

Let America Be America Then: Imagining a More United Front in the Early Civil Rights Era

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Let America Be America Then: Imagining a More United Front in the Early Civil Rights Era¹

Michael Dennis

Eric Porter, *The Problem of the Future World: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010)

Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010)

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE REBELLIOUS 1960s, writing about black activism meant writing about Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Congress of Racial Equality, and the Freedom Rides. How could it not? Young black and white activists courageously overturned the structures of Jim Crow and set the example for subsequent movements of liberation. They rejected the litigious moderation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, demonstrated the utility of nonviolent direct action tactics, and exemplified the ethic of participatory democracy that defined the New Left. In short, the activists who transformed their confinement in Parchman Penitentiary into a badge of honour set the tone for an era of idealism. They also captured the imagination of historians shaped by its dramatic events.

In this movement, and in the chronicles written by its earliest historians, labour unions and political economy figured only incidentally. The bravery and audacity of young activists or the malfeasance and cynicism of liberal politicians mattered most.² Even when historians turned their attention

1. Inspired, of course, by Langston Hughes' elegiac "Let America Be America Again" (1938). The author wishes to thank W. Fitzhugh Brundage for his comments on and suggestions for this essay.

2. Of course, the literature is monumental. Some of the most influential of the early period include August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942–1968* (New York 1973), Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of*

to organizations inspired by Black Nationalism, the focus tended to be on how violent revolutionaries undermined a movement defined by interracial cooperation and liberal pragmatism.³ Of course, historians explored earlier episodes of racial rebellion, including those surrounding Marcus Garvey, the Harlem Renaissance, and the black nationalism of the antebellum era.⁴ Yet the evidence of the connection between black protest and organized labour remained subordinate at best. Moreover, the earlier examples of civil rights activism were seen as mere precursors to the full flourishing of the 'real' civil rights movements. Like many civil rights activists, they saw the movement as *sui generis*, born out of the unique zeitgeist of the New Frontier, owing nothing to the Old Left, which now seemed as much part of the problem as the solution.

Over the past 20 years, historians have gradually modified that focus. They have questioned the presupposition that the depression years simply paved the way for the 'classic' phase of Montgomery to Selma.⁵ They now assess the relationship between organized labour and the civil rights movement, often coming to diametrically opposed conclusions.⁶ Using evidence that Black Power groups contributed to community improvement by addressing concrete social needs, they have challenged the assertion that black militancy meant destructive racial separatism.⁷ Responding to a number of stimuli, including the gradual disappearance of race from political debate (which was inversely proportional to its incendiary prominence in the culture wars of the 1990s), historians reinvigorated the study of black civil rights. They pushed the chronological boundaries backward, studying the political possibilities as well as the glaring inadequacies of the New Deal for black equality. Increasingly it was not a matter of *when* the civil rights movement began, but the character of the movement that developed in those years. For many historians, including Eric Porter, that movement was transnational, cosmopolitan, and distinctively radical. Foreign relations now matter in the long view of the civil rights movement.

the 1960s (Cambridge 1981), and Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York 1990).

3. Manning Marable, Series Editors' Foreword, *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: Another Side of the Story*, ed. Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang (New York 2009), ix–x.

4. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (New York 1988).

5. Robert Korstad, "Civil Rights Unionism and the Black Freedom Struggle," *American Communist History* 7 (2008): 255; Michael Dennis, *Luther P. Jackson and a Life for Civil Rights* (Gainesville 2004), 4–5.

6. Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Champaign 1994; Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968* (Ithaca 1995); Nancy MacLean, "Achieving the Promise of the Civil Rights Act: Herbert Hill and the NAACP's Fight for Jobs and Justice," *Labor* 3 (Summer 2006): 13–19.

7. Marable, Series Editors' Foreword, ix.

In it, the celebratory tone of civil rights historiography diminished.⁸ This was an analysis informed as much by frustration as by hope. In a period in which conservative agitators fused crime, welfare, and blackness in the public mind, what hope was there to reverse the trends toward disproportionate black incarceration, homelessness, unemployment, poverty, and income inequality? Turning to the period before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, historians asked: How did the New Deal era create the conditions for persistent black poverty and powerlessness? Might the epoch of labour and political radicalism offer a usable history to an era in which right-wing demagogues deployed the most vicious of racial stereotypes to slash away at the social contract? Could studies of radical political organizations such as the National Negro Congress illuminate paths not taken, particularly since that movement failed to achieve economic justice for African Americans? If the movement for racial justice *had*, in fact, become bogged down in esoteric questions of racial identity and cultural 'empowerment,' what were the alternative visions from the past?

The decline of the New Deal order also fostered a growing desire to understand what black and white workers had lost in the process. When a growing public consensus—fuelled by conservative pundits and the rightward shift in American politics—maintained that the civil rights movement had never aimed to achieve anything more than a colour-blind society, historians responded, exploring what would come to be known as 'the long civil rights movement.'

