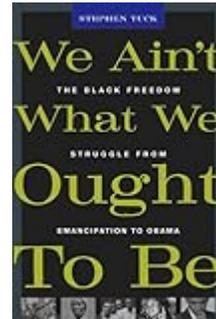




Stephen Tuck. *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. Illustrations. viii + 494 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-03626-0.



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Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep (San Francisco State University)

Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back

Stephen Tuck's *We Ain't What We Ought to Be* is a well-written, well-organized survey of African American history from the Civil War to the present. It combines much of the most recent scholarship on the subject with readings in primary sources. Divided into a prologue, eleven chapters, an epilogue, endnotes, and an index, Tuck's interpretation is neo-Marxist and focuses on the local and grassroots. At the same time, black struggle takes place against a background of changing social, political, economic, and technological possibilities.

Beginning each chapter with the quotidian and specific, Tuck builds on such incidents to examine an era, an attitude, or a movement. The final chapter, "Reagan, Rap, and Resistance: 1979-2000," opens with Michael "Wonder Mike" Wright recording the first hip-hop smash hit at a New Jersey studio and Ronald Reagan delivering a speech at the New York Hilton in his pursuit of the 1980 Republican presidential nomination. With the occasional exception, Tuck's book features historical walk-ons, people left out of most textbooks: a farmer in Mississippi, a washerwoman in Atlanta, a soldier in the First World

War, a clubwoman in Washington DC—each playing a part, each contributing to a collage of resistance. It is in this way, for example, that he almost seamlessly integrates black women into his picture of the whole.

Stressing continuity in the post-emancipation struggle for equality, Tuck also quotes Zora Neale Hurston: "Anyone who purports to plead for what the Negro wants is a liar and knows it. Negroes want a variety of things, and many of them diametrically opposed" (p. 2). Tuck is acutely aware of the variety of meanings that freedom had for African Americans. He sets forth eight themes to provide a structural backbone: local, not just national; American, not just southern; violence, not just nonviolence; wartime, not just peacetime; secular, not just religious; global, not just national; economic rights, not just civil rights; and separation as much as integration. Contingency, therefore, sometimes overwhelms continuity.

This is a fine textbook for the second half of an upper-level undergraduate course in African American history.

It is clear as well as nuanced and contains a surprising amount of sly humor. Tuck, university lecturer in American history at Pembroke College, Oxford University, has produced a valuable guide for graduate students as well. Its only drawback is the lack of a bibliography or better still, a bibliographical essay.

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