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Intervention

The legacies of the U.S. Civil Rights Act, fifty years on

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Introduction

Civil rights and the emergence of a 'colorblind' United States

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During the 2013–2014 academic year the University of South Carolina (USC) commemorated the 50th anniversary of the university's desegregation with a series of events and ceremonies. Speakers at the dedication of a garden memorializing desegregation at USC described the progress that had been made since three Black[1] students registered for classes at the start of 1963 academic year, becoming the first Black students at USC since the post-Civil War Reconstruction period (1865–1877). USC certainly has become more inclusive place, with students—Black, white, Latino, Asian—sharing dorm rooms, recreational facilities, and classroom space in a way that would have been unimaginable before the passage of Civil Rights legislation. Yet even as we celebrate this progress, we must reflect on the ways in which equality has been hindered by the insistence, voiced mainly by whites, that racial differences are no longer meaningful. The purpose of this intervention, therefore, is to explore the ambivalent legacies of the Civil Rights Movement and to consider how the Civil Rights Act of 1964 might be understood both as a triumph of Black struggle and as a moment of white retrenchment.

The Civil Rights Act, and the broader struggle for racial equality from which it emerged, can be interpreted through different geographical lenses. The Act was, in the first instance, a turning point in the history of U.S. South: the elimination of the Jim Crow system of racial separation, which was created after the abolition of slavery to ensure white domination in all realms of life. Racial discrimination, to be sure, was a reality throughout the U.S., as was the struggle for racial justice (Tyner, 2006). But the most dramatic acts of resistance of the Civil Rights era—from lunch counter protests to bus boycotts to the famous March on Selma—took place in the South and were directed against the exceptional modes of institutionalized racism that existed there. There was, at the same time, an important global dimension to the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Civil Rights leaders had been inspired by the non-violent, anti-colonial resistance movement led by Mohandas Gandhi in India, and many Civil Rights activists linked their struggle to anti-colonial struggles in Africa. White political leaders in the U.S., meanwhile, regarded the broadcasting of white brutality against Black Civil Rights protestors as a serious threat to

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America's global prestige. The government's advocacy of Civil Rights seemed motivated less by a commitment to racial equality than a need to assert moral authority as leader of the "free world" in the ideological battle against Communism (Borstelmann, 2000; Fraser, 2000).

The Civil Rights struggle and its legacies can further be interpreted against a backdrop of post-war metropolitan restructuring in the U.S. Federal housing policies from the Great Depression (1929–1939) onward had heavily subsidized suburbanization in U.S. cities while protecting white privilege in new residential neighborhoods through redlining and the sanctioning of racially discriminatory protective covenants (Jackson, 1985; Self, 2006). In the post-World War II "New South," city growth machines pursued particularly aggressive residential and industrial decentralization policies to ensure that whites would not be required to integrate with Blacks even with court-ordered desegregation. As they became more suburbanized, Southern cities increasingly resembled their counterparts in the North and Midwest, becoming *more*, not less, segregated in the late 20th century (Massey & Denton, 1993). Segregation through suburbanization was abetted nationwide by post-war urban renewal policies that ensured the residential containment of Blacks in inner cities. These policies included the construction of spatially concentrated public housing and the placement of expressways to block Black expansion into white neighborhoods. Moreover, the funneling of billions of dollars of federal defense spending into outlying and predominantly white areas all but guaranteed that inner cities and predominantly Black neighborhoods in U.S. cities would be trapped in a downward spiral of disinvestment (O'Mara, 2006).

The dismantling of Jim Crow signaled the emergence of a nationwide ideological discourse that interpreted these ever more glaring urban inequalities in terms of "natural" filtering processes and the exercise of "freedom of choice" in (sub)urban housing markets. This discourse animated white suburban resistance to efforts by state and federal courts to enforce desegregation in U.S. cities, most notably through school busing. Anti-busing activists, Lassiter (2004, 550) argues, successfully "recast the legal debate over the historical burdens of racial discrimination into an ahistorical defense of meritocratic individualism" and "normalized pervasive patterns of spatial inequality by refusing even to acknowledge the structural legacies of racial and residential segregation." This same populist impulse drove the suburban tax revolts of the 1970s and eventually ushered in the "Reagan Revolution." In the supposedly meritocratic, individualistic, colorblind U.S. of the 1980s, welfare became a cause, rather than a consequence, of poverty, and minority communities—increasingly isolated and impoverished after decades of urban disinvestment, discrimination, and deindustrialization—were blamed for their own predicament.

