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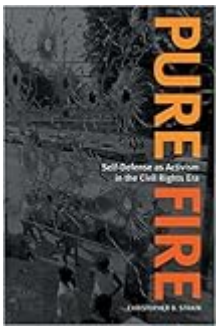

Christopher B. Strain. *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2005. x + 254 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2686-3; $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2687-0.

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Published on H-South (April, 2006)

A Politics of Self-Defense? Rethinking Civil Rights as "Pure Fire"

Writing in 1969, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. made an impassioned plea for gun control in the United States, offering a legal and institutional solution to the problem of violence in the late 1960s, against prevailing arguments about the ineluctability of bloodshed, whether the product of America's frontier mentality or the privations of industrial capitalism and its attendant culture of alienation. Not one to settle too quickly on legislative panaceas though, he also concluded that violence was an "American tradition." And partly echoing D.H. Lawrence's literary evocation of the ghosts of our national past some four decades earlier, Schlesinger contended that the violence then haunting America found its most prominent expression in the historic brutalizing of minority peoples, particularly African Americans, by the white majority.[1]

Christopher Strain, in *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era*, makes a largely persuasive case that in a movement and an era often characterized (and, if I get his argument correctly, caricatured) in America's popular imagination by the tactics of nonviolent direct action, African Americans resisted racial violence by meeting it with violence, expressing themselves politically by means of armed self-defense. White liberals like Schlesinger might conclude that too many guns were the problem, but more than a few black folk, it turns out, were not so convinced. The ghosts of America's racial past might inhabit our national literary imagination, but for many local people in the civil rights era, the haunting continued to manifest itself in ways far more terrifying than mere apparition.

With respect to the historiography of the civil rights movement, Strain's study is part of a recent trend inspired, it seems, by Charles Payne's suggestion, made a decade ago, that "little attention has been paid to the possibility that the success of the movement in the rural South owes something to the attitude of local people to self defense."[2] Following the lead of Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*, more recently a group of scholars has sought to apply the phenomenon of self-defense to local studies of the civil rights movement more systematically.[3]

So *Pure Fire* belongs to an up-and-coming school of interpretation among civil rights historians. Of the schol-

ars in question, Strain is the first to apply the idea of self-defense to the civil rights era and the movement in a comprehensive way. Even more, he proposes "an exercise in intellectual history; the history of an idea, as reflected in both events and people" (p. 4). This is a good thing. If the most vibrant trend in recent civil rights scholarship has been the appearance of tightly focused local studies that reveal a kaleidoscopic range of activists, venues, and types of protest, effectively challenging traditional King-centered or "top-down" narratives of the movement, then they have also left a great deal of conceptual confusion in their wake.

Like those studies, *Pure Fire* takes on the mainstream narrative, but does so by looking at the movement writ large through the lens of self-defense. Christopher Strain contends that a false dichotomy developed between violence and nonviolence during the movement, indulged in many cases by the white media, sometimes the black media, and even by a few prominent civil rights leaders. This fallacy signified a failure to comprehend the complex relation between the two strategies, making for an either/or dualism that obscured the meaning of self-defense. Even worse, this sort of misunderstanding fostered a "double standard" that privileged white over black acts of violence (p. 4). According to this flawed criterion, whites who defended themselves acted within an acceptable American tradition of self-defense, but African Americans who did the same engaged in unacceptable violence. In this reading the simple assertion of self-defense by black people belonged to a monolithic category called violence, one diametrically opposed to nonviolence. This double standard spawned some profoundly mistaken accounts of the civil rights era in Strain's estimation, chief among them the notion that the movement can be neatly divided into a pre-1965 nonviolent phase, and a post-1965 violent phase. (Strain does not discuss whether or not 1965 acts as a dividing line because of the passage of the Voting Rights Act.)

