by King's leadership of the SCLC. White portrays Nixon as a true grass-roots activist who was able to forge important links with organised labour (The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), notable white liberals (Aubrey Williams and Virginia Durr) and the local black community. Though not as gifted as King as a public speaker, Nixon spoke with a language of militancy that articulated the urgency of black demands. The Alabama Journal described him as "very unassuming, yet militant ... aggressive, yet not a radical" (p. 49). Elsewhere in the black community, Nixon's achievements as head of the local NAACP and the important role in the formation of the MIA were crucial to the success of the bus boycotts. White sees him as a more impatient and direct type of civil rights activist, but this meant he did not appeal to the middle-class, clerical leadership of the MIA. Had his influence not diminished after 1956, the SCLC could have benefited from his strong links with organized labour to improve employment opportunities for blacks.

The three papers in this section make very strong arguments for historians to look more closely at the dynamics of African-American protest in the 1940s and early 1950s. Perhaps then we can tell the story of protest from within the

specific communities that started it. Fairclough, Kirk and White successfully bring to light figures whose dedication to civil rights have previously been overlooked.

The modern, black protest movement depended, to a large extent, upon white reaction and response. Both were crucial in determining the limits placed on the movement and the outcomes of major scenes of racial confrontation. In the second section of this book entitled 'Responses', Tony Badger gives a detailed overview of the dilemmas and conflicts faced by post-war Southern liberalism on the crucial issue of race. He takes a fresh look at Mississippi and Alabama, two states notorious for the unfair treatment of blacks under Jim Crow segregation, through the perspective of white liberals. While the New Deal and World War II created a softening in attitudes towards the race question among certain whites in both states, the collapse of this coalition after the war was largely due to the Rise of Massive Resistance triggered by the Brown case of 1954 and the publication of the Southern Manifesto in 1956. The crucial question asked by Badger's paper is what caused the eventual success of the civil rights movement? Was it the desire to promote racial harmony and regional economic growth from within the white business community or the failure of postwar liberalism which left the field open for African Americans to take the initiative and conclude the Second Reconstruction? Badger first explains what it meant to be a liberal on the race question in the context of white supremacy. They were gradualists with a firm belief that racial progress could be achieved within the institution of segregation. Governor Jim Folsom of Alabama and ex-New Dealer Aubrey Williams were examples of moderates on the race issue. According to Badger, the Brown decision turned these gradualists into fatalists. The prospect of school desegregation gave Southern extremists a rallying point for the defence of white supremacy and quashed any hope that the New Deal/liberal coalition had of promoting racial progress. A "climate

of conformity" administered by the Citizen's Councils and state pressure gripped liberals in Mississippi. Having dealt extensively with the reasons for the failure of post-war liberalism to advance civil rights for blacks, Badger concludes that this was relatively unimportant to the eventual rise of the civil rights movement. In the end, blacks were able to confront white authority on an unprecedented scale which made white supremacy all the more indefensible to many Southerners themselves.

Walter Jackson's paper examines the intellectual debate among white liberals as seen through publications such as the New Republic, Harper's and the Atlantic. The views of such liberals remained relatively unchallenged by the lack of similar discourse among African American intellectuals. Perceiving the problem of race relations as a regional one, these liberals drew their position from the North where Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* and Truman's Committee on Civil Rights had nationalised the debate on racial discrimination in the South. Like other gradualists, they believed sudden change as implied by the school integration order would be disastrous. An optimism was expressed about peaceful implementation since blacks and whites were united by the common factor of being Americans. Such views were increasingly gagged by the emergence of Massive Resistance when liberals found it dangerous to even endorse token integration. However, Jackson informs us that the real turning point came when blacks decided the time had come to take their demands to the streets, in the shopping malls, restaurants and in schools. Like the conclusion in Badger's paper, it appears that the wind of racial change was made possible by the radicalism of African Americans after 1954 and not by the liberals who debated the merits and demerits of school desegregation. Jackson shows how the limits of white, liberal intellectual thought from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the Greensboro sit-ins, contributed to the inertia of Americans

who placed a higher priority on law and order than on desegregation itself.

