THE ORIGINS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: BLACK COMMUNITIES ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE.

By Aldon D. Morris.[1] New York: The Free Press. 1984. Pp. xiv, 354. $19.95

Clayborne Carson [2]

This important and provocative book reflects a trend in recent scholarship concerning the modern struggles for black advancement. Scholars have increasingly moved from a national to a local perspective in their effort to understand the momentous changes in American racial relations since 1954. The newer scholarship has begun to examine the distinctive qualities of the local black movements that both grew out of and spurred the campaign for national civil rights laws. Earlier studies have told us much about nationally prominent civil rights leaders such as King, but only recently have scholars begun to portray the southern black struggle as a locally based social movement with its own objectives instead of merely as a source of mass enthusiasm to be mobilized and manipulated by the national leaders. In short, what has been called the civil rights movement is now understood as more than an effort to achieve civil rights reforms.

Revisionist scholarship such as Morris's has challenged many widely held assumptions regarding black activism of the 1950's and 1960's. In the 1960's, black activism was usually categorized with other forms of collective behavior, which were seen as ephemeral outbursts of emotions. In this view, protest activity was an expression of the yearning of blacks to realize a longstanding civil rights reform agenda and thereby become part of the American mainstream. While recognizing that black protesters were impatient with the pace of racial change and with the caution of NAACP leaders, scholars nevertheless assumed that the political significance of mass militancy was limited. Mass militancy merely gauged integrationist sentiments among blacks and allowed national civil rights leaders to demonstrate the urgency of their concerns. Only such leaders, it was assumed, possessed the political sophistication and access to institutionalized power that was necessary to transform amorphous racial frustrations and resentments into an effective force for social reform.

Most early studies of the civil rights movement gave little at-

---

tention to local black social movements and instead focused on the ideas and strategies advocated by national civil rights leaders. The result is a rich, expanding literature on the evolution of civil rights law, especially in the area of education. Black protest activity served as a backdrop for discussions of the activities of political elites and full-time civil rights proponents that culminated in the major civil rights legislation of the 1960's.[3] When black protest activity was discussed at all in these conventional studies, it was usually from the perspective of these national leaders. Thus, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., illustrated a continuing theme in the civil rights literature when he portrayed President Kennedy as seeking to "keep control over the demand for civil rights" and as a leader moving "to incorporate the Negro revolution into the democratic coalition."[4]

While studies of civil rights leaders understandably have given more emphasis to the role of these leaders than have studies of presidential leadership, until recent years few such studies addressed the possibility that mass militancy could arise from local sources and generate its own strategies and goals. The implicit assumption has been that significant changes in the lives of black people during the 1960's were more likely to result from national civil rights legislation than from social transformation occurring within southern communities. Scholars were more interested in explaining how civil rights leaders developed civil rights strategies that could garner support among white leaders than in evaluating whether these strategies reflected the changing sentiments of the masses of blacks. This top-down view of the black struggle is reflected in most of the biographies of King and other black civil rights leaders.[5] Studies of the major civil rights organizations have paid increasing attention to their local activities, but these studies typically examined local movements only during their brief periods of national attention.[6] Even the few studies of particular protest

---

3. The definitive studies of the two major pieces of civil rights legislation are S. LAWSON, BLACK BALLOTS: VOTING RIGHTS IN THE SOUTH, 1944-1969 (1976); C. WHALEN & B. WHALEN, THE LONGEST DEBATE: A LEGISLATIVE HISTORY OF THE 1964 CIVIL RIGHTS ACT (1985).

4. A. SCHLESINGER, JR., A THOUSAND DAYS: JOHN F. KENNEDY IN THE WHITE HOUSE 931, 977 (1965). Similarly, Carl M. Brauer concludes that Kennedy maintained the initiative even when black militancy threatened to get out of hand in the spring of 1963. Brauer recounts that the President "boldly reached out to grasp them [the reins of leadership] once again." C. BRAUER, JOHN R. KENNEDY AND THE SECOND RECONSTRUCTION 318 (1977).

5. David Lewis's biography of King is exceptional in its recognition that King's ability to mobilize blacks was an issue to be investigated rather than an assumed fact. D. LEWIS, KING, A BIOGRAPHY (2d ed. 1978).

