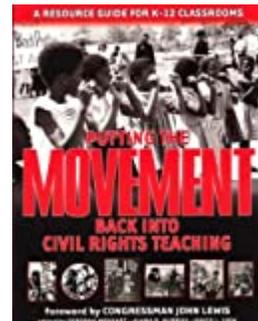


Deborah Menkart, Alana D. Murray, Jenice L. View, eds. *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching: A Resource Guide for K-12 Classrooms*. DC: McArdle Printing, 2004. 576 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-878554-18-5.



Reviewed by Trevor Griffey (Department of History, University of Washington and Project Coordinator, Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project)

Published on H-1960s (September, 2005)

Teaching Activism

Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching is not the kind of book that usually gets reviewed for H-NET.[1] It is a “resource guide” for K-12 teachers rather than an historical monograph; it is edited by “educator-activists” (p. 555) rather than academic or even popular historians; and it is not published by an academic or popular press, but jointly by two non-profit organizations.[2] Teaching for Change, one of the guide’s non-profit publishers, works “to provide teachers and parents with the tools to transform schools into socially equitable centers of learning where students become architects of a better future.” The guide’s other publisher, the Poverty & Race Research Action Council (PRRAC), is a small Washington D.C. think tank and policy advocacy organization that seeks to “alleviate conditions caused by the interaction of race and poverty.”[3] Prominent historians, journalists, and civil rights activists were involved in creating the guide: Congressman John Lewis wrote its Foreword, and its Advisory Board includes (but is not limited to) Clayborne Carson, Charles Payne, Howard Zinn, Juan Williams, James Forman, Danny Glover, and Sonia Sanchez. Rather than being a self-contained book, it

serves as a companion to a teaching-tool web-site. And a significant portion of the book’s content came from people affiliated with Rethinking Schools—an organization whose website, magazine, and curriculum resource guides are on the cutting edge of making innovative and socially engaged teaching methods accessible and relevant to today’s K-12 classroom.[4]

This unusual mix of politics and pedagogy takes *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching* far beyond what one might find in the standard K-12 teaching tool. The guide advocates a pedagogy that fundamentally links the way we teach to what we teach, and applies relatively recent trends in academic studies of civil rights movement history to the needs of K-12 educators.

Rather than assess the resource guide’s varied approaches to teaching from a professional educator’s standpoint, this review takes the guide’s publication as an important opportunity to consider the social significance of new trends in civil rights historiography as they relate to K-12 teaching methods. The guide implicitly raises critical questions about how to popularize recent

academic studies that include the North as well as the South, women as well as men, multiracial rather than just black vs. white perspectives, and go beyond the traditional 1954-64 textbook story centered on Martin Luther King, Jr. It also raises pedagogical questions about the role of the world wide web in bringing educators and historians together in the production of social movement history, and the use and potential abuse of social movement history in the quest to turn today's youth into tomorrow's leaders.

Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching was intentionally published to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown decision and has an unapologetically activist orientation, a point this review will engage more substantively in the conclusion. The guide's organization flows from that perspective. As editor Jenice L. View writes in the introduction, "the purpose of education is to create equality and justice.... The [guide's] materials encourage students and teachers to challenge barriers to student achievement, analyze how injustice is reinforced, and develop information and skills for creating a just world" (p. 3). She later adds that "we share the belief that teachers are, in the words of Lerone Bennett Jr., 'either oppressors or liberators'" (p. 6).

From this framework, the book's editors directly challenge the civil rights history found in most contemporary textbooks. "The typical story of the Civil Rights Movement," the introduction announces, "is actually a disempowering narrative" (p. 3). Most textbooks celebrate the heroism of Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, and laud government actions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In the process, the grassroots struggles of ordinary people receives short shrift, causing students to admire the movement from afar rather than connect it to their own lives.

This attack on textbook history explicitly fuses Charles Payne's critique of top-down civil rights history with James W. Loewen's criticism of textbooks as "anti-citizenship manuals" that promote "patriotism over democracy" (pp. 11, 79-90). The editors of *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching* strongly agree with Payne's interpretation of the civil rights movement. *Parts of his essay, Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968, are reprinted in the guide's introductory section and referenced multiple times throughout other sections of the book.*[5] *Emphasizing daily struggles over large events, "ordinary" people over "elites," and personal stories over legislative histories, the guide's editors and contributors invoke insights Payne developed in I've Got the Light of Free-*

dom (1995) to provide lesson plans and teaching models quite different from almost anything else available to K-12 teachers. Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching_ thereby brings the content of civil rights history together with the way it is taught. It provocatively suggests that teaching the history of grassroots social movements requires methods that challenge students to assess their own relationship to various forms of power in their daily lives.

Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching doesn't spend much time berating current textbooks or providing an alternative narrative for a singular civil rights movement. It is not an activist textbook as much as a collection of complementary short readings and lesson plans organized into six sections on topics rarely covered by conventional textbooks. These sections, entitled, "Reflections [by teachers] on Teaching About the Movement," "Citizenship and Self-Determination," "Education," "Economic Justice," "Culture," and "Looking Forward," contain a variety of essays that offer one or more "lenses" for understanding movement history: "women, youth, organizing, culture, institutional racism, and the interconnectedness of social movements" (p. 6).

