

Racial politics



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The push for racial equality in the United States got a boost from the demands placed on all facets of society during the Second World War. The mobilization effort relied on the black race to win the war and once it was over, there was no turning back. Furthermore, the ideals of freedom and equality, which were the backbone of the Allied war cry and the foundation for the anti-communist Western movement, did not sit well alongside Jim Crow laws and public acts of racial discrimination.

The Jim Crow System of segregation was a process in which white Southerners legitimized their racial supremacy over their black counterparts. It was a system based on ethnic and racial differentiation. It is important to note that such a system enabled the "definition of race as an institutional fact" (Singh, 2004, p. 22). This is evident if one considers that such a system enabled "the construction of black people as subjects proscribed from participating in the social state in which they live" thereby positing them as entities "whose relation to the public is always in racial doubt" (Singh, 2004, p.

22). The possibility of such is better understood if one considers that differentiation entails the recognition that races are different and as such, it creates a political setting that separates races [e. g. distinction and hence separation of the whites from the blacks]. In addition to this, it also separates and ultimately, limits or confines races to a social sphere with corresponding social functions that are imposed on them. In lieu of this, the importance of the Civil Rights movement lies in its attempt to breakdown and free society of this idea of racial differentiation.

Contrary to popular belief, the Civil Rights movement did not begin in the 1950's and end in the 1960's; instead, it has been an ongoing process since the Compromise of 1877, through to the present day. The movement has encompassed not only political equality but also housing, education, and economics, to name a few. Moreover, Jeanne Theoharis (2003) argues against the dominant notion that the civil rights movement was a nonviolent movement born in the South during the 1950's that emerged triumphant in the early 1960's only to be derailed by Black Power and the white backlash when it moved North after 1965.

Theoharis (2003) argues that an understanding of the movement necessitates " a fuller inclusion of Northern activism within the postwar freedom narrative challenges the notion that the movement went from civil rights to Black Power (p. 12). She notes, " that Black Power caused the decline of the movement, that self-defense was new to the movement in the 1960s, and that well-organized nonviolent movements were not as prevalent or successful across the North as they were in the South from 1940 to 1980" (p. 12).

The Northern movement successfully used similar tactics as compared to the Southern movement such as boycotts, sit-ins, rallies and grassroots. The difference however, was the internal concepts of race in the North. An example of the historical and political tensions that existed in the North can be seen in Alexis de Tocqueville commentary in 1831 when he stated, " the prejudice of race appears to be stronger in the states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists; and nowhere is it so intolerant as in those states where servitude has never been known" (Jacobson, 1998, p.

22). On the surface, it seemed as if the North was anything but racist since the North had fought against slavery and never implemented Jim Crow Laws. Underneath this however, racism and discrimination were institutionalized within the economic and political system; and in both instances, the system was controlled by whites. This was noted by Sugrue (1996) in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Within the aforementioned work, Sugrue outlined the pre-existing presence of economic discrimination in postwar Detroit, which led to the 1967 riots.

At the end of World War II, blacks were leaving for the North, just as northern cities began to lose money and jobs. The “Second Great Migration” led to an influx of unemployed blacks into northern cities with limited resources and jobs. Deindustrialization, combined with the Great Migration, exacerbated the persistent racial discrimination in labor markets and intensified the racial division within the metropolitan area. Though Sugrue focuses on the economic aspect of the issue, he does note that the origins of the urban crisis are much earlier than social scientists have recognized.

In lieu of this, he stated, “there is no simple explanation for the inequality and marginality that beset the urban poor” (Sugrue, 1996, p. 5). In lieu of this, this paper opts to present an evaluation of the effect of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Such an analysis will consider the historical, philosophical and ideological underpinnings of the Civil Rights Movement. I will argue that American society was unprepared for such huge and radical changes [brought by Civil Rights Movement] because the issues involved were too complex.

In relation to this, I will also argue that it is not only the case that society was not ready to handle such changes but also the legislated and enacted laws were directly attempting to change a social conception of race that had dominated United States [political, social, economic, and religious]culturesince its inception. In proving my argument, I will focus on the aspect of “ educational equality” as implemented in the process of Mississippi’s initial experiences in its implementation of school desegregation programs.

In 1954, the United States of America’s Supreme Court decided a landmark case concerning educational and racial equality. In *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U. S. 483 (1954), the Court’s ruling is grounded on the principle that the doctrine of “ separate but equal” [this doctrine is referring to the segregation policy, more specifically, the segregation policy in the schools in the United States] will not and cannot provide Black Americans with the same standards and quality of education available for White Americans.

The court thus, outlawed the “ racial segregation of public education facilities” for the aforementioned reason. In relation to this, on May 17, 1954, the Warren Court handed down a 9-0 decision, which stated, in clear and certain terms that “ separate educational facilities are inherently unequal”. Chief Justice Warren writes: “ Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society.

It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms” (Imber & Geel, 2004, p.

