

Book Review

From Sit-Ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s

Iwan Morgan and Philip Davies
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013

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Morgan and Davies deserve credit for their careful documentation of the history of the 1960s student civil rights movement. The significance of this volume's focus on student sit-ins is matched by the skill of the editing. Every chapter in *From Sit-Ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s* contributes to (re)telling the history of the student non-violent movement through nuanced and informative lenses that update available historical perspectives. This contribution is best stated on the book's back matter. The substantive essays in this collection not only delineate the role of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) over the course of the struggle for African American civil rights but also offer an updated perspective on the development and impact of the sit-in movement in light of both new research into organizational records and the personal papers of key actors.

There are nine chapters in the volume each with potential to inspire critical race theorists, who will benefit from reading Morgan and Davies' book because much of the material pertains to issues of the racial *colour line* versus the economic *bottom line*. Critical race pedagogues might ask, How did a white *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980) and a Cold War imperative influence segregation practices in the United States? Indeed, one of the sit-in movement's main strengths was that it revealed the absurdity of public accommodations remaining segregated while other social spaces increasingly were not. L. C. Bates is cited as having said,

The Negro is just not going to be satisfied with the situation where we can buy \$1,000 worth of merchandise in one department of a store but he is considered trespassing and arrested if he attempts to spend one dime at the lunch counter. (p. 29)

The nine chapters show how the student protests helped to invalidate the false pretense that blacks accepted being separate—a willfully ignorant notion that whites clung to in order to sustain their own racial ideologies. The book goes on to touch upon, but does not address in specific detail, the fact that student sit-ins protesting white-only lunchroom counters were not an isolated movement. Other protests during this same period of time included *kneel-ins* in churches, *sleep-ins* in motel lobbies, *swim-ins* in pools, *wade-ins* on restricted beaches, *read-ins* at public libraries, *play-ins* in parks, and *watch-ins* in movie theaters.

In Chapter 1, Morgan provides background information about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), including its original two names before the SNCC. The first name was the Temporary Coordinating Committee and then later, the Temporary Student

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In Chapter 2, Kirk unpacks the jurisprudential tensions that existed between civil rights and property rights. In Chapter 3, Lewis describes how student protests were successful in pushing back against white segregationists' belief system that blacks preferred to be separate from whites. In Chapter 4, Webb describes how and why "the sit-ins stimulated a new level of introspection on the part of white southerners about their treatment of African Americans" (p. 73). In Chapter 5, Ling shows how the SNCC ceased to be a primarily student organization after 1962 and by 1966, moved away from nonviolence and become more radicalized. In Chapter 6, Monteith analyzes two lost pieces of SNCC writing: a book-length manuscript, *Thin White Line* by James Forman, SNCC executive secretary and a published short story by Michael Thelwell, an SNCC staffer and strategist. In Chapter 7, Street shares the ideological and identity transition that occurred within SNCC when the organization's identity shifted from one of a *Beloved Community* to one of an *Imagined Community*. The *Beloved Community* referred to "a climate in which all men are respected as men, in which there is appreciation of the dignity of man and in which each individual is free to grow and produce to his fullest capacity" (p. 118), while the *Imagined Community* referred to an "irrevocable rejection of SNCC's earlier approach to community building" (pp. 128-129) and its embrace of black nationalism. An element within this transformation included becoming more radical and militant (e.g., valuing field-based education over college-based education) and was finalized in May of 1967 when SNCC became a black-only organization. In Chapter 8, Hall covers why "SNCC activists came to embrace a more militant internationalism that emphasized global solidarity among non-white peoples and condemned U.S. foreign policy as racist, expansionist, and imperialistic" (p. 147). Lastly, in Chapter 9, Tuck covers how "[t]he sit-in became a staple tactic for the global student protests" of the 1960s (p. 156).

Another facet of the book critical race theorists will notice pertains to non-violent tactics used during the 1960s such as "jail no bail." Theorists may ask, Would this tactic work in contemporary times? Historically, a *jail no bail* approach directly resisted white supremacy because the practice of throwing protesters in jail became financially costly to whites (and the white power structure). As more black protesters adopted this *jail no bail* approach and jails became overcrowded, physical space became an unavoidable issue for white jailers. Since the jails did not collect *bail* money but instead had to pay to feed and house the incarcerated individuals, this approach proved to be cunningly effective on a basic economic level. Critical race academicians might be curious to know if this tactic would work today given the changes in the prison system.

One of the cornerstones of critical race theory (CRT) is that racism is an ordinary and normalized formation in society (Hartlep, 2010; Lynn & Dixson, 2013). This tenet of CRT—that racism is the rule rather than the exception—gives me pause. According to CRT, the desegregation of U.S. schools was a pyrrhic victory since true integration never occurred (Dudziak, 1988). *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that upheld the constitutionality of state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities under the doctrine of separate but equal. *Oliver Brown et al. v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) was the United States Supreme Court decision that overturned *Plessy*. Some scholars propose that it would have been better to have a real *Plessy* than continue with a fake *Brown* (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Could the same be said of public accommodations? I don't think so. However, I recently read a satirical newspaper story published in the *Spring Hill Courier*, which reported that an Arby's franchise owner won approval for a whites-only restaurant in Spring Hill, Florida (Fencil, 2014). Although satirical, the story sounded so

potentially true it was scary! Why? I believe the reason is because racism is so deeply integrated into society and its social and economic relations.

The authors in *From Sit-Ins to SNCC* make important contributions to the historical accounting of the student sit-in movement of the 1960s. This book will be of interest to historians and those individuals who do work in CRT. Historical studies like *From Sit-Ins to SNCC* are highly important, especially in the face of satirical stories that sound so real that they could be true. The student protest movement of the 1960s was highly important. But was it a pyrrhic victory like school desegregation? That is a question for which I do not have an answer but on which a book such as this one may shed further light.

Today, blacks continue to be incarcerated at disproportionately higher rates than whites. Overcrowding does not appear to be a problem for the American carceral state, especially since building new prisons and jails is big business and highly lucrative for the private sector. According to Dolovich (2011), a carceral state refers to a state modeled on the idea of a prison. In the United States, the unfortunate truth is that private prison building is a multi-billion dollar enterprise. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (2011), the 2010 revenue of the top two private prison companies, Corrections Corporation of America and The GEO Group, was \$1,700,000,000 and \$1,269,968,000 respectively.

Moreover, while the construction and operation of private prisons in the United States is lucrative, the *prison-industrial complex* is dependent upon having a source of people to incarcerate (Sudbury, 2002). Thus is the burden of white supremacy; it benefits when more black and brown people are thrown into jail, something Michelle Alexander refers to as the *new Jim Crow*. Alexander (2010) points out that the United States incarcerates a higher percentage of black men than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. She notes, “More African Americans are under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began” (p. 175).

I find it fascinating that the sit-in strategy of resistance was imported by South Africa during the Third World Liberation freedom movements of the 1960s. The question remains, What amount of racial progress has been made since the 1960s, in the United States and globally (Sudbury, 2002) and what role can we attribute to the student sit-ins of this same time period? While I do not have an immediate answer, I know that reading and reflecting on history, as documented in Morgan and Davies’ *From Sit-Ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s*, is vital lest we are doomed to repeat it.

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