

**Introduction to special issue: “The Civil Rights Movement in New York City”**  
**by Clarence Taylor**

Since the 1960s most US history has been written as if the civil rights movement was primarily or entirely a southern history. Of course this is incorrect. The fight for civil rights has always been a national struggle. For many years now historians have been attempting to correct this view. My own contribution to this effort has focused on the struggle in New York City through a history of the black churches in Brooklyn, a biography of one of the most prominent religious leaders in New York City, and a forthcoming history of the teachers union. I also co-edited a survey history of the civil rights movement that emphasizes the national--both northern and southern--character of this ongoing struggle. One of the first chapters in that book discusses the fight for school integration in Boston in 1787. (2)

Of course, no one has been alone in this work. There is a new generation of scholarship rewriting our understanding of this history. This special issue of *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* represents one of the first compilations surveying this effort. The essays chosen for this volume, which will later be expanded in book form, focus on this northern history from a New York perspective. (3)

In their challenge to the southern paradigm of the movement, scholars have not only questioned the 1954 starting date of the civil rights movement but have argued that voting rights, public accommodation, and integration were not the only goals of civil rights campaigns. Jeanne F. Theoharis, for instance, has argued that the northern wing of the movement embraced black economic empowerment, and a fairer distribution of governmental services and resources. Campaigns outside of the South, she argues, did not limit their approach to non-violent protest but adopted self-defense and Black Nationalism in some campaigns. Theoharis and other scholars of northern civil rights struggles also challenge the portrayal of the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s as a force that derailed the "triumphant" struggle for civil rights.

Periodization is also an important question in this literature. There are some who contend that the objectives that would later be identified with the black freedom struggle of the late 1960s were evident in the late 1940s and 1950s. Not only have northern civil right studies been more geographically inclusive, they have also moved beyond the white-black dichotomy so pervasive in studies on the South and have turned to the plight and agency of other people of color, especially Latinos and Asians. Some scholars have also disputed the portrayal of the classification of segregation in the North as *de facto*, arguing that northern segregation was sanctioned by the state. (4)

There are at least three important components noted by scholars studying northern civil rights. The first component was a secular left that included members of the American Communist Party. Despite attacks on the party during the Cold War, many members did not abandon racial justice movements, but instead joined national and grassroots organizations. For example, Annie Stein became active in the Brooklyn branch of the NAACP in the 1950s where she championed the cause of school integration.

Communists were not the only leftist fighting for racial justice. Other members of the secular left included anti-Communist democratic socialists and social democrats. A good example is Bayard Rustin who was the main organizer of the February 3, 1964 New York City School Boycott. Some historians have also noted the pivotal role of trade unionists in civil rights campaigns outside of the South. (5)

The second important part of the northern civil rights movement was made up of a religious component. Various religious communities, including ministers of different denominations and

non-ministerial lay people were at the fore, organizing, and carrying out demonstrations. It was not just in the South but many places outside of the southern region that black churches became the center force of civil rights campaigns. Nightly meetings in churches became revivals where people heard eloquent speeches and sermons, sang freedom songs, gave testimony, and helped finance the movements. Moreover, many from the black religious communities joined and rose to leadership in the local chapters of civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and Urban League. (6)

The third component involved in northern civil rights campaigns was Black Nationalist. Objectives, which are now attributed to black nationalists, did not first appear in the late 1960s but were evident in earlier civil rights struggles such as the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" crusades in Chicago, Washington D.C., Manhattan, Brooklyn, and New York, during the Depression. Historian Peter Levy has noted that black activists in Cambridge, Maryland, involved in a civil rights struggle in the early 1960s led by Gloria Richardson, were willing, as black nationalists often advocated, defending themselves and not turning the other cheek. Those activists had ties with black nationalists, including Malcolm X, and even decided not to integrate lunch counters in the city. In some cases the dividing line between those advocating "civil rights" and those advocating Black Nationalist objectives were blurred. A good example is Malcolm X's decision to publicly support the second citywide boycott of New York Public schools in March 1964. Although he never moved away from Black Nationalism, he opposed school segregation and said he considered himself "aligned with everyone who will take some action to end this criminal situation in the schools." (7)

Undeniably, New York City was one of the most important centers of civil rights activities. Long before the Montgomery the Bus Boycott the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr. helped launch the Harlem Bus Boycott of 1941. Historian Martha Biondi discusses, black and Jewish organizations struggling in the 1940s for the passage and enforcement of anti-discrimination measures. (8) By the 1950s and 1960s there were numerous civil rights campaigns taking place in the city.

Biondi challenges the argument that the southern wing of the movement shaped the northern civil rights struggle. Instead, she contends that it was the northern wing, especially New York City that had a profound impact on the national movement, including the southern campaigns. Biondi argues that black migrants to the city were responsible for launching the "Second Reconstruction," which began the fight for civil rights legislation, ending discrimination in housing, the workplace, schools, and public transportation all before the celebrated campaigns in the South such as the Montgomery Bus boycott. Many studies have focused on the role of ministers in civil rights battles. However, Biondi notes that in New York, other forces were at the forefront, especially labor. While integration was an objective of the southern wing of the movement, Biondi contends that in New York the post WWII movement focused on jobs, democracy and complete equality.