In a pivotal article in the *Journal of American History*, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall encapsulated this developing perspective but also decisively advanced it. Hall argued that the movement that developed in the 1930s and 40s was deeply enmeshed in the popular front values of that era. At the center of it was the connection between race and class.⁹ The commitments to antifascism, industrial democracy, and social democratic reform defined this phase of the drive for black equality. "Proceeding from the assumption that...racism has been bound up with economic exploitation," Hall writes, "civil rights unionists sought to combine protection from discrimination with universalistic social welfare policies and individual rights with labor rights."¹⁰ The Communist Party and the CIO were decisive if not controlling institutions. According to proponents of this thesis, this movement was more radical, more focused on

8. As Charles Eagles pointed out, many of the early histories were written by former participants. Eagles suggests that this personal and ideological investment produced a "sympathetic attitude toward the quest for civil rights" that prevented historians from developing "thorough, critical, and radical interpretations of the civil rights struggle." See "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *Journal of Southern History* 66 (November 2000): 816–17.

9. Eric Arnesen, "Reconsidering the Long Civil Rights Movement," *Historically Speaking* 10 (April 2009): 32.

10. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005), 1246.

questions of political economy, more amenable to the idea that the fortunes of race and labour were intertwined in these years than it would ever be again.

Yet proponents of this perspective also want to underline continuity. Hall acknowledges the dislocating impact of anticommunism on the movement, but she and others stress the persistence of the class-race connection beyond 1940s, into the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* decision.¹¹ This was not simply a matter of “antecedents” but of “origins.”¹² Historians of this persuasion have argued that the movement that emerged after the Montgomery Bus Boycott expressed social democratic commitments that right-wing versions of Martin Luther King’s allegedly colour-blind ‘dream’ would expunge from memory.¹³

Of course, this schematic is a little too neat to accommodate the diversity and volume of writing on civil rights over the past 40 years. For example, Richard Dalfiume wrote “The Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution,” a groundbreaking article that explored the antecedents of black protest in the turbulent years of the New Deal era. That article was written in 1968.¹⁴ And as early as 1983, historian Mark Naison was reinterpreting the impact of Communist Party activism in New York, examining in a sympathetic light its efforts to defend the Scottsboro Boys, fight tenant evictions, and raise the alarm against fascism.¹⁵ Nor does it account for methodological developments such as the New Labour History in the 1970s, the social history paradigm in the 1980s, and the “linguistic turn” of the 1980s and 90s. Even so, this general outline foregrounds the contemporary forces shaping the drive to excavate the era of depression and war. These are the terms in which historians increasingly cast their studies of the New Deal era. Historians not only re-discovered the 1930s, they started exploring the radical possibilities it generated and the legacies it produced.¹⁶ This writing reflects a considerably more tolerant

11. Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1251–53.

12. Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, “Introduction,” *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement* (Basingstoke 2009), 3.

13. Hall’s article makes this case, but a fuller development of the notion that social democratic and even socialist values underlay the movement of the 1950s and 60s can be found in Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia 2007).

14. Not to mention Harvard Sitkoff’s *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1992* (New York 1981 [reprint 1993]), which elaborated the political and demographic antecedents of the movement, which he confined to the post-1954 period.

15. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York 1983); Naison’s work was part of a larger revisionist renaissance on American communism, but particularly notable works on the relationship between the party and African Americans include Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill 1990), and Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–1936* (Jackson, MS 1998).

16. Some leading examples include Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical*

perspective on the appeal of socialism and communism to midcentury African Americans.

Yet the 'long civil rights movement' has not swept the field. Historians Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang acknowledge the vital contribution that its practitioners have made, but take them to task for diminishing the impact that anticommunism had on the movement. Like Ellen Schrecker in *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton 1998), they emphasize how anticommunism vaporized the popular front organizations that championed a vision of racial justice predicated on economic democracy and interracial solidarity. "It was precisely the broader notion of black freedom," Liebermann and Lang argue, "a global struggle for human rights encompassing anticolonialism and economic justice that had to be downplayed in order to achieve 'civil rights.'"¹⁷ The civil rights movement continued, but it was a qualitatively different phenomenon. Gone was the idea that black equality required a thorough-going critique of capitalism and the support of progressive labour organizations. Visions of an international movement for racial justice embracing a decolonizing Africa were also purged from the mainstream movement. If sympathetic to the "long civil rights movement" thesis, Liebermann and Lang have little patience for the suggestion that the Cold War improved the prospects for black equality. They join Manning Marable and a handful of others in arguing that the American rise to globalism was anything but a blessing for the cause of black freedom.¹⁸

Although Eric Porter's *The Problem of the Future World: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury* is not an explicit contribution to the "long civil rights movement" project, it does illuminate a figure who became the intellectual Zelig of his era, shaping and responding to each defining debate. Propelling Porter's reconsideration of Du Bois in the postwar era is the historiography which posits that the New Deal years had a decisive influence on the impulse for social justice. Some, such as Mary Dudziak in *Cold War Civil Rights* (Princeton 2000), argue that the superpower conflict had an ironically positive impact on black civil rights. By forcing American racial practices

Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950 (New York 2008); Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: the Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens 1999), which emphasizes the long-view as well as NAACP local activism but not the popular front; Robert Rogers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill 2003), which introduced the idea of "civil rights unionism"; Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill 1996), Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900–1950* (Urbana and Chicago 2006), Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge 2006), Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York 2008).

