

Black Freedom Movement

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The Black Freedom Movement is a distinct era in the African American struggle for civil and human rights that began in the mid-1940s with a surge in public protest and ended in the mid-1970s with a shift in emphasis toward electoral politics. It encompasses two of the most unique and enduring periods of black activism. The first is the civil rights movement, which resulted in the elimination of Jim Crow laws in the South and the upending of Jim Crow customs in the North. The second is the Black Power movement, which not only expanded on the gains of the civil rights movement but also elevated African American racial consciousness, forever changing what it meant to be black.

The three words that compose the phrase “Black Freedom Movement” reflect the term’s core characteristics. “Black” speaks not only to the racial identity of the vast majority of the Black Freedom Movement’s participants—the black masses—but also to the race of its leaders. African American activists, from black preachers to black community organizers, led the Black Freedom Movement by marshaling the energy and resources of the black community. “Freedom,” meanwhile, addresses the Black Freedom Movement’s wide-ranging goals, which included both civil rights objectives, such as securing the right to vote, and human rights aims, such as access to decent housing. And “Movement” marks that moment as a time when black protest coalesced into a genuine social movement, with generally agreed-on ideological frameworks, strategies, tactics, and aspirations.

For generations, African Americans have described their struggle for justice and equality in language reflective of the Black Freedom Movement’s chief characteristics. They have regularly used racial signifiers when naming their organizations. In the 1830s, they routinely included some derivation of



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“colored” when identifying their political conventions. When they came together in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1835, for instance, they called their gathering the National Convention of Free People of Colour. They have often identified freedom as their overarching goal. During slavery, black abolitionists such as David Walker argued for a literal freedom from bondage, and enslaved rebels such as Nat Turner took up arms toward this end. And immediately after emancipation, they demanded their freedom rights, insisting on living as free men and women. Indeed, freedom has always been an integral part of African Americans’ protest lexicon. During the height of the Black Freedom Movement, for instance, black activists called their protest music “freedom songs,” dubbed their parallel educational institutions “freedom schools,” and named their independent political organizations “freedom parties.” African Americans have also tended to label heightened periods of protest, such as the Back-to-Africa crusade of Marcus Garvey’s era, “movements.”

In the 1950s, however, black moderates led a decided shift away from using racial signifiers to define and/or describe the struggle. Their influence was far reaching. In 1955, black activists in Montgomery, Alabama, for example, opted to omit racial signifiers when they formed the Montgomery Improvement Association to coordinate the local bus boycott. And a year later, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his coterie of advisers came together to launch the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, they too adopted the new practice.

Meanwhile, the same contingent of moderate black leaders led a sharp move away from identifying freedom as a primary protest goal. Instead, they framed the struggle exclusively as a fight for civil rights, narrowing the focus of protest to securing only those rights guaranteed by government. In publicly jettisoning freedom as a goal, they obscured and at times ignored long-standing human rights objectives.

These changes were a direct response to Cold War domestic politics. As tensions escalated between the United States and the Soviet Union, federal and state officials began cracking down with increasing ferocity on organizations that challenged the status quo. NAACP leaders Walter White and Roy Wilkins, among many others, feared the political and financial



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consequences of being red-baited. In response, they rebranded the struggle, reframing it as a civil rights movement, phrasing they believed would be more palatable to whites. Liberal whites latched onto the term, helping it become the dominant descriptor of black protest.

The changes in terminology were never fully embraced by African Americans at the grassroots. Local people continued to invoke freedom when naming their groups. In Mississippi, for example, when voting rights activists formed a statewide umbrella organization to coordinate voter registration efforts, they called it the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. At the same time, local people continued to frame their struggle as more than a fight for civil rights. In Lowndes County, Alabama, for instance, when black residents established a countywide movement organization in 1965, they named it the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights. And by the late 1960s, racial signifiers had returned. Taking a cue from Lowndes County activists, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale named their new movement organization the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The resurgence of the once familiar practice of incorporating race in movement naming practices was an explicit rejection of Cold War colorblindness and a full embrace of the long history of racial self-identification. And the tendency was not limited to the grassroots. When African American professionals organized, they almost always included “black” in the names of their organizations, such as the National Association of Black Journalists and the National Association of Black Social Workers.