Turning to the post-civil rights and Black Power eras, Clayborne Carson's paper on African American political thought is a welcome revision of the often cursory treatment that this period is given in standard histories of the civil rights movement. The shadow of Watts and the glaring inequalities of life among the urban black communities after the main legislative successes of 1964 and 1965, have characterised the Black Power era. Carson challenges the established view of African-American political thought after 1960 as a departure from the more accommodating stance of the SCLC and CORE during the 1950s. He urges us to view the politics of the mid- to late-1960s not so much as a revolutionary departure but as a continuation of King's radicalism based on social gospel and the attack on capitalist society. The emergence of SNCC was, according to Carson, an attempt to provide an alternative to traditional, liberal forms of African-American protest. SNCC activists were able to turn the sit-in movement into a revolutionary tactic to overthrow segregation. The difference between the two phases was one of emphasis rather than ideology. With the emergence of Malcolm X, Black Power found a leader who rejected assimilation and King's Gandhian tactics as the only path for achieving social justice. This, according to Carson, is where African-American politics is transformed with slogans like "By Any Means Necessary" after 1965. It is interesting to note that the radicalism of blacks in the North was the product of the poverty and racism of de facto segregation. Here King and Malcolm X were united in the goal of securing for blacks a better economic future in the post-civil rights era.

In the section on "Representations," three scholars examine the widely differing meanings that the civil rights movement created in the nation's political consciousness. Robert Cook examines the ways in which the Civil War Centennial

memorial of 1961 was manipulated by both segregationists and civil rights groups in order to further their respective ideological goals. The NAACP objected to the segregation of black and white attendees at the memorial. Civil rights activists claimed that the memorial was continuing the "Confederate Myth" which tended to gloss over the fact that the South was defeated and that emancipation was the result of that defeat. The memorial was a time to praise black loyalty to the union and Lincoln's commitment to freedom for blacks. On the opposing side, segregationists in the South used the event to downplay the issue of defeat in the Civil War. The pageantry was a welcome distraction from present racial problems and a reminder of the South's distinct cultural past. Cook's analysis importantly points out how the civil rights era initiated a more questioning and nostalgic look at the past. The varying responses to the centennial celebration indicated how opposing sides were able to use "the language of American nationalism" to justify current solutions to the crisis in race relations.

This leads us to consider the very significant ways in which the civil rights movement was able to pursue its goals within the framework of American democracy and institutions. Keith Miller's paper examines the symbolism attached to Abraham Lincoln. In their quest for justice, black Americans were able to combine patriotism and loyalty to the nation with the culture of protest created by the movement. According to Miller, the Lincoln memorial of 1939 where the black performer Marian Anderson sang "America" on stage, was the culmination of the NAACP's long effort to present him as a national figure who united the country and ended slavery. Anderson's performance was symbolic in itself. Here was a black woman singing for her country and the man who gave her people freedom. The event, Miller informs us, had a profound effect on the young Martin Luther King who later made several references to Lincoln and the Civil War in his speeches. While the black Power movement rejected this

patriotism, King and Anderson used Lincoln and what he stood for to advance civil rights for African Americans.

Arguing for the greater use of fiction in the study of the civil rights movement, Richard King examines the psychological awakening that accompanied the individual decision to become involved in a struggle which polarized communities and incurred huge personal sacrifices for blacks and whites once the decision to participate had been made. King makes the assertion that many blacks underestimated what was at stake for whites to join the movement. The expulsion of white activists by the SNCC leadership between 1965 and 1966 and King's claim that the white liberal was the biggest obstacle to racial progress, were two important manifestations of this underestimation. The three novels chosen deal with the reasons why people became involved in the struggle from a deeply personal point of view. Joining the movement helped to psychologically and politically liberate a young black girl in Alice Walker's *Meridian*. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest Gaines shows how the formation of a political community was essential to an oppressed group and how involvement helped to create a sense of self-respect. In contrast, Rosellen Brown's *Civil Wars* is, according to King, one of the few novels which looks at how the movement affected its white participants. The central character is disowned by his family for joining and suffers a lifetime of social alienation as a consequence. Richard King makes a strong case for the use of fiction to illuminate how blacks and whites perceived themselves and their environment during a period of heightened political awareness.

