

The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford

Review Number: 1590

Publish date: Thursday, 8 May, 2014

Author: Beth Tompkins Bates

ISBN: 9780807835647

Date of Publication: 2013

Price: £36.95

Pages: 343pp.

Publisher: University of North Carolina Press

Publisher url: http://uncpress.unc.edu/browse/book_detail?title_id=3068

Place of Publication: Chapel Hill, NC

Reviewer: Oliver Ayers

Popular views of the US civil rights movement remain focused on the post-war South. The abundant journalistic coverage of the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous 'I Have a Dream' speech last year provided one recent demonstration of the hold of these iconic images of protest on public consciousness.⁽¹⁾ In recent years, however, a new and much more expansive vision of civil rights has taken hold in academia. Numerous scholars have uncovered less familiar instances of protest that extend before and after the 1950s and 1960s and go beyond the geographical confines of the ex-Confederate South. The notion of a 'long' civil rights movement, articulated most forcefully by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall in 2005, has become intellectual orthodoxy in many circles.⁽²⁾ The 'long' interpretation emphasizes the importance of a first phase of civil rights protest that occurred in the 1930s and 1940s. During this period of 'civil rights unionism', scholars argue black activists in strongholds across the urban north drew strength from the rise of industrial unionism to articulate a vision of protest that allied with the labour movement and spoke to the economic concerns of the black working class. Since an influential article by Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein in 1988, the unionization of black workers at Ford Motor Company in Detroit in 1941 has been afforded a central role in this narrative.⁽³⁾ In *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*, Beth Tompkins Bates lines up with this wave of revisionist scholarship and extends the chronological scope of this story back another two decades. The book argues that, in the period between the two world wars, Detroit's black community moved from a vision of community development based upon an alliance with Henry Ford and his motor company to embrace a labour-oriented civil rights agenda.

It is the first part of this story which is less well-known and where Bates' book breaks the most substantial new ground. The first chapters neatly sketch out the forces that shaped the mass migration of black workers to the motor city in the last years of the 1910s and first years of the 1920s. A combination of the 'push' factors that made life intolerable for black Americans in the Jim Crow South are weighed against the 'pull' of increased job opportunities in the USA's mass production industries in northern cities like Detroit. While giving a detailed account of these various black motivations, Bates also examines the complex question of Henry Ford's motivations for hiring black workers in such proportionally high numbers. In an era when the other two of the 'big three' auto manufacturers, General Motors and Chrysler, still largely excluded black workers from production jobs, Ford's contrasting willingness to open up employment stood as a high profile

apparent anomaly. Noting the lack of official documentation explaining this decision, Bates creatively connects a variety of factors in Ford's decision, arguing his company was at a 'crossroads' between 1919 and 1921. A combination of industrial unrest, conversion to peace-time production, international revolutions and company debt problems forced Ford to repackage his 'American Plan' of production and consumption (p. 47). Assessing Ford's economic priorities and his idiosyncratic political worldview (including the increasingly vitriolic anti-Semitism broadcast in the *Dearborn Independent*, a local Fordist newspaper), Bates argues Ford's reinvigorated desire to control his workforce – and, crucially, deter unionization – led his company to hire black workers in increased volumes. Ford was able to enjoy a steady stream of industrious black employees who found often found access to other forms of employment closed. By 1940, nearly half of black men in jobs in Detroit worked at Ford (p. 66).

Bates is careful to show how black workers and their community leaders were not mere passive recipients of Ford Motor Company largesse. Instead, black workers took up jobs at Ford in the 'hope that advancement within the auto industry would be a means for attaining broader social citizenship' (p. 68). Though there was loyalty to Ford as a result of his provision of employment, black Detroit's expanding community found a variety of ways of asserting their political independence throughout the formative years of the 1920s. A vocal branch of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) offered one such outlet, railing against what it saw as dependent relationships being cultivated with company and municipal officials by some black elites, derogatorily described as 'modern Uncle Toms' (p. 70). Black Detroiters also tried to exercise independent political expression at the ballot box. By aligning with the reforming platform of Democrat Frank Murphy in a series of elections from the Recorder's Court judges elections in 1923 to his successful mayoral campaigns in the early 1930s, African Americans defied the wishes of Ford and his officials. Meanwhile, in the crucial area of housing, black inhabitants found the 1920s a decade that saw marked residential segregation, yet this separation also fostered a powerful sense of community identity and latent political power.