The guide's design weaves primary documents with analysis and first-person narratives with lessons into a kind of workbook. In structuring their work this way, the guide's editors took inspiration from *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment*, a UCLA publication about Asian American activism in the United States from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. [6] Like other K-12 teaching guides published by Rethinking Schools, *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching* is meant to be used with a companion website. There, teachers will find handouts to accompany the lesson plans, suggestions for tying lesson plans to national teaching standard requirements, and links to multimedia primary source collections, books, and web sites through which to teach civil rights history.

Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching takes an important first step at making recent trends in civil rights historiography useful to K-12 teachers. These trends include a turn toward the local and grassroots, the role of women in movement-building, multiracial components of civil rights history, and the importance of political culture. It also includes provocative personal stories about the sometimes controversial nature of different types of civil rights teaching, which may include uneasy role-playing simulations, taking students to protests, and struggling with images of the brutal violence many civil

rights activists faced. These stories offer important testimony to the rewards and also the risks of teaching sensitive and sometimes unpleasant topics in ways meant to challenge students' relationship to authority.

The book's pioneering work does come with some costs. By not providing a coherent alternative narrative to textbook history, and by significantly downplaying legal benchmarks, it renders much of its own material supplemental to the textbooks that the guide is so critical of. Academic discussions of what a long civil rights movement would look like—including Communist Party and organized labor activity in the 1930s and 1940s, and community action in federal antipoverty agencies in the 1960s and 1970s—are almost entirely missing. An absence of explicit discussion of regional differentiations in northern and southern movement histories makes it difficult to provide students or teachers with sufficient means to challenge textbook omissions of white supremacy in northern housing and labor union politics. And despite an explicit interest in personal stories that emphasize local aspects of civil rights history, the guide offers few useful suggestions for making local history a significant part of the civil rights curriculum of individual instructors.

Finally, there is the question of activist teaching and its relationship to the historical profession. Many academic historians are uncomfortable engaging topics in the present. Some of these concerns reflect a kind of closeted positivism that tends toward political conservatism, as if questions about the past are objective and independent from our present political assumptions and experiences. But most concerns about activist history also provide a very real and important challenge to those heavy-handed teachers who would, in the name of some "movement," abuse history, flatten the past into a caricature of the present, and narrowly channel students' ideas into rigid, preconceived civic ideologies, undermining their attempts to think and act for themselves.

Through its multiple teachers' testimonies, along with its resistance to any single meta-narrative, *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching* avoids becoming a dogmatic tool for student indoctrination that some historians might fear from its promotional materials. The guide does not adequately discuss the potential pitfalls of teaching social movement history in unconventional ways, but its criticism of what happens when one does not veer from the straight and narrow is nicely expressed. Its examples of lesson plans express a creative spirit of experimentation rather than rigid programming, a commitment to a democratic classroom experi-

ence rather than new forms of oppressive tests that demand overly simplistic answers. The guide's engagement with the present, and its admitted goal for "contemporary youth to understand themselves as the makers of history, not passive customers," strikes me as intellectually honest rather than inherently ahistorical (p. 7).

This is not to say, however, that the book and its accompanying website avoid all the pitfalls of activist pedagogy. A "Myth Busters Quiz" on the guide's website asks the question: "The crucial element enabling progress in winning civil rights was: A) Grassroots activism and organizing; B) The federal government; C) The March on Washington; D) National civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. or Roy Wilkins of the NAACP." The "correct" answer is supposedly A, but I would argue that this question confuses interpretation for information and forecloses the very debates that students should learn to engage in and decide for themselves.

Nevertheless, this criticism, which could be applied to other parts of the guide as well, is not meant to reduce the significance of *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching*. In bringing together academic historians and K-12 educators, in taking seriously the web's importance as a teaching tool, and in going beyond the black freedom struggle to include stories of Asian American, Mexican American, and Native American movements, the guide's editors have created an invaluable contribution to rethinking multicultural education. They have also succeeded in pulling together scattered stories of remarkable experimentation in K-12 civil rights teaching. Hopefully those innovations can inspire and even facilitate more unconventional communication across disciplinary boundaries in the near future.

Notes

[1]. Companion Website: <http://www.civilrightsTeaching.org/>.

[2]. Alana D. Murray describes herself as an "educator activist," but the term seems apt for all three editors.

[3]. Teaching for Change: Building Social Justice, Starting in the Classroom, http://www.Teaching_forchange.org/; The Poverty & Race Research Action Council (PRRAC), <http://www.prrac.org/about.php>.

[4]. Rethinking Schools Online, <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/>.

[5]. The most robust expression of Charles M. Payne's

criticism of top-down, state-centered civil rights history is in his book, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching* provides a brief summary of views expressed in that work, simply titled "Critique of the Traditional Narrative," that is reprinted from Payne's essay in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968*, ed. Steven F. Lawson and Charles M. Payne (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998). An excerpt from James W. Loewen, *Lies My*

Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong (New York: New Press, 1995) is published in *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching* under the title, "Patriotism Over Democracy: A Critical Analysis of U.S. History Textbooks."

[6]. Steven Louie and Glenn Omatsu, eds., *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2001); <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/aasc/aam/index.html>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-1960s>

Citation: Trevor Griffey. Review of Menkart, Deborah; Murray, Alana D.; View, Jenice L., eds., *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching: A Resource Guide for K-12 Classrooms*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10880>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.