The last section entitled "Comparisons" deals with the significance of the American Civil Rights Movement in other multi-racial countries across the world. The Atlantocentric model of race relations comes under attack from Tariq Modood. He argues that its emphasis on the paradigm of "black-white" polarity based upon the South

African and North American experience does not help to explain the very different pattern of race relations in a former colonial power such as Britain. The racial dualism implied by the black-white paradigm tends to explain the sociological and political profile of certain racial groups in terms of being white or non-white. While this may apply to America and South Africa, it is inappropriate for Britain where social mobility has been a significant characteristic among non-whites since the 1980s and where the immigrant population stems from different regions of the world. Given the ethnic pluralism of non-whites who came to Britain after de-colonization during the 1950s and 1960s, Modood shows how different ethnic groups have progressed or not progressed in Britain. He identifies a "hierarchy of ethnicity" which undermines the black-white theory. For example, East Africans and Indians have moved up the economic and educational ladder while Pakistanis and Bangladeshis have failed to do so. Social mobility has been possible within the context of British race relations due to the plural nature of the country's non-white minority. Modood has uncovered important factors to explain why an American-style civil rights movement failed to take root in Britain during periods of rising racial tensions.

The civil rights movement was an opportunity for both blacks and whites to engage in new forms of protest which ultimately sought the fulfillment of the promises of American democracy. The symbolic meanings of the movement outside America are important. On the one hand, the movement revealed the limits and double standards of the American political culture and, on the other, showed what could be achieved by ordinary individuals. Mike Sewell's paper examines British press coverage of the movement which increased between the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Such press coverage was accompanied on the domestic front by the arrival of a large number of immigrants from the Caribbean, South Asia and Africa. The onset of de-colonisation in Africa

shaped contemporary views of the American racial situation. While attitudes were sympathetic at first with King being the "integration leader" (p. 194) and a concern that the Southern justice system was unfair, this was to change with the emergence of Black Power politics. As riots and violence broke out in the late 1960s, British commentators began to stand back and look to America for vital lessons in order to prevent a similar situation happening in their country. America then became an example of a democracy that had failed to deliver justice to a significant proportion of its citizens.

In the final paper, George Frederickson helps us to gain a wider perspective on the American situation by comparing it to that of South Africa, a country where the ruling white elite also segregated and denied full political participation to its black population. He focuses on the strategy for liberation offered by non-violent action and evaluates its success in both countries. It was obvious that the non-violent phase of the American civil rights movement was a success with the 1964 and 1965 civil rights acts. In South Africa, a similar campaign was led by the African National Congress (ANC) in 1952 but was a relative failure. It does not appear that African Americans gained much inspiration from the ANC and vice-versa. Both were united by being blacks in an oppressive society. The eventual movements to achieve equality in the two countries were similar in the usage of Ghandi's non-violent civil disobedience tactics to overthrow oppressive power. On the issue of leadership however, King's prophet-like Christian philosophy was unparalleled in South Africa with Mandela clearly being a secular figure. Although the South African movement adopted the Gandhian philosophy, it did not create a Ghandi-like figure to lead the masses in the way that King did in America. Frederickson uses comparative history to reveal the differing conditions from which oppressed groups organise and challenge the status quo.

As a book, this lacks the coherency of a finished product. While the papers are suitably arranged by theme, the diversity of the topics means that a great deal of ground needs to be covered in a limited amount of space. Some of the papers are essentially summaries of larger studies connected to the civil rights movement in the South. For example, Adam Fairclough's paper is taken from his book *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana* (University of Georgia Press, 1995), and Clayborne Carson's ideas can be examined further in his study entitled *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Harvard University Press, 1995). The biggest selling point, however, of *The Making of Martin Luther King* is its strong historiographical nature. As a resource for future research by graduate students and scholars alike, it is invaluable and should be placed on any reading list on the American civil rights movement.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <rendlex@csd.uwm.edu>]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

**Citation:** Nahfiza Ahmed. Review of Ward, Brian; Badger, Tony, eds. *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. October, 1997.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1379>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.