17. Lieberman and Lang, "Introduction," 6.

18. Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990*, 2nd edition (Jackson 1991), 13–39.

into the international spotlight, the Cold War compelled decision makers to reconcile social practice and official ideology. Others, such as Elizabeth Borgwardt in *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge 2005), contend that the crisis of war convinced the Roosevelt and Truman administrations to internationalize the New Deal program and the liberal democratic ideology that supported it. Coming from the 'long civil rights' school, others such as Nikhil Pal Singh, contend that the anti-colonial and political economic thought of Du Bois, Robeson, and C.L.R. James had a enduring impact on the movement that followed.¹⁹

Porter positions his study in the midst of this literature. According to the author, it "enable an understanding of the deep historical context in which Du Bois's midcentury work can be analyzed...bring[ing] to light shifts in mass consciousness and ideological orientation" as well as "political and economic developments across the globe." (13) The author may be hedging his bets, but the Du Bois that emerges in *The Problem of the Future World* is decidedly skeptical that American globalism augured a new day for people of colour. On the eve of victory, Du Bois penned *Color and Democracy*, a book that encapsulated his ambivalent response to Pax Americana. Du Bois understood that the "new imperial order throws down the gauntlet to the racisms of fascism and old colonialisms," writes Porter, "but it is also predicated on a continuation of a series of racial exclusions, precisely through its refusal to recognize the extent to which the race concept organizes the world." (89) It is the Du Bois of the 1940s—of the international peace and civil rights movement—that interests Porter. In liberal historiography, he would become the civil rights leader gone bad. Porter's focus on the radical W.E.B. Du Bois challenges our reveries for the lyrical elegance and sagacity of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). To his credit, his analysis also leads us to question the judgments he made and at least some of the values he espoused. Although Manning Marable and Gerald Horne have ploughed these fields before, Porter is convinced that their scholarship has tended toward vindicationism. That might be understandable considering the persistently virulent anti-communism in American society. Yet Porter believes it is an impediment to an accurate portrait of a figure notorious for his contradictions, not to mention lapses in judgment.

This protean period developed not only out of the clash of ideologies and armies but out of ideas. As Porter reminds us, this was the era of iconoclastic scholarship on race. Melville Herskovitz, Ruth Benedict, Gunnar Myrdal, Franz Boaz, and W.E.B. Du Bois had shaken the intellectual foundations of racial prejudice. Their research invalidated the fixed cultural hierarchies of Victorian society and exposed the bigotry at the center of its pseudo-scientific racial classifications. According to Porter, those changes paradoxically promised greater freedom and a perpetuation of racial inequality. It was "precisely

19. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge 2004).

at the moment when the falsity of race was made public that its persistence and complexity became more apparent," Porter writes. This was because scientific advancements, state reforms, and a thriving wartime economy had the habit of promoting black advancement while subtly reinforcing racial subordination. (11) Making race disappear in a paroxysm of wartime patriotism could obscure the manner in which it was inscribed into social policy and sedimented into public consciousness.

The historical context is critical, but the theoretical questions that Du Bois explored interest Porter the most. He raises these issues not only to challenge contemporary cultural theorists who maintain that race is now a pernicious category for analyzing the black experience, but also to illuminate Du Bois's conceptual struggles in the era of the Four Freedoms. However irrational, however artificial, Porter argues, the objective experience of race continues to define African American realities, particularly in a capitalist economy predicated on racial divisions. "Thus is it easy to see that scientific definition of race is impossible; it is easy to prove that physical characteristics are not so inherited as to make it possible to divide the world into races," Du Bois suggested, but that could not change for a minute the reality that "organized groups of men by monopoly of economic and physical power" subjugated humanity in a fashion that preserved racial divisions and ensured continued black subservience. (31)

More than this, race provides a platform of independent black political activity. This was an insight that would permeate Du Bois's postwar mentality and prodigious writings. It made him skeptical of any movement which claimed that blacks could simply be absorbed in a larger drive for working class solidarity. Porter's position on Du Bois points directly to the present hand-wringing by labour activists who imagine interracial solidarity triumphing if only Latinos and African Americans would relinquish 'identity' and embrace the unifying salve of class. For Du Bois, as indeed for the Communist Party at least until the United Front, independent black political activity was the *sine qua non* of working class emancipation.

From that standpoint, Porter interrogates Du Bois' meditation on the social scientist in an era of crisis. It was the claim to scientific authority, after all, that legitimized race in the minds of gentlemen scholars and social uplifters. Du Bois himself was a vigorous advocate of the idea that by exposing the irrational and antiquated basis of social practices, the enlightened social scientist could advance progressive reform. An entire generation of black activists, from Du Bois to Carter G. Woodson to Charles Johnson, subscribed to this organizing myth of the Progressive Era. Reason, particularly of the empirical variety that informed Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), would banish ignorance. However, as Du Bois observed in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), the detached posture of the social scientist hardly seemed appropriate when blacks continued to be lynched, segregated, and discriminated against in the era of the Forgotten Man. In the tumult of this period, Du Bois begins to accept the notion that

the “propagandist” had a legitimate role to play alongside the “scientist.” Even before drafting *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois had come to the conclusion, according to Porter, that “science needed to be infused with both an ethical commitment to social justice and a fuller recognition of the lived experience of its marginalized subjects.” (39) The scholar admitted to the activism that had characterized his work since the beginning.

Yet the debate over science and advocacy was not simply, well, academic. It pushed him in directions far beyond the relative comfort of the NAACP. Now the author of *The Souls of Black Folk* would pursue Marxian pathways, at least in so far as they illuminated black economic exploitation. Now the fiery editor of the *Crisis* would engage the question of multiracial labour alliances, New Deal reforms, and the political coalitions best suited to black interests.