The attempts of Bates to problematize older assumptions that assume a close and loyal relationship between black Detroit and their benefactor Henry Ford during the 1920s are valuable and convincing. Reverend Robert Bradby, for instance, has occasionally been painted a pro-Ford stalwart, but though he and other churchmen were closely aligned with the company and involved in hiring practices, he often continued to operate independently. Bradby supported Murphy and his political reforms, even in the face of being chastised by Ford officials in 1931 for his stance.

In this context, it becomes easier to see why Ford's grip on the black community loosened once the Depression put substantial strain on their relationship. The economic slide, we are told, was a turning point that 'exposed the fault lines in Henry Ford's seemingly flawless approach to mass production' (p. 115). Actually beginning as early in 1927 when Ford stopped production of his revolutionary but outdated Model T, industrial production in Detroit, as was the case in the nation-at-large, continued to slacken off dramatically in the early 1930s. Ford Motor Company lost \$125,000,000 between 1931 and 1933 (p. 121). Ford's personal authority and standing were greatly damaged by the thousands of layoffs that accompanied this collapse. Matters reached a violent climax during the notorious Hunger March in 1932, when thousands of unemployed workers marching to Ford's River Rouge plant (black participants among them) were met by violence and a hail of bullets from Dearborn and company police that left four dead. A fifth, African American Curtis Williams, later also died from wounds he sustained that day.

From this examination of the turbulent, pivotal early years of the Depression, the latter stages of the book switch focus to examine the process by which black workers were ushered into the labour movement. According to Bates, the '[s]ocial forces and challenges arising out of the Depression opened the community to progressive politics, inspiring citizens to embrace a more aggressive agenda' (pp. 172-3). A series of organizations and events are examined to make this case.

The prominent role played by Communist Party organizers in the defence of the Scottsboro boys, nine black men convicted of raping two white women by an all-white jury in Alabama, offered an important early focus

for a more restive style of community protest. But the Communist Party were not dictating events. There was a wider belief in more assertive, independent political protests against racial discrimination, which underpinned the formation of the Civic Rights Committee (CRC) in 1933. Led by activist Snow Grigsby, the CRC lambasted the discrimination against black Detroiters practiced by various quarters of the city's public services and also provided an organizational base subsequently built upon with the establishment of a branch of the National Negro Congress (NNC) in 1935. Building upon other revisionist scholarship in this area, Bates convincingly shows how these groups, though often drawing support from Communist Party members during the party's 'Popular Front' phase of collaboration between 1935 and 1939, were much more than just front organizations.

According to Bates, the work of the CRC and NNC was the first of three stages that moved black Detroit to embrace a labor-oriented civil rights agenda, subsequently followed by attempts to reach out to the newly successful United Auto Workers (UAW) which finally reached fruition when the UAW, now a member of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), actively sought black support after 1939 (p. 200). Connecting these developments was a cadre of black activists who, though differing in personal background and some points of politics, were unified by principles of self-determination and self-reliance that meant '[c]onventional political stripes – designating right, left, or center – faded as the contours of a united front came into focus' (p. 175).

In line with existing historiographical interpretations, the climax of the book is the successful unionization of Ford in 1941. Drawing heavily upon the oral testimony of black trade union organizers, Bates recounts how these men and women often worked secretly in Detroit's community in defiance of Ford's company spy system, signing up workers to the union's cause. The key breakthrough came during the strike in April 1941 when, despite the visible presence of some black workers as strike breakers, Ford was forced to accede to union elections that were subsequently won by the UAW-CIO. Local 600 in Ford's River Rouge foundry became the largest concentration of unionized black workers in the nation: the era of 'civil rights unionism' had begun.

In these final chapters the complex rendering of black relationships with Ford that rings true in the first half of the book is partially replaced by a neater set of conclusions about alliances with the labour movement. True, we hear that the marriage between the UAW and black workers in 1941 was partly that of a 'reluctant groom and an anxious bride' (p. 256), while the National Recovery Act's support for collective bargaining opened up 'the tortuous history of relations between black Americans and white labor unions.' (p. 190). Yet ultimately the militancy of black unionists at Ford represented a 'dramatic change in community identity' (p. 10). Support for the UAW, despite some dissenting voices from the black church, 'represented a sea-change within black Detroit, as the progressive forces within the community forged a new approach to gaining democratic rights' (p. 247). Evidence for these more sweeping claims often comes in the form of the oral testimony provided by black leaders in the early UAW like Shelton Tappes and Veal Clough. What the book clearly shows is the hard-headed commitment of activists like these to use unionism as a weapon to advance a broader platform of civil rights; whether their stories amply demonstrate a 'sea-change' in the outlook of the entire community is less clear. One is left with some questions: were sceptics like the Baptist Ministers Conference who supported Ford in the National Labor Relations Board elections won over after unionization in 1941? Did the unity among black leaders around deterring black strike breaking in the Ford strike extend to unity on other protest issues and, if so, how successful were these protests? If Detroit provided a 'model' of civil rights unionism, where and how successfully was this model replicated?