The battle thus joined, the author argues that African Americans' articulation of their right to self-defense belongs among American ideas of natural right, and more importantly, often acted as a constitutionalist expression of citizenship. Guns, which Strain often treats as symbols and even proxies for self-defense, had much richer significance for black people than they did for whites. Gun ownership was a claim to citizenship by virtue of the second amendment, an assertion of self-respect, power, manhood, and indeed, civil rights. The language of civil rights triggered by the fourteenth amendment during Reconstruction made the following logic explicit: "If blacks were citizens, they were Americans. If they were Americans, then they could own firearms as white folks could" (p. 19). So Strain reminds us of something that nonviolent educators like James Lawson, Jr. were at pains to undermine: self-defense was the historic attitude of most African Americans who engaged in the struggle before the civil rights era, and as such, was very much in keeping with American history and tradition.

The bulk of *Pure Fire* covers some well-trod territory: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s pilgrimage to nonviolence during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the relationship between King and the influential activist and self-defense advocate Robert F. Williams, the complex interplay between King and Malcolm X over the question of nonviolence, the story of Charles Sims, the Deacons of Defense and Justice and their relation to mainstream civil rights figures and organizations, the L.A. Watts "conflagration" (Strain's carefully considered term), and the apotheosis of violence by the Oakland Black Panther Party (p. 128).

Strain does give these people, relations, and episodes some interesting and sometimes fresh interpretations. Admirably, he makes clear that popular conceptions of nonviolence tended to sap that approach of much of its militant quality. If the media reflexively misread self-defense exclusively as "violence," they also read nonviolence as "passive," or, to describe the idea in a way that Strain doesn't: Tolstoyan rather than Gandhian. The media were not alone in these types of misunderstandings, however, and this is a valuable point. Advocates of self-defense at times failed to see the potential coerciveness of nonviolent direct action when used in a disciplined way. Robert F. Williams and Charles Sims, for example, saw the pragmatic or tactical value of nonviolent direct action, but were far from persuaded about its potential as a Christian spirituality or a lifestyle. In the latter capacity, nonviolence could be dogmatic or unrealistic in their estimation. (Of course, among the rank and file, this sentiment was probably widespread.) Malcolm X, it appears, found neither type very persuasive.

It is interesting though, as Strain demonstrates it, that advocates of nonviolence and self-defense often cooperated, or realized that their approaches could be complementary. For example, King and Malcolm X, as "cautious partners" tended to use each other to sharpen their respective messages (p. 92). King forced legislative solutions by dangling the threat of black separatism in the face of recalcitrant authorities, while Malcolm ridiculed King as an Uncle Tom to highlight his militancy. Moreover, CORE and SNCC activists in rural areas quickly dis-

covered that it was neither good nor entirely just to challenge too much or attempt to change local customs of firearm ownership. And more than a few activists, even Martin Luther King, Jr. in at least one instance (if Charles Sims' account is to be believed, p. 117) found the services of the Deacons for Defense and Justice quite helpful.

Considered as intellectual history, *Pure Fire* shows how fluid the idea of self-defense could be when used by activists. By these lights, the book is the story of how the concept of self-defense became increasingly broad in its scope and application. By the time Bobby Seale and Huey Newton acquired and adapted the idea to their purposes, it ceased to resemble commonplace definitions. In their hands, a racist white society and government was a systematic organ of violence against black people, and as such, self-defense could be expanded to include even acts of preemptive violence.

We learn, then, how activists adapted the idea of self-defense to fit their beliefs as well as changing circumstances. Herein lies the problem with Strain's account. It starts with a discussion of rather narrow, legal definitions of self-defense, moves into African Americans' traditional understandings of the idea (which proved more expansive) and then describes (and this makes up the bulk of the study) the peculiar circumstances in which the act or proclamation of self-defense was transformed into a type of political expression or protest. If I understand the arguments of the text correctly, Strain largely presumes to tell us what self-defense meant to those who employed the term. In this narrow sense, it might mean whatever its advocates claimed it meant–a bit troubling, but certainly reasonable. However, there are too many instances in which we have no such evidence and are left with the author's interpretations, many of which are insightful and some of which are a bit problematic.

A case in point: from the anecdotal evidence provided, it seems that some participants in the Watts conflagration believed that they were acting in self-defense. In fairness to Christopher Strain's argument, this meant that many people felt, and in fact did say, that the immediate cause of the events, a traffic stop and a drunk-driving arrest, indicated an unacceptable act of violence against the persons involved, and signified a broader pattern of police brutality against the residents of Watts. So the immediate cause of the protest (not, as the author carefully points out, the subsequent smash and grab looting, etc.) was an act of self-defense on the part of those people who believed their community was under attack.