Out of the intellectual ferment that produced *Dusk of Dawn* and the journal *Phylon*, Du Bois generated a vision of black democratic internationalism that guided his subsequent thought. Even as he veered into the camp of Stalinist communism, he maintained that Africa’s destiny was tied to world peace. Now, ‘Africa’ as a place and an abstract ideal would dominate his mental landscape. It had already decisively influenced his conception of the black experience in America. As Porter demonstrates, it was through the 1919 Pan-African Congress, his connection to Jamaican activist Claude McKay, and his exposure to the Marcus Garvey movement of the 1920s that Du Bois discovered the potential inherent in combining anti-colonial activism abroad and black protest at home. Du Bois’s visits to the Soviet Union would add a key dimension to the ideological mix. (26–27) Yet moving beyond this broadening perspective, he came to the conclusion that the fate of Africa could not be separated from the prospects of black liberation in the United States. The struggle for racial equality had to be built on anti-imperialist convictions and anti-colonial alliances. In the era of social protest, he began to imagine the possibilities of “an interracial and global notion of collective responsibility.” (56) Only this vision of independent racial activism could overcome the combination of self-righteous moral uplift and flagrant colonial subjugation that had been the plague of modern Africa.

According to Porter, this cosmopolitan vision challenged the liberal assimilationism of Gunnar Myrdal’s legendary *The American Dilemma* (1944). Instead of seeing black civil rights as a method for legitimizing the extension of American power abroad, Du Bois advocated “a black-led reconstruction of democracy at home and abroad.” (55) In this explicitly forward-looking analysis, the author suggests that *Dusk of Dawn* and *Phylon* prodded contemporaries to “think carefully about the centrality of race and racism to modernity and more specifically to the ways that they have been fundamentally intertwined with capitalism and with the development of liberalism.” (58) The author’s refreshingly direct though sometimes jarringly presentist agenda is equally evident in the suggestion that “Du Bois’s project signals the way that an antiracist intellectual project must be attuned to the potential racist

power of both affirmations and disaffirmations of racial difference in various aspects of social and political life [since] they not only “mask the existence of racial hierarchies,” but they can also develop into the “ideological mechanisms upholding white supremacy.” (58) In effect, Porter is suggesting, the Du Bois of the 1940s can be recruited in the contemporary struggle against colourblind neoliberalism.

In subsequent chapters, Porter advances the case for Du Bois’ relevance. He details his steady disillusionment with the United Nations as it failed to address the legacy of colonial racism. He explores his disaffection from an NAACP increasingly devoted to the Cold War *quid pro quo* of loyalty to the Truman administration in exchange for incremental improvements. Both experiences fostered a more radical vision of postwar reconstruction. Participating in the Phelps-Stokes Fund’s study titled *The Atlantic Charter and Africa from an American Standpoint*, Du Bois would enjoin the committee to “pay more attention to the United States’ responsibility for African Affairs given its growing investments on the continent.” Criticizing the draft report, he amplified that point, contending that it failed to “adequately address the problems of modern imperial exploitation and histories of the slave trade and colonialism.” (109). While modifying some of his criticisms in an article for *Phylon*, he would chastise the report for failing to frame the analysis in the context of imperialism, failing to address the need for wage protections and prohibitions on child labour, failing to see the urgency of it all. (110) In *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (1945), he articulated the now-conventional opinion that an inequitable distribution of wealth prevented millions of Africans from building meaningful democracies. When compounded by the legacy of colonialism and slavery, it would leave Africa a constant “problem.” Yet that troubled continent could not be ignored considering its central place in the logic of capitalist expansion and in the international movement for black liberation.

Outspoken on questions of political economy, conscious of the danger that African Americans might become complicit in the bid for American global hegemony (173), Du Bois was driven from the liberal civil rights movement. He landed in the ranks of the Communist-friendly National Negro Congress and the Council of African Affairs. There, he and Paul Robeson became the symbols of a Popular Front that had supposedly capitulated wholesale to Soviet Communism. That supposition is facile, Porter convincingly argues. Frustrated by American Cold War recalcitrance, the venerable scholar-activist would espouse a “broader, socialistic global vision of justice and cooperation,” yet one “that still imagined the United States as a key player in the reconstruction of democracy.” (130) Again invoking the presentist possibilities inherent in Du Bois’ midcentury missives, Porter submits that Du Bois was the key figure in situating the African predicament at the center of progressive humanitarianism. “Du Bois suggests the need for an epistemological and moral intervention,” Porter argues, “in what [James] Ferguson calls the

'demoralizing aspects' of neoliberal policy, which privilege individual economic freedoms and property rights and call upon Africans to atone for their irresponsible behaviors of the post-independence past." (144)

In perhaps his most expressly interventionist chapter, Porter draws analogies between Du Bois's political persecution and the "suspect citizens" of our post-9/11 epoch. The parallels to the present are suggestive, but what is most powerful is his illustration of how Du Bois tried to redefine loyalty in his own era. In short, Du Bois argued for a vision of loyalty geared to something higher than coercive authority. Already facing prosecution for his involvement in the Peace Information Center, which US authorities considered a Soviet front, Du Bois penned *Battle for Peace* (1952), a memoir defending his increasingly transnational sense of identity. According to Eric Porter, Du Bois believed that his decisions were "motivated by humanitarian instincts, democratic values typically defined as American, and the ethical challenge that the Soviet Union poses to people who are overly concerned with the accrual of capital and consumer goods." (163)

Porter extols the virtues of Du Bois's cosmopolitan sense of identity. Moved by socialism, the author argues, "and to some extent the political project of the USSR," Du Bois distanced himself from the claustrophobia of American politics in the 1940s and responded to "a higher cosmopolitan calling." (166) As an antithesis to jingoistic nationalism and belligerent unilateralism, the cosmopolitan temperament was appealing. The dream of international solidarity against predatory capitalism had been a feature of the Left since the International Working People's Association and the IWW took to the field. It was little wonder that it appealed to leftists in an era of anxiety over atomic weaponry and postwar reconstruction.

Yet there is good reason to question Du Bois's judgment in asserting global citizenship as the foundation of his moral authority. Here is where Porter's presentism obscures our understanding of the context that operated on Du Bois. Historian Henry Steele Commager struggled with the same issues as Du Bois, if not the same circumstances. Yet his answer was to affirm the right of dissent as a uniquely American tradition. He asserted that "those who inflame racial hatreds, who sow religious and class dissensions," are genuinely disloyal. Commager was not advocating the democratic socialism of the popular front. Even so, he and Du Bois faced a common adversary, an anticommunist juggernaut cutting down everything in its path that was left of center. Yet Commager's defense of the Constitution, his criticism of southern demagogues who "make a mockery of majority rule by the use of the filibuster," his castigation of those "who impair democracy by denying equal educational facilities," and his insistence that the rebellious "Seward of the Higher Law" and the "Sumner of racial equality" would never pass the scrutiny of HUAC gave the historian an ideological foundation that Du Bois desperately needed. That may have not have saved him from the recrimination of the Red Hunters. It might, however, have provided the basis for a more effective peace movement. After

all, the abolitionists who Commager lauded—Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, and Henry David Thoreau—were advocates of peace, at least until John Brown. Appealing to a larger, more cosmopolitan truth, Du Bois was reaching for the transcendentalism, “the philosophy of the Higher Law,” which Commager placed at the “very core of Americanism.” Commager grounded his defense of independent thought in this tradition. Loyalty was the “realization that “America was born of revolt, flourished on dissent, became great through experimentation.”²⁰ In gravitating to a version of citizenship that privileged Africa and the Soviet Union, Du Bois cut himself loose from the indigenous traditions of American radicalism. As Commager demonstrated, the intellectual did not have to look abroad in order to oppose anticommunism.

If Porter (and Robin Kelley and Peggy von Eschen) overplays the tactical virtue of Du Bois’s internationalism, he captures the scholar’s sagacity in anticipating the narrowing of dissent in postwar America.²¹ He understood the danger that Cold War militarism, authoritarianism, and unilateralism posed to the black freedom struggle. Better than his erstwhile allies in the NAACP, he understood how Cold War liberals would make the case that civil rights could serve “the interests of ‘national security,’” all the while legitimizing it as a “powerful check on radical political projects that pushed too hard for racial reform” as well “a mechanism for scaling back the civil liberties of individuals involved in those projects.” (152) Porter is equally successful, however—not to mention honest—in addressing Du Bois’s poor judgment in adopting the mantle of Soviet communism, particularly *after* the revelation of Stalin’s atrocities at the 20th Congress in 1956. It is “surprising,” writes Porter in the understatement of the book, “given Du Bois’s iconoclasm, contrariness, and still vigorous intelligence, that he did not have more critical perspective on the Soviet Union’s manipulation of the left at this moment and did not, like C.L.R. James, develop an analytical Marxism that was simultaneously anti-Stalinist and critical of Western racism and imperialism.” That question might legitimately be asked of most who continued their fealty to the party once the purge trials, gulags, and exterminations were confirmed.

Even so, Eric Porter, following Gerald Horne, offers a plausible answer to the dilemma. The Soviet Union, he argues, provided a counterpoint to American imperialism and “the possibility of socialism in practice.” (152) While few historians would maintain that the Soviet Union offered any prospect of genuine socialism after 1925, not to mention 1950, that was not the perspective of African American radicals at the time. In the teeth of landmark

20. Henry Steele Commager, “Who is Loyal to America?” *Harper’s Magazine* 195 (September 1947): 193–99, quotes on 197–98.

21. Peggy von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), which argues that the 1940s saw the development of international black united front dedicated to fundamental social change, African independence, and global citizenship based on racial solidarity.

court victories for racial equality, freedom trains celebrating the American Constitution, and the ideology of liberal internationalism, blacks confronted the persistence of perverse racial injustice. Porter makes the salient point that reflexive anti-Soviet hostility has become a convenient device for discrediting a more progressive civil rights movement, not to mention a more radical labour movement. Porter's balance is admirable on this point. While drawn to "Marxism, his intellectual affinity resist[ed] programmatic restrictions from the party." The problem that Du Bois confronted was the problem that had faced the Left since the days of Daniel DeLeon and Eugene Debs: how to check the anti-intellectual tendencies inherent in "political dogmatism" and manage the "political challenge of synthesizing patriotism and cosmopolitanism." (155) The Communist Party confronted the same dilemma. The era of Browderism and the popular front seemed to have solved it.

Porter wants to leave us with a Du Bois who reminds us of the "political possibilities" inherent in the "unfinished, cosmopolitan black and left political projects of the twentieth century for reconstructing democracy across the globe." (177) That idea—of democracy reconstructed, reinvented, re-imagined in a global context—pervades his analysis of Du Bois in the 1940s. Obstructed by Porter's excessive entrenchment in the jargon of cultural studies, it still represents his signature achievement. Yet the question we are left with is: how? Through what instrumentality would it be achieved? Perhaps more to the point, precisely what framework did Du Bois have to offer an international movement? Disillusioned by the United Nations, he turned to various aggregations of anti-colonialist intellectuals and 'peace' advocates to advance the cause. Yet these had little purchase on a mass movement of workers and racial minorities. If the latter-day Du Bois speaks to progressives today—and Porter would very much like him to—it is as a principled defender of free speech and civil liberties, not as an architect of mass movements for social change.

The Soviet affiliation and the radical Pan-Africanism certainly explain why liberal academics threw the older Du Bois overboard. But we might reasonably ask why it is that Ralph Bunche, E. Franklin Frazier, Horace Cayton, and Rayford Logan seem to have a contemporary resonance that the later Du Bois does not. Perhaps it is because they did not dismiss the possibility of forging a multiracial working-class alliance in the New Deal era and using that leverage to improve the conditions for black Americans. (37) Instead of emphasizing workers' control over production, Du Bois endorsed black consumer cooperatives, economic self-sufficiency, the leadership of black colleges, and a strategy of Black Nationalism as the hope for African American liberation. At least until 1940, Du Bois had little interest in a united labour movement. (47) These positions seemed incongruously ill-suited to the needs of the era. They seem even less so now.

Du Bois astutely criticized the racial limitations of New Deal policies. Yet his investment "in complicating naïve faiths in both class struggle and state reform" and his skepticism toward "the ameliorative capabilities of liberal

state projects" ignored how real working-class housewives, industrial labourers, and displaced rural field hands benefitted from those programs. (33) Admittedly, Du Bois did develop an appreciation for interracial alliances during the war. Moreover, he did lend his support to left-led unions in the postwar years, a development which Porter overlooks. Despite his inability to formulate systematic alternatives, the left-wing of the civil rights movement, rooted in organizations such as the Highlander Folk School and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, embraced Du Bois. So too, for that matter, did left-wing unionists and intellectuals.²²

Yet if Du Bois looked favourably on left-led unions, he and other progressive intellectuals steadily devoted less and less time to sustaining an American movement for social reform. In the heat of the Cold War, that proved difficult for even the most devoted rank-and-file activists. Still, the growing preoccupation with the peace movement and decolonization distracted him from addressing the immediate issues facing African American workers. These included housing, full employment, the repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act, postwar lynchings, voting rights, a postwar Fair Employment Practices Committee, educational opportunities, and the need for inclusion in the New Deal social welfare apparatus. As Robbie Liebermann explains, progressives respected Du Bois for his critique of Cold War escalation. They applauded his objections to the rise of the national security state as well as his belief that anticolonialism and the movement for labour and civil rights in the United States were intricately connected.²³ Yet too often these noble sentiments did not drill down to the immediate social and political challenges facing urban black workers and rural black sharecroppers. Eric Porter is most interested in how Du Bois interpreted the African moment to American blacks. As an intellectual, if not an activist, however, what did Du Bois offer African Americans from their own experience? In turn, what did the African American experience have to offer the world?

Not surprisingly, Du Bois himself provided a compelling answer. In *Black Reconstruction* (1935), he assembled the evidence that African Americans could bend the "ameliorative capabilities" of the liberal state to their benefit. Challenging the racist historiography that had dominated the field since the 1880s, Du Bois documented the development of productive bi-racial alliances, grass-roots black political activism, and effective state intervention on behalf of a rural proletariat. As Porter acknowledges, "when *Black Reconstruction* looked at African American activism, it was as much forward looking as it was historical." (29) By serving in the Union Army, voting for Reconstruction

22. Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963* (Albany 1986), 235, 243.

23. Robbie Liebermann, "Another Side of the Story: African American Intellectuals Speak Out for Peace and Freedom during the Early Cold War Years," in *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement*, 23.

governments, getting elected to a wide spectrum of public offices, attending black political conventions, fashioning the Union Leagues, and building the state-level Republican Party, blacks advanced southern democratization. That they did so in alliance with the state through organizations such as the Freedmen's Bureau was all that more remarkable. "Reconstruction," Porter writes, "represented the possibility of a multiracial, industrial (socialist) democracy," (30) an example arguably more compelling than anything the Soviet Union or Cold War America had to offer. Intrigued by Du Bois's eloquent reflections on Africa, Porter does not develop this line of inquiry. And yet it was Reconstruction, not Garveyite nationalism or the anti-colonial stirrings of the postwar period, which offered Du Bois his most convincing example of independent black activism. It was the recovered memory of the accomplishments of a radical Reconstruction that Du Bois had to offer an international movement for social justice.