Some scholars, like Biondi, now argue that integration was not the major objective of northern civil rights campaigns and prefer to describe the struggle as a fight for "desegregation." Others, like Peter Eisenstadt, maintain that integration was a pivotal objective of battles in New York City. Eisenstadt investigates the attempt in the 1960s at integrating the largest middle class housing cooperative in New York, Rochdale Village in South Jamaica. Eisenstadt notes that the housing integration effort in the city's third largest black community brought together a coalition of leftists, liberal Democrats, moderate Republicans, pragmatic government officials and business executives. He details how powerful city figures such as Robert Moses, New York City's Commissioner of Parks and Abraham Kazan, president of the United Housing Foundation, helped create Rochdale and the crucial role played by residents of the housing cooperative in maintaining a racial harmonious community. Eisenstadt also distinguishes the civil rights movement from the Black Power movement, by contending that the rise of Black Power

sentiment in the late 1960s and 1970s undermines the experiment at Rochdale. The authors of the articles of this issue all call into questions the city's reputation for liberalism.

The last three articles in this issue emphasize the direct challenge to that image by those involved in the fight for racial equality. As a city where a strong social contract provided city workers with high wages, benefits and the right to collectively bargain, affordable housing, and health care services for the working class and poor, New York developed a reputation as a bastion of liberalism. Its anti-discriminatory policies, however limited, helped the city acquire a reputation for racial liberalism. However, the Brooklyn chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) questioned the reality of that reputation. Brian Purnell details the 1962 direct action campaign by Brooklyn CORE, a racially integrated membership organization, to force the city to provide better sanitation services to Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn's largest black community. It was Brooklyn CORE that exposed the city's racially discriminatory policy on garbage removal and the intransigence of city officials to seriously address those discriminatory practices and policies." Purnell details this community-wide campaign involving Brooklyn CORE activists and residents of Bedford-Stuyvesant and examines the campaign's larger impact on structural inequality in New York City.

Dan Perlstein turns our attention to the labor movement in New York City in the late 1960s by exploring one of the leading figures of the civil rights movement, Bayard Rustin and his alliance with the politically moderate United Federation of Teachers against black activists in the late 1960s. Perlstein takes on recent scholarship that contends that Rustin was consistent throughout his years as a leading civil rights strategist and theoretician.

Perlstein depicts a Rustin who became quite pessimistic about the country's willingness to accept racial equality and increasingly felt that it was willing to accommodate the system. By the late 1960s the once left-wing organizer of the 1963 March on Washington was siding with the UFT against more militant community activists and black trade unionists who insisted that community control of schools was a necessary goal for gaining racial equality. Unfortunately, the strike led to tragic results, dashing all hopes of an alliance between labor and New York's black and Latino communities and helping shift city politics to the right.

My final article explores how those active in the New York City's school integration battle of the 1950s and 1960s also exposed the limits of the city's racial liberal image. The school integration movement, like other civil rights campaigns described in this journal, was a challenge to the structural inequality and institutional racism that relegated blacks to the lowest socioeconomic conditions in America. It exposed how government officials, those who ran the school system, those who lived in predominantly white neighborhoods and many of the members of the city's liberal community opposed attempts at city-wide integration. New York's failure to respond to the problems of its minority populations revealed the limits of its liberal reputation.

Despite all their differences the essays in this special issue is just a small example of the rich scholarship on New York City and civil rights. As noted, the authors sometimes express different views on analytical categories, periodization, on the interpretation of events, and the impact of the civil rights movement. Those differences express the rich and vitality of this new literature. The essays in this issue clearly provide evidence of the civil rights movement northern character.

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(2) Clarence Taylor, *The Black Churches of Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997)

(3) Some works are James R. Ralph Jr., *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Randal Maurice Jelks, *African Americans in the Furniture City: The Struggle For Civil Rights in Grand Rapids* (University of Illinois Press, 2006); Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Gretchen Cassel, *Dissent in Wichita: The Civil Rights Movement in the Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Mathew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Adina Back, "Up South in New York: The 1950s School Desegregation Struggles," Dissertation, New York University, 1997; Jeanne F. Theoharis, "We Saved the City": Black Struggles for Educational Equality in Boston," *Radical History Review* 81 (2201), pp. 61-93. Gerald Home, *The Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, University press of Virginia, 1995); Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Princeton University Press, 1996, Clarence Taylor, *Knocking at our Own Door*.

(4) Jeanne F. Theoharis, "I'd Rather Go to School in the South: How Boston's School Desegregation Complicates the Civil Rights Paradigm," in Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Freedom North*; pp.-125-51; Michael Washington, "The Stirrings of the Modern Civil rights Movement in Cincinnati, Ohio, 1943-1953," in Theoharis and Komozi, *Groundwork*, pp. 215-34; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*.

(5) For the role of Communists and others of the Left see; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; Daniel H. Perlstein, *Justice, Justice: School Politics and the Eclipse of Liberalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door*; pp. 54-60, 92-97.

(6) Clarence Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door*; Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: C.L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2005)

(7) Lizabeth Cohn, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, p. 16; Mark Naison, *Communist in Harlem During the Depression* (University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 50-51; Peter Levy, "Gloria Richardson and the Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland," in Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, pp. 97-115; Clarence Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door*, pp. 158-60; Angela D. Dillard, "Religion and Radicalism: The Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr., and the Rise of Black Christian Nationalism in Detroit," in Theoharis and Woodard's *Freedom North*, pp. 153-75; Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange land, C.L. Franklin, The Black Church, and the Transformation of America*, pp.241-278.

(8) Dominic J. Capeci, Jr., "The Harlem Bus Boycott of 1941," *Historian*, August 1979, pp. 723-29, excerpted in Birnbaum and Taylor, pp.298-302; Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, pp 98-111.

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