6. See, e.g., C. CARSON, IN STRUGGLE: SNCC AND THE BLACK AWAKENING OF THE 1960s (1981); D. GARROW, BEARING THE CROSS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND

campaigns tended to view mass activism from the perspective of the major civil rights leaders.[7] Some scholars who wrote leader-centered studies called for investigation at the local level, but book-length community studies covering long periods of time only began to appear during the 1980's.

Morris's work is an extension of these pioneering community studies. William Chafe's 1980 study of race relations in Greensboro, North Carolina, broke new ground by demonstrating that a local black movement could sustain itself for two decades without substantial intervention by national black leaders and while pursuing local goals that were only indirectly related to federal civil rights legislation.[8] Other community studies confirmed that local black struggles each had unique life histories and that some struggles began before the dates traditionally used to mark the start of the civil rights movement—1954, 1955, or 1960 are typical—and continued after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.[9] As the author of a thoughtful recent study of the Tuskegee black movement commented: "Each community now has a story to tell about the movement, and only when many of those stories are told will the South's great social upheaval be well understood."[10]

Even more systematically than Morris, sociologist Doug McAdam set forth some of the theoretical assumptions underlying the new revisionist literature in his *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, published in 1982.[11] Rejecting both "classical" models, which ascribed social movements to psychological responses resulting from disruptive social strains, and "resource mobilization" models, which stressed the importance of "elite largess," McAdam offered instead a "political process" model to explain the rise of the modern black struggle. Like the historians doing community studies, McAdam noted that among the important causal factors of the black struggle were the indigenous institutions and levels of political awareness present in black communities.

THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE, 1955-1968 (forthcoming); A. MEIER & E. RUDWICK, CORE: A STUDY IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1942-1968 (1973).

    7. *See, e.g.*, D. COLBURN, RACIAL CHANGE AND COMMUNITY CRISIS: ST. AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA, 1980 (1983); D. GARROW, PROTEST AT SELMA: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965 (1978).

    8. W. CHAFE, CIVILITIES AND CIVIL RIGHTS: GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA, AND THE BLACK STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM (1980).

    9. *See, e.g.*, R. NORRELL, REAPING THE WHIRLWIND: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN TUSKEGEE (1985); Thornton, *Challenge and Response in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956*, 33 ALA. REV. 163-235 (1980).

    10. NORRELL, *supra* note 9, at ix.

    11. D. MCADAM, POLITICAL PROCESS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK INSURGENCY 1930-1970 (1982).

In contrast to McAdam, who unfortunately obtained his data regarding the black struggle largely from a secondary source, Morris undertook extensive historical research into original sources. On the basis of many interviews (and less impressive documentary research), Morris argues that "local movement centers" were responsible for the rapid emergence of sustained struggles in southern communities. Emphasizing the institutional autonomy and strength of black communities, Morris sharply disputes scholars who explain black movements by citing individual psychological responses to large-scale structural factors. In his view, the modern black struggle was made possible not by nebulous discontent among blacks but by black institutions, especially churches, and of resourceful, sophisticated black leaders. These leaders, he asserts, benefited from the advice and guidance of the major civil rights groups and movement "halfway houses," such as the Highlander Folk school and the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

By investigating the local roots of the black struggle, Morris is able to trace its origins before the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott. He offers a useful discussion of the black community boycott of buses in Baton Rouge, which predated the Montgomery bus boycott by more than two years and even preceded the 1954 *Brown* decision. Morris somewhat exaggerates the importance of this boycott, which was neither the first black boycott of southern segregated transportation facilities nor as significant a model for subsequent protests as the Montgomery movement. Nevertheless, Morris's account allows him to demonstrate the ability of southern blacks to build a successful, locally led, locally funded movement. He notes that the Reverend T.J. Jemison, Baton Rouge boycott leader, was an official of the five-million-member National Baptist Congress, thus enabling news of the boycott to be disseminated elsewhere in the South by black ministers.