It is safe to contend, I think, that many people thought this way, and the evidence provided clearly suggests this. Yet, the chapter on Watts ends with the troubling story of Charles Fizer. A recording artist who had fallen on hard times, Fizer was released from jail amidst the riot in progress. Cruising in his Buick and stopping short of a National Guard blockade, he then inexplicably accelerated into the guardsmen, refused to yield or acknowledge warnings, and under a hail of bullets, effectively committed "revolutionary suicide" (p. 144). Strain argues that this episode "might be interpreted as the ultimate expression of self-defense" (p. 144). But prima facie, self-defense, at a minimum, indicates the effort to protect one's self or livelihood from threat of violation by another, matching lethal force if necessary. Fizer made no such effort to defend himself; he showed no respect for his own life. It seems antithetical to the idea of self-defense to argue that it might incorporate a suicide.

This particular case only speaks to the larger problem with squeezing into this concept of self-defense simultaneous functions of natural right, legal standard, civil right, and political expression or protest. Human protests against injustice, or political acts that yield some sort of individual or group self-realization can take on a variety of forms, rendering infinite complexities that a definition of self-defense even generously expanded beyond its juridical meaning cannot accommodate neatly–thus the apparent (il)logic of suicide as a form of self-defense. At times, *Pure Fire* seems untroubled by these sorts of problems, and plays it a bit fast and loose where more conceptual precision or consideration may have helped. Certainly, it is not the point of Christopher Strain's book to make the reader believe that every person who hurls herself against the barricades of her tormentors acts in self-defense, but this is an impression one certainly might get. In other words, while Strain is critical of the ways in which members of the Oakland Black Panther Party "abused" self-defense, portions of their logic appear to leak into and even inform other aspects of the text rather uncritically (p. 145). Such instances (and there are other examples) encourage a conflation of violence and self-defense that presumably the author would very much like to undo.

This merely proves that self-defense is a fiendishly difficult idea to pin down when confronted with the varieties of human experience. Perhaps nonviolence enjoys the preeminent status it does in civil rights history because its practitioners proved far more systematic, coherent, and formal in their rendering of it. In terms of these types of considerations, *Pure Fire* and the studies that no doubt will follow it have an uphill climb. Yet,

for this reason and many others, *Pure Fire* makes an important contribution to civil rights scholarship, offering a different lens through which we might view the movement as a whole. Given that it comes at a time when practitioners of local studies, often with great skill, make it clear that "the movement" may well be indefinable, it comes as somewhat of a comfort to have an idea to chew on and follow in its development across different locales. Perhaps most important, as an effort to understand ideas as they emanate from grassroots contexts and people, Christopher Strain has performed a very valuable service.

Notes

[1]. This argument is in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of Confidence: Ideas, Power, and Violence in America* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1969). The Lawrence reference is from his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003 [1923]).

[2]. Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 205.

[3]. For example, Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Craig S. Pascoe, "The Monroe Rifle Club: Finding Justice in an 'Ungodly and Social Jungle Called Dixie,' " in *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History*, ed. Michael A. Bellesiles (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 393-424. Lance E. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Greta De Jong, *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Akinyele O. Umoja, "1964: The Beginning of the End of Nonviolence in the Mississippi Freedom Movement," *Radical History Review* 85 (Winter 2003): pp. 201-26; Umoja, " 'We Will Shoot Back': The Natchez Model and Paramilitary Organization in the Mississippi Freedom Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 3 (January 2002): pp. 271-94; Emilye J. Crosby, "'This Nonviolent Stuff Ain't No Good. It'll Get Ya Killed': Teaching about Self-Defense in the African American Freedom Struggle," in *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement: Freedom's Bittersweet Song*, ed. Julie Buckner Armstrong et al.(New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 159-73; Simon Wendt, "God, Gandhi, and Guns: The African American Freedom Struggle in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1964-1965," *Journal of African American History* 89, no. 1 (Winter 2004): pp. 36-56.

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Citation: Peter Kuryla. Review of Strain, Christopher B., *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era.* H-South, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

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