In fact, it was this memory of bi-racial democracy that preserved his allegiance to the American experiment, however strained, in the trials of anti-communism. Writing at the height of McCarthyism, he could still claim that "I know what America has done for the poor, oppressed and hopeless of many other peoples, and what indeed it has done to contradict and atone for its sins against Negroes." (162) Certainly Porter is right to contend that the Du Bois of the 1940s remains relevant because his analysis reminds us to be conscious of "shifts in the ontology of race while simultaneously looking out for the return of older racial logics." Yet perhaps more important was what Du Bois understood about the American experience. The conflict over access to land and the control of labour in the postwar South was *the* central drama in 19th century America, notwithstanding the war itself. Du Bois understood that it was the culmination of a movement to "reconstruct democracy in America," as the historian subtitled his groundbreaking analysis. Focusing intensively on Africa and its place in the escalating Cold War, Du Bois lost sight of what this vision of a mass movement for economic democracy could mean to the black freedom struggle. The UN Security Council, not to mention the American national security state, had little to offer the movement for racial emancipation. Absent a black labour left (there were more blacks in the CIO than the NAACP), Henry Wallace, and the Progressive Party challenge, we have good reason to question whether the Truman administration would have struck a presidential commission on civil rights and desegregated the armed forces. What *Black Reconstruction* offered was the example of African-American political self-determination essential to the 1940s struggle. Distortions of historical memory all but obscured those achievements.

In *Wrestling with the Left*, Barbara Foley directly engages the question of historical memory. In this case, thought, it is to challenge an African American author made famous by his selective recollection of the Popular Front. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was published in 1952 to critical acclaim. It won him a National Book Award as well as accolades from liberal commentators who

interpreted the novel as an allegory on the treachery of the Communist Party toward blacks and, by extension, toward American society. In the conventional account, Ellison was a fellow traveler, possibly a member of the party until 1945. He joined the ranks of other disillusioned writers, most notably Richard Wright and Chester Himes, and threw off the alleged shackles of communist perfidy in the black freedom struggle.²⁴ Since its publication, critics have praised *Invisible Man* as the saga of that journey, in which black Americans yearning for freedom repudiate radicalism and nationalism for the benefits of liberal pluralism. In another sense, *Invisible Man* has become the 20th century literary equivalent of St. Augustine's conversion, in which the writer awakens from the illusions of vulgar Marxism to the truth of de-politicized, art-for-art's sake. As Foley demonstrates, however, Ellison's vast collection of unpublished short stories, notes, out-takes, and earlier drafts tell a different story. In the era of the Cold War, one wonders whether the publication of such material would have altered the reception of *Invisible Man* at all. As Foley acknowledges, the book "is read as testimony to Ellison's maturation; the novel's repudiation of leftists authoritarianism and scientism and its embrace of democratic pluralism and epistemological ambivalence exhibit not just its protagonist's development from ranter to writer, but the increasing sophistication of the text's creator as well." (5)

In a challenging but richly rewarding analysis of Ellison's oeuvre, Foley contests that interpretation. At the same time, she identifies the literary and ideological traces of Ellison's radical convictions that remained in *Invisible Man* despite his mainstreaming edits. Not unlike Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1997), influenced in turn by Foley's earlier and seminal *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (1993), *Wrestling with the Left* is meant to demonstrate that the United Front ethos of the 1930s continued to mould the sensibilities of writers who had apparently cut their ties to the movement. Instead of interpreting the novel from the perspective of the anticommunist consensus that Ellison embraced, Foley examines it from the perspective of a writer trying to make sense of a world in which the range of political options had yet to be irrevocably narrowed. Foley sees the novel "as a conflicted and contradictory text bearing multiple traces of his struggle to repress and then abolish the ghost of his leftist consciousness and conscience." (7)

The evidence that Foley accrues illustrates the depth of the author's belief in the possibility of a class-conscious, multiracial movement for social change. The most remarkable feature of *Wrestling with the Left* is the mountain of passages demonstrating the author's ethic of radical democratic engagement that

24. Add to Ellison and Wright's critique that of Harold Cruse, who excoriated white communists in anti-Semitic terms, accusing them of arrogating "the mantle of spokesperson on Negro affairs, thus burying the Negro radical potential deeper and deeper in the slough of white intellectual paternalism": *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York 1967), 147.

end up on the cutting room floor as he reconciles the novel to the culture of conformity. In the fervid atmosphere of the 1930s, Ellison was clearly developing a perspective that combines historical materialism and racial internationalism. Following his stint in Harlem as a chronicler of the black experience for the Works Progress Administration, Ellison turns to radical journalism. Exploring his contributions to *The New Masses* and the left-wing *Negro Quarterly*, Foley discovers a writer who subscribed to the “cardinal principles of Popular Front-era CP politics.” (33) These included the party’s commitment to black self-determination in the South, its vision of itself as the inheritors of the abolitionist tradition, and its emphasis on the insidious threat of fascism at home and abroad. More intriguing, his affinity for the CPUSA convinced him to accept its notorious twists and turns in policy, an ideological alignment to which his sanitized recollections do not admit. If Ellison had his fictional “Brotherhood” – his literary substitute for the Communist Party – selling out Harlem blacks and then inciting riots, his earlier journalism evinced a class-conscious writer who reluctantly acquiesced to the shifting winds of party policy. Ellison’s assent to party discipline even included its subordination of the racial struggle to the imperative of winning the war. (39)