Like many scholars, Morris tends to overstate the originality of his arguments. He attacks straw men such as the unnamed scholars who "for too long have portrayed the masses as a flock of sheep reacting blindly to uncontrollable forces." In support of his assertion that scholars have "consistently" dismissed movement centers "as weak and incapable of generating mass collective action," he cites only a single work, a general textbook on social movements written in 1973. He is not the first to note the crucial role of churches and local leaders or that the desegregation sit-ins occurred before 1960. In his eagerness to challenge previous scholarship and to direct attention toward the local sources of the black struggle, Morris almost completely ignores factors that do not fit his analyti-

cal framework, such as the actions of outside elites and the assimila-tionist motives of some black activists.

Most troubling of all, Morris's evidence does not show how social movements emerge at the local level. Somewhat surprisingly, Morris seems determined to attribute the initiation of movements to individuals affiliated with the major civil rights organizations rather than to emphasize the role of emergent, local protest groups. Apparently in an effort to rebut the notion that protests were unplanned, emotional outbursts, he attacks scholars who have observed that the protest initiators often acted without the authorization of established organizations. My own research, based on documentary evidence as well as interviews with some of the same individuals Morris interviewed, revealed that even when protest initiators were affiliated with existing civil rights groups, their militancy challenged the established leadership of these groups. Morris's assertion that the wave of sit-ins in February, 1960, were initially planned by the NAACP, CORE, and the SCLC is supported only by a vague reference to his interviews rather than by documentary evidence from the period. Far more research at the local level would be necessary to determine the extent to which local protest initiators acted on behalf of the major civil rights groups.

Morris's understanding of the importance of indigenous institutions should have made him more skeptical of after-the-fact claims regarding the initiating role of the major civil rights organizations. More careful research, using documents rather than the recollections of individual leaders, would have revealed the extent to which local protest movements disrupted existing leadership structures in black communities. Blacks in Montgomery, rather than turning to the NAACP or CORE, formed their own local organization—the Montgomery Improvement Association—to direct their movement. Similarly, the students who initiated the sit-in movement formed local protest groups, which repeatedly affirmed their independence from the established civil rights organizations, including King's SCLC, and even from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which was led by student activists. The movement in Mississippi involved largely autonomous local organizations only loosely affiliated with the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which was independent of the national civil rights groups. Although Morris stresses the importance of the black church, he should have discussed the conflicts within the church regarding racial militancy and noted the large number—perhaps a majority—of southern black clergymen who did not become active

in the civil rights movement or allow their churches to be used for civil rights meetings.

Despite these weaknesses, Morris's study is a major contribution to the civil rights literature, for he lays out a challenging agenda for future research. The revisionist literature has revitalized a field that was in danger of becoming bogged down in more and more detailed accounts of national civil rights leadership. Biographies and leadership studies focused on Martin Luther King have become a minor scholarly industry that have acquainted us with the finer points of King's thought, but few of these studies document King's relationship to the black struggle or his ability to mobilize the masses of southern blacks in order to implement his nonviolent strategy. The result is a widely held perception that King was not only the most prominent black spokesman of the 1960's but that he *was* the civil rights movement. This perception persists despite the fact that of the dozens of sustained local protest movements of the 1960's, King played major roles in only a few movements (Albany, St. Augustine, Birmingham, and Selma are the major examples), and even in these communities he worked closely with local leaders who were major figures before and after King captured the national spotlight.

Investigations of the local context of southern black struggles are necessary not only to correct an oversight in previous scholarship but also to aid in understanding the present state of Afro-American society. Although national civil rights reforms had an important impact on southern blacks, careful study of black communities has revealed that the passage of civil rights legislation was accompanied by perhaps more significant changes in black institutional, cultural, and social life. Southern blacks gained equal access to public accommodations and electoral processes, but they also acquired new institutional and leadership resources and a new conception of themselves. The modes of thought and behavior that emerged from the struggles of the 1950's and 1960's had a greater impact, I would argue, on the daily lives of most black Americans than did the federal statutes. Racial equality under the law gave Afro-Americans new legal protections and an added measure of personal dignity in the surrounding white-dominated world, but social transformation within black communities was needed—and is still needed—to allow black Americans to utilize and protect the rights that have been won.