The renaissance of old naming practices and descriptors of black protest did not keep scholars from using the more narrowly constructed catchall phrase “civil rights movement” to describe the work of African American activists. But some scholars, especially those who had taken part in the movement, began pushing back against the vague colorblind nomenclature. In the early 1980s, the historian Clayborne Carson was one of several academics who pointed out the numerous inadequacies of the term “civil rights movement.” In an essay titled “Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle” (1986), Carson argued that “use of the term civil rights movement, rather than



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such alternatives as black freedom struggle, reflects the misleading assumption that the black insurgencies of the 1950s and 1960s were part of a coordinated national campaign . . . rather than a locally-based social movement” (23). “In reality,” he said, “these local protest movements involved thousands of protesters, including large numbers of working class blacks, and local organizers who were more concerned with local issues, including employment opportunities and political power, than with achieving national legislation” (23–24). Carson further explained, “Rather than remaining within the ideological confines of the integrationism or King’s Christian-Gandhianism, the local movements displayed a wide range of ideologies and proto-ideologies, involving militant racial or class consciousness” (24). For Carson and an increasing number of scholars, historical accuracy required the terms “black” and “freedom” be used to describe 1960s-era black protest.

Since Carson’s essay, scholars studying black protest from a black perspective have made the important distinction between a struggle and a movement. For many, “struggle” is an umbrella term that captures the broad contours of the African American fight against white supremacy and for racial justice and equality. It includes the many moments in the African American journey from slavery to freedom when black protest rose to the level of a genuine social movement, such as the abolitionist movement, Back-to-Africa movement, and the Black Power movement. “Movement,” on the other hand, refers specifically to those more precise moments of black protest, such as the period from the 1940s through the 1970s, when African American activists came together around a common set of concrete goals, shared a similar approach to change, and organized and mobilized the black masses to challenge the status quo.

By definition, the Black Freedom Struggle is chronologically broad. It stretches from the colonial era, starting with the efforts of the first enslaved Africans to gain their freedom, to the present day, with the Movement for Black Lives. But temporal boundaries are essential to making sense of the start, evolution, and end of social movements. By necessity, then, the Black Freedom Movement is time bound. Pinning its beginning and ending to precise chronological moments connects it to concrete



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historical forces and developments, such as World War II in the 1940s and the surge in the number of black elected officials in the 1970s. It enables charting the Black Freedom Movement's trajectory and decoding its development. And it makes identifying the factors most responsible for the Black Freedom Movement's demise possible.

Significantly, the chronological specificity central to the Black Freedom Movement in some ways affirms the narrower periodization of the normative civil rights movement framework, which places the movement's beginning in 1954 with the U.S. Supreme Court school-desegregation ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* and locates its end in 1965 with the passage of the Voting Rights Act or a few years later, in 1968, with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But there are critical differences.

First, the Black Freedom Movement does not decontextualize midcentury black activism, pretending as though it was far and away the most important manifestation of black protest. Instead, it locates the activism of the era on the continuum of black protest that stretches both backward and forward in time and constitutes the Black Freedom Struggle. Second, it balances top-down with bottom-up approaches to understanding black protest. Whereas the civil rights movement conceptualization tends to focus on government actors, especially presidents and federal judges, as well as national leaders such as Dr. King, the Black Freedom Movement retrieves everyday people and grassroots activists from the margins of analysis. And third, it treats Black Power protest as a logical extension of earlier forms of black agitation, rather than as an ill-advised break from the past.

The Black Freedom Movement framework also expands understanding of black protest. Ever since civil rights became the dominant lens through which to view 1960s-era black activism, the strategies and tactics used by black activists have been too narrowly configured. Most notably, nonviolence, as both a philosophical approach and a tactic, has been made the standard of black protest, against which all other approaches and activities are measured. While nonviolence enjoyed unprecedented popularity among African American activists during this time—indeed, the unusually high level of interest in nonviolence



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was a defining characteristic of the era—only a handful of black leaders, Dr. King foremost among them, embraced nonviolence philosophically as a way of life. Many more accepted nonviolent direct action as a useful tactic given the circumstances. But even more than that rejected it wholesale, choosing instead to continue long-standing African American traditions of self-defense and parallel institution building. Rather than focus wholly or substantially on nonviolence, the Black Freedom Movement properly contextualizes nonviolence, putting it alongside and in conversation with the many other forms of black protest.

The Black Freedom Movement framework has gained widespread acceptance among scholars who study black protest from an African American perspective. But its influence has not been limited to them. Its critique of the broad civil rights movement construct has encouraged scholars who have adhered to this mode of analysis to reconsider its underlying suppositions. For the southern historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (2005), this meant pushing the starting point of 1960s-era black protest back into the 1930s, to a time when white labor organizers, scattered about the South, found common cause with black workers and activists. It also meant emphasizing the movement's economic objectives.

But Hall's "Long Civil Rights Movement" contradicts the Black Freedom Movement in several important ways. Foremost, it de-centers African Americans, giving primacy instead to whites. In the Long Civil Rights Movement, the starting point is essentially the moment when white labor organizers realize that their success is tied directly to, and in many ways wholly dependent on, the success of black activists on the factory floor and beyond. In addition, it credits white labor organizers with injecting an economic agenda into the Black Freedom Struggle, ignoring the black impulse for economic justice that had taken countless forms since emancipation, including the effort by black unions such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to win recognition and collective bargaining rights. At the same time, it posits that the shift away from workplace organizing during the 1950s stemmed from the withdrawal of white labor organizers from the movement, rather than being a pragmatic response to shifting political opportunities brought about by the onset of the



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Cold War. And finally, it treats the Black Power movement much as civil rights traditionalists have, as a dramatic and unfortunate break from the usual forms of black protest.

The Long Civil Rights Movement has resonated within the academy in large part because it allows scholars whose work intersects only secondarily, or even just tangentially, with the Black Freedom Struggle to claim close association with black protest. But proponents of the Black Freedom Movement have pushed back. The historians Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, for example, offered a biting critique of its shortcomings in “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies” in the *Journal of African American History* in 2007. And Black Freedom Movement scholars have vociferously pointed out its merits and shortcomings at national conferences, including at the ninety-eighth meeting of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History in 2013.

But the debate surrounding the Long Civil Rights Movement is almost entirely academic, confined to the pages of historical journals and monographs and to roundtables at professional gatherings. Indeed, the public is almost wholly unaware of the disagreements between advocates of the Black Freedom Movement and proponents of the Long Civil Rights Movement. In fact, nonacademics barely know these conceptualizations exist. For most people, the dominant framework for understanding 1960s-era black protest is still the civil rights movement. To be sure, the Black Freedom Movement, as an idea and a term, has made real inroads into the public square, reflected most notably in spaces dedicated to historic preservation, including the Smithsonian Institution’s new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. But even spaces that have embraced the Black Freedom Movement fully, such as the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, which centered its five-year, \$25 million exhibit redesign and renovation around the Black Freedom Movement, find it hard to shed the civil rights movement moniker.

The inability of the Black Freedom Movement to dislodge the civil rights movement is not simply a function of the latter being



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deeply ingrained in people's minds. The problem is that the civil rights movement reinforces a set of false assumptions about racial progress in America that many whites find comforting and reassuring. Among other things, they cling to the notion that racial discrimination in the South was the fault of only a handful of southern hayseeds and that racial discrimination in the North was simply an unintended consequence of colorblind public policy. These ideas permit whites to put a great distance between themselves and the past—that was *then* and that was *them*. In this way, they avoid confronting the harsh realities of history. The Black Freedom Movement, on the other hand, draws the past near, rendering plainly visible the ways the past is present. Indeed, while the civil rights movement eases the conscience, the Black Freedom Movement challenges it.

It is highly unlikely that Black Freedom Movement will replace the broader civil rights movement framework anytime soon. The public's attachment to the older way of understanding black protest runs too deep. However, among academicians who study black protest from a black perspective, that shift has already occurred. In fact, the Black Freedom Movement has been the driving force behind the very best scholarship on 1960s-era black protest since the 1990s. Although it may still be a while, all signs indicate that "Black Freedom Movement" will one day roll off the tongues of the public as easily as "civil rights movement" does today.



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