Similar to W.E.B. Du Bois, the aspiring author underlines the vital importance of black political leadership in any movement for liberation. Yet in 1943, in an editorial following the Zoot Suit riots, Ellison is still extolling the virtues of “class-based interracial alliances.” (48) In an unpublished editorial for *Negro Quarterly*, he contends that the authentic cultural independence will be won when black leaders become “theoretical Marxists, emotionally Negro nationalists, Negro in form, socialist in content, working class in politics.” (50) Paul Robeson becomes Ellison’s example of the cosmopolitan black activist. Above all, he was committed above all to the elimination of social injustice, not to the pursuit of the main chance, which seems to preoccupy the hucksters and hipsters in the final version of *Invisible Man*. On the concept of race, Ellison warned of its mystical allure. “We must not be fooled by race; that is a myth... The real problem is class: class: class: whether hidden behind theories of race superiority or beneath the chronic nationalism of fascism.” (52) Like many of his CP contemporaries, and unlike Du Bois, Ellison underestimated the existential reality of race and its utility as an organizing principle. What he and the literary left did not do was ignore the political and economic forces that conditioned both the experience of race and the paths to black liberation.

Yet long before his absorption into the Cold War consensus, Ellison had grown skeptical of the party. In Foley’s hands, he emerges an independent leftist intellectual, not a party hack. The war years saw Ellison moving toward a “critique of the CP’s economistic narrowing of the domain of the antiracist struggle,” not a wholesale repudiation of Marxism or even the party. The condemnation of Stalinist authoritarianism would only come later. Influenced by literary theorist Kenneth Burke, Ellison would incorporate a narrative strategy based on the Marxian dialectic even while his character repudiated the idea of

"history as a spiral." Using other Marxian techniques, he would begin crafting a novel that illustrated his "enduring fascination with the figure of the African American leftist as Promethean rebel." (110) Ellison's story of the young southerner schooled in but ultimately betrayed by the ethic of Washingtonian submission, raised to political consciousness but manipulated by the Harlem Brotherhood, and ultimately emancipated by "affirming the principle" of American democratic pluralism (328) represents a struggle between "doubt and commitment." Yet it is also an account of the author's own intellectual tension. This struggle was not between leftist naturalism and apolitical modernism, but "to find a ground where his warring tendencies might coexist in dialectical tension." (111)

Out of this dialectic, Ellison produced a book that initially reflected his Popular Front convictions. Its early drafts exhibited his immersion in political economy and his jaundiced view of the American past. In chapters subsequently excised from the final draft, he critiqued the complicity of the black college in the Jim Crow system, making allusions to Robert R. Moton, Booker T. Washington's right-hand man at Tuskegee. It was Moton who turned over a Sharecroppers Union organizer, wounded in gun battle with local deputies, to the authorities instead of offering him the protection of the college. His penultimate versions underlined northern culpability in the failure of Reconstruction. They emphasized the importance of black-white alliances anchored in left-wing trade unionism. They critiqued hyper-patriotism, extolled antifascism, acknowledged the positive impact of communist activism in Harlem, celebrated the idea that progressive social activism generated human dignity, castigated the illusion of the American Dream. In an earlier draft of the Harlem boarding house scenes, Ellison inserted the character of Leroy, a member of a fictionalized version of the National Maritime Union. Leroy becomes the "proletarian hero" of *Invisible Man*, and his membership in the parallel NMU no accident. Ellison admired the commitment of the radical maritime union to the cause of the Scottsboro Boys and the defense of Angelo Herndon. He grafts their class consciousness, working-class militancy, and international racial solidarity onto Leroy. Killed by company thugs, his body tossed callously overboard, Leroy enacts the mythic sacrifice of the fictional John Henry and the historical John Brown in the cause of black liberation.

Yet the character of Leroy haunts the narrator. He inhabits his former room at the boarding house in Harlem. Through his extant journal and the impression he has branded on the memory of the remaining boarders, Leroy becomes the model for his dedication to a world more humane. In the original, the invisible man's dedication plays out in the arena scene where he delivers an impassioned speech before a captive audience shortly after becoming a Brotherhood organizer. In this pivotal moment, the invisible man is transformed by his recognition of the link between individual fulfillment and collective purpose. Brother Jack, the cadre leader who, in the final text, would come to symbolize the myopic mendacity of the party, is anything but an authoritarian stooge. In

the arena scene, the invisible man originally has the measure of himself and his comrades in a larger movement of social purpose: "I no longer lived upon a fragment," Foley quotes the novel, "but in a total world, the revolution of which, with its surge of events, through the correct and combined action of others, I could control. For the first time I seemed to have a hand in my own destiny. Old Norton [the white philanthropist patterned after a George Foster Peabody type, paternalistically investing in Washingtonian black subservience] had spoken of me as *his* destiny, now Brother Jack was giving me a sense that I was my own—no, that we, here in the arena were *our* destiny. We had only to combine to act." (261) Brotherhood, it seemed to the unreconstructed Ellison, not acquisitive individualism, was the path to a fuller humanity. (349) In the 1952 publication, the scene would serve to illustrate the clash between communistic dogmatism and the African American desire for dignity. Although excised from the final draft, this section, Foley argues, keenly illustrates the Popular Front sensibilities that originally animated the novel.

Foley's analysis extends well beyond this episode; in fact, two thirds of the book is devoted to a chapter-by-chapter analysis that details Ellison's descent into hackneyed anticommunist stereotypes. One of the most provocative features of *Wrestling with the Left* is the author's analysis of Ellison's historical distortions, which end up attributing the Harlem riot of 1943 to Communