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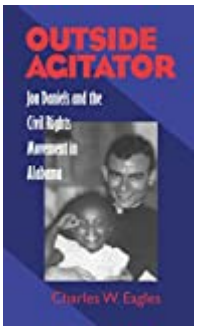

Charles W. Eagles. *Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama.* Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2000. xi + 335 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-1069-1.

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Up From Romanticism: New Histories of the Civil Rights

Up From Romanticism: New Histories of the Civil Rights

Thirty-five years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, scholars are gradually moving away from romantic narratives of the Movement to more judicious examinations of the history of African Americans' struggle for Civil Rights. Gone is the idealistic optimism that the passage of Civil Rights legislation would erase the color line. Instead, scholars are beginning to explore how such legislation has redrawn the color line and reconstituted racial subordination through the principle of racial equality.[1] The emergence over the past decade of this more critical reading of the Civil Rights Era has led historians to turn their attention away from romantic narratives of national events and charismatic leaders to focus on unknown figures, little known events, and local social history. In the sprit of this revisionist thrust in the study of the history of the Civil Rights era, the University of Alabama Press has reissued Charles W. Eagles' important study of the killing of a civil rights worker in Alabama.

On August 16, 1965, Tom Coleman, a fifty-two year old white Alabaman shot Jon Daniels, an Episcopal seminarian from New Hampshire. The stories of these two men and the local historical context of Lowndes County, Alabama–an impoverished black belt agriculture area that remained a hotbed of resistance even after the 1965 voting rights act–provide the plot and setting for Eagles' provocative narrative that sheds light not only on this Civil Rights activist, but also on the social context that produced such intense reaction to integration throughout the South. His analysis, moreover, illuminates a local struggle for civil rights at the same time that the Federal government was gradually consolidating the Movement within the bureaucratic institutions of the State.

Tom Coleman's slaying of Jonathan Daniels occurred one week after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the Watts Riot in Los Angeles, yet garnered scarce national attention, overshadowed as it was by the racial strife emerging in northern and western cities. Eagles' study makes an important contribution to Civil Rights literature as he illuminates the shifting contours of racial politics at the dawn of the post-segregation era.

"Bloody Lowndes County and an Outside Agitator"

In the first chapter Eagles describes the life history that led Jonathan Daniels, a seminarian from Keene, New Hampshire to answer Martin Luther King's call to all clergy to protest the bloody confrontation between Alabama State police and civil rights activists on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Daniels stands apart from the stereotypical "liberals" and "hippies" invading the South in support of the freedom struggle. Apart from being a graduate of the VMI, Daniels, up to a week before deciding to join SCLC in Alabama, defended Bishop Charles C.J. Carpenter's position that Episcopalians outside of his diocese were not welcome to work for civil rights in Alabama.

A combination of mainstream democratic ideals, existential philosophy, and a fairly conservative interpretation of Episcopalian doctrine motivated Daniels to participate in the Movement. After the events of "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, he became convinced that participation in the Selma protest meant that he had "found the existential opportunity that he had been looking for–a chance to create his beliefs and become his real self through action" (p. 38).

In each succeeding chapter Eagles deepens the narrative to elaborate the social and political context in which Daniels' activism grew in order to understand how white southerners could view him, and other civil rights workers, as an "outside agitator." Such contextualization includes a thorough examination of the history of the civil rights movement in Selma (chapter two), the social history of "bloody" Lowndes County (chapters three and four), and the development of the Lowndes County's local movement to end segregation (chapter five). Lowndes County, which after the Civil War had become the center of the South's peonage system (p. 97), continued to be one of the poorest counties in the nation during the 1960s as fifty-eight percent of its households had no automobile, only twenty percent had telephones, and only half had indoor toilets, sewers, or septic tanks (pp. 108-9).

Chapter six describes Stokely Carmichael's efforts to augment the local civil rights movement in Lowndes County following the slaying of the civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo on March 22, 1965. Jon Daniels was inspired by Carmichael's courageous drive to desegregate this county, notorious for its hostility toward any attempts to change the customary segregation. Daniels chose to work in Lowndes County, therefore, because it "offered him the greatest challenge for Christian witness and the best opportunity for existential action and meaning" (p. 32). While in Lowndes County, Daniels worked exclusively with blacks, primarily on SNCC projects that focused on voting rights. He was involved in organizing mass meetings, voter registration, integration of the local offices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's agricultural stabilization and conservation service, and in encouraging local blacks to end racial segregation in the schools.