The tendency towards a rather tidy set of conclusions stems from the book's concentration on attitudes and allegiance. Bates justifies this approach in the introduction and argues that:

While discussions will continue about whether the glass was half full or half empty for African Americans in terms of what was being done *for* black America during Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, this study argues that what black progressives did for themselves within Detroit was a model for enhancing the power of African Americans to demand inclusion (p. 11).

Some may feel short-changed by the way the book sidesteps the controversial but important issue about the extent of actual progress made by black workers in this period. This is not to demand a different book from the one Bates has written; from the perspective of the black community this book adopts and within its existing chronological and thematic scope, we could have been provided with more explicit analysis of the complex and competing impacts wrought by unionization and at least some consideration of the questions listed above. Many works in the 'long' civil right narrative tend to emphasize attitudes and ideas rather than achievements and tangible results. As one study of protest during the war years has recently pointed out, a lot of the argument that the war years were a watershed moment in black protest rests 'to a great extent on vague estimates of black attitudes and aspirations rather than concrete accomplishments'.⁽⁴⁾ The book's epilogue would have been more satisfying had it addressed the question of which 'concrete accomplishments' accompanied unionization.

In sum, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford* is a deeply thought-provoking book that covers a topic of clear importance to the story of black civil rights and 20th-century American history more broadly. It is clearly written, well-paced and thoroughly researched. It makes a valuable contribution by challenging the notion of a black community passively reliant on the paternalism of Henry Ford and is at its strongest when problematizing the neat categories that have occasionally been used to describe the black inter-war experience. Black experiences in the interwar years cannot be boiled down to being either 'pro-union' or 'pro-Ford,' while Bates is also on strong ground when showing local activists were willing to traverse the traditional categories of left, right and centre. As to the wider 'long' civil rights narrative within which this work explicitly positions itself, question marks remain. Several scholars have begun to question the notion that Cold War repression derailed an otherwise promising labor-liberal-left alliance in the post-war years.⁽⁵⁾ To move this debate forward, it seems time to reappraise the foundations built during the movement's formative years during the 1930s and 1940s too. As a result, Bates' book certainly succeeds in its stated wish to 'contribute to the conversation on the long civil rights movement and civil rights unionism' (p. 11), but also suggests this is a conversation that needs to continue.

Notes

1. A good example of the dominance of this iconic imagery is Time Magazine's commemorative online edition, celebrating 'One Man. One March. One Speech. One Dream' <
<http://content.time.com/time/onedream> [2]> [accessed 12 March 2014].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'The long civil rights movement and the political uses of the past', *Journal of American History*, 91 (2005), 1233–63.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities found and lost: labor, radicals, and the early civil rights movement', *Journal of American History*, 75 (1988), 786–811.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, (Oxford, 2012), p. 5.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See, for instance, Eric Arnesen, 'Civil rights and the cold war at home: postwar activism, anticommunism, and the decline of the left', *American Communist History*, 11 (2012), 5–44; Manfred Berg, 'Black civil rights and liberal anticommunism: the NAACP in the early Cold War', *Journal of American History*, 94 (2007), 75–96.[Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

Essays in History

<http://www.essaysinhistory.com/review/2013/195> [3]

Kazi Book Review

<http://kazibookreview.wordpress.com/2012/10/28/podcast-interview-with-beth-bates-author-of-the-making-of-black-detroit-in-the-age-of-henry-ford/>

[4]

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1590>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/51533> [2] <http://content.time.com/time/onedream>

[3] <http://www.essaysinhistory.com/review/2013/195>

[4] <http://kazibookreview.wordpress.com/2012/10/28/podcast-interview-with-beth-bates-author-of-the-making-of-black-detroit-in-the-age-of-henry-ford/>