The language of colorblind meritocracy, with its assumption of white racial innocence, continues to uphold unequal socio-spatial arrangements in the U.S. and to leave intact racialized ways of thinking that consistently value white lives over non-white lives, whether in the U.S. or abroad (Olds, Sidaway, & Sparke, 2005). Ideas of colorblindness in the U.S. (and in other racially divided societies) have been complemented by what Mary Thomas (2011) calls "banal multiculturalism"—a discourse that invites appreciation of cultural differences while insisting on essential human sameness. Banal multiculturalism deploys "culture" as an explanatory category and celebrates meritorious members of "cultural" groups for their ability to overcome personal (as opposed to societal) hardships. As such, banal multiculturalism works to discourage frank discussion about racism and widening income inequalities.

Through the lens of banal multiculturalism, the Civil Rights Act is characterized as a moment of redemption in U.S. history—a definitive break from the past that allowed Blacks to be fully woven into the national fabric. This perspective effectively transforms the Civil Rights Movement from an on-going story of Black struggle to a story of whites' success in overcoming their irrational prejudices to create a more meritocratic society. This narrative encourages white people to cast themselves as the saviors of Black people—a phenomenon seen in Hollywood films like *The Blind Side* (2009) and *The Help* (2011). U.S. society, in short, is deeply invested in the idea that race doesn't matter, and politicians, employers, teachers, preachers, and university administrators (among others) have sought to render race innocuous through the language of cultural difference and diversity. On those occasions when whites are forced to confront the uncomfortable truth that race does matter—when they must listen to and witness the anger of people of color—they often throw back accusations of divisiveness, incivility, and indeed, racism.

This intervention considers the ways in which U.S. society continues to operate through systems of racial privilege long after the dismantling of formal segregation. The first three interventions (by Inwood and Alderman, Holloway and Bolton, and Aggarwal) suggest that Civil Rights legislation has largely failed to secure full inclusion and societal membership for people of color, not least because the framers of Civil Rights-era legislation never intended to challenge white racial entitlements in the South or anywhere else. Whether in the housing sector, the educational system, or in the realm of mobility rights, we see not only entrenched inequalities, but also a tendency to attribute these inequalities to factors other than racism, thereby allowing them to persist. The three contributions that follow strike a more hopeful note, reminding us that the Civil Rights Act was an astounding triumph by a long-subordinated group against a violent, white supremacist order—a triumph that continues to inspire subordinated groups in the U.S. and abroad. Wright, Ellis, and Holloway demonstrate how Civil Rights-era court decisions—namely, the overturning of anti-miscegenation laws—have framed contemporary struggles for marriage equality among same-sex couples. McCutcheon and Hankins, et al., explore the continued relevance of Black faith-based organizations and spirituality in articulating claims of social justice in U.S. cities. Their contributions prompt us to think about the ways that a variety of faith-based groups and belief systems—Christian and non-Christian—may help to shape cities and societies along more equitable lines by directly addressing poverty and racism. These contributions collectively honor the Civil Rights Act by rejecting the language of colorblind meritocracy, by re-centering race in analyses of local, national, and international politics, and by shedding light on the unfinished business of racial justice.

Civil Rights and the right of mobility: a neglected geographic agenda

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Engagement with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires an understanding the socio-spatial transformations that were occurring during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when African Americans and others rose up to challenge geographies of discrimination and U.S.-style apartheid. This apartheid was built upon not just white privilege but white supremacy, a term that geographers have not used nearly enough to describe both the subtle and blunt force of racist white control. White supremacy, as a normative and often violent force, has exerted a powerful influence on U.S. economic, political, and cultural development—from the genocidal