Daniels' work in Lowndes County culminated in an aborted demonstration in Fort Deposit, the largest and most commercially developed town in the county. On August 14, three days following the Watts Riot, SNCC workers helped Lowndes activists organize a demonstration in Fort Deposit. All of the protesters were arrested, including Daniels and Stokely Carmichael and jailed for six days. Upon release, Daniels ventured to a small grocery store to buy refreshments for his fellow activists as they awaited transportation out of the county. His exchange of words with Tom Coleman, a 52 year old government employee, ended in a shotgun blast to Daniels' chest.

Eagles' narrative is innovative in the way he relates Daniel's biography to that of his killer. Instead of representing Daniels' death as the tragic ending of a heroic act, in chapters seven and eight he delves into Coleman's biography to seriously consider white culture in this impoverished black belt community. Coleman's biography adds texture and dimension to the Lowndes County's political economy highlighting as it does the interconnection between local customs of race relations to economic forces that developed from the post-slavery peonage system. Such a perspective expands analysis of "race" to include the topic of "whiteness" and the contradictory feelings and sentiments whites expressed in the face of changing patterns of race relations in the South. It would have been easy to represent "the white community" monolithically in order to beatify Jon Daniels (which the Episcopal Church did). Instead of getting a picture of the typical southern community's resistance to racial change, we see something that is atypical in Lowndes County.

"Reconceptualizing Civil Rights' History"

In *Outside Agitators*, Eagles' innovative use of the social history of Lowndes County uncovers important details of a little known story in a forgotten place that nonetheless challenges conventional views of the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, his depiction of this event, at a momentous juncture in American history yields important insights into the transformation of the civil rights struggle from a movement to a federal institution. The

problem is that Eagles did not use his empirical findings to challenge preexisting interpretations of the struggle for racial justice and the function of race in national politics.

Perhaps part of the problem derives from how American historians generally have framed research on racial matters by the assumption that racism in the United States is a contradiction in American values. Such a view resonates with American political culture in that it sees racism as the exception (e.g. *America's Dilemma* or *This Country's Unfinished Business*) that proves the rule of American Exceptionalism. Accordingly Eagles' innovative research begs for new conceptual frameworks. Or, in Eagles own words, in a recent review article:

"The literature on the movement now needs ... to be invigorated by new works that will challenge the established chronology, add greater detachment, and correct the imbalance now pervading the scholarship. The innovation may come from the imaginative monographic work, new syntheses, and more likely, from *new bold reconceptualization* of the movement's history (emphasis added)."[2]

Bold new reconceptualizations of the Movement's history, and I should add, the study of "race" and racism, could come from the insights of scholars of nationalism and state formation found in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and historiography outside of the United States. Over the past three decades, students of nationalism have applied the analytic concepts of ethnicity, nation, and the State to understand "race" as a framework of ranked categories within social hierarchies. Accordingly, racism is not a contradiction in "America," instead it is part of the practical logic of the modern nation-state. Studies of American racial politics could therefore benefit from the insights of work done on such subjects as communalism in India, Mestizaje in Latin America, regionalism in Europe, and ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, to name only a few examples.[3]

A related shortcoming of the text is that Eagles does not analyze the changes in racial politics outside of the narrative of progress. Thus he accounts for changes in the racial patterns since the fall of Jim Crow by proffering the view that the lives of African Americans have "improved" because of community action and federal spending. We cannot adequately sum up the changes in African American lives over the past three decades as merely improvement. Relations of power and the Federal State have been transformed by a new regime of race relations management. Therefore civil rights laws have reconfigured racial patterns in terms of important changes in the U.S. political economy.

By merely labeling these changes as improvement, we have no analytical purchase on the type of changes that have occurred, the effects of such transformations, and the limitations of the legal system that distributes rights according to racial categories. Moreover such labels do not grapple with the important question of class politics within the categories of "white" and "black" communities. We must begin to analyze how national structures of power use minority-majority power dynamics to retain contradictions in the idea of the nation within a coherent political structure. This view could transcend American political mythology and challenges us to think about how Civil Rights Legislation has reconstituted rather than erased racial subordination.

Notes

[1]. See Tali Mendelburg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategies, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) for an analysis of how politicians, since the fall of Jim Crow, use the principle of racial equality to make subtle appeals to race in order to mobilize voters. See Robert Smith, *We Have No Leaders: African-Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), and Adolph Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) for three diverse interpretations of how the federal institutions have redrawn the color line over the past thirty years and the important role of black leadership in these new configurations.

[2]. Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *Journal of Southern History*, (November 2000), 843.

[3]. See Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering the Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Bruce Kapferer, *Legends of People, Myths of State: Violence: Intolerance, and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998); Brackette F. Williams, *Women Out of Place: The Gender of Agency and the Race of Nationality* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

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