212). The aforementioned decisions may be best understood if one considers that racial segregation [as the court sees it] is against the pronouncements of the Constitution. The segregation of students on the basis of race or ethnicity and the legalization of a segregated public school education through the enactment of certain statutes serving to legitimize the creation and operation of schools that are exclusively for Whites or for Blacks, is clearly, not justified. The Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v.*

Board of Education of Topeka remains and is still considered as a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Within Mississippi, the attempt to account for the implementation of the aforementioned decisions occurred during the later part of the 20th century [1970’s]. The reason for such lies in the high amount of white resistance to school desegregation. In lieu of this, the result of the elimination of the desegregation system was set on white terms. This is evident if one considers that during the process, race was considered as a high factor in the consideration of a school’s teachers and administrators.

Black teachers and administrators thereby lost their jobs and the black community saw an erosion of the control they had exercised over their children's education (Bolton, 2000, p. 782). In the years that followed, as federal support waned, efforts in Mississippi and across the nation to create unitary school systems usually floundered, in many cases leading to a resegregation of schools (Burger, 1982). In the decade before the Brown decision, upgrading black schools within segregation was considered a viable alternative to school integration by both blacks and whites.

This strategy of educational equalization sought to ensure a balanced distribution of resources between separate black and white schools. From 1925 until 1950, black southerners, focused their efforts on trying to equalize educational spending rather than directly assaulting the doctrine of separate but equal. In addition to this, after the organizations shifted its tactics to challenge the Jim Crow system, many black southerners continued to embrace the equalization policy as the best method for improving black education.

The necessity of such was posited by Burger (1982) during his oral account of history during the 1930's to the 1960's. Burger (1982) noted that the importance of the aforementioned segregation system lies in its ability to provide good education for the black people. He noted, " There was interest to help the black high school to be established and survive [however] it didn't get much support locally". According to Burger, the difficulty of the situations within the black schools is evident if one considered that " there was no money there [black schools]".

In addition to this, he noted that during the 1930's to the 1960's, the black schools got " little aid... from the county... [It] was just a little bit of sixteenth section money and maybe one or two other funds". Southern state governments in the decade after World War, faced with both a federal government increasingly sympathetic to the cause of black civil rights and changes in the region's demographics and economy that threatened to undermine the racial status quo, also recognized that a little more emphasis on the " equal" part of the separate but equal equation might be prudent if segregation were to be preserved.

After the war, these states all began or enhanced programs to improve black education. As opposed to this some southern states, such as Mississippi, continued to advocate educational equalization even after the Brown decision had declared segregated schools inherently unequal, in the vain hope that the federal government might somehow still accept an improved version of separate but equal over desegregation.

During the aforementioned period, within the Mississippi area although implementing the Brown mandate ultimately proved difficult, educational equalization was never a viable alternative. Such is evident not merely in the efforts to enable student desegregation but also in providing education for the black professionals within the field of education. An example of such was evident in Dr. Burger's situation during the period.

As a black principal in Hattiesburg during the period that he sought to obtain a master's degree in the early 1950s, he had to take a leave of absence without pay. In order to fully understand such a situation, one must thus be careful of the nuances involved in his or her understanding and analysis of

the Civil Rights Movement, what the movement sought to achieve and the means in and through which its prominent leaders and advocates believe to be both proper and effective.

As may be noted in the development of the civil rights movement, from the historical, philosophical and ideological perspectives, the proper and effective means in which the recognition of civil rights be regarded as fundamental rights that ought to be granted to every citizen of the state and not only to a selected few, is through the tedious process of “ legislation” and “ affirmative action”.

By these two concepts we mean a legal mechanism (1) “ for the institutionalization of certain laws and statutes” and (2) “ for the correction of certain laws and statutes to address and correct the mistakes committed in the past” so that the law may be said to fulfill its function, that is, to administer social justice. The above discussion gives us an idea of the complexity of the problem that needs to be resolved.

At this point, it is not difficult to see that all of these things involve the very notion of “ power relation” at the very core and as such, it may be said that the whole historical, philosophical and ideological developments of the push for racial equality in the United States was held fast by this very notion. Power relation then, both as a notion and a political phenomenon, is constitutive of the problem that was explored by the paper.

As I see it, the problem with the civil rights movement was that it was not universal; instead, there were those who defended and supported the movement and there were those who opposed. It was not able to gain an inter-subjective consensus, so to speak. In the face of such a complex

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problem, legislators in the past should not have merely taken into consideration that the problem would appropriately and effectively be addressed by mere acts of rapid legislation. Rapid legislation, as what the legislators in the past did, and as will be argued in this thesis is not the solution to the problem.

In fact, it made the problem worse by failing to consider the interweaving and interconnected issues that were involved. In the case of Mississippi, the formulation of legislations that opted to eradicate the aforementioned cases of segregation merely led to the further specification of the events that enable segregation. It is important to note that the downside of such lies in the fact that such cases of segregation or racism were enabled by the existing laws of Mississippi during the period in discussion.

The oral history narrated by Dr. Burger serves as an example of such. True, the expedited implementation of civil rights on all facets and areas of society created considerable "changes" on the realms of the social, political and economic but the question whether such huge and radical changes were appropriate and effective remained without a satisfactory answer since the phenomenon is in itself deeply embedded in the culture of the American society. References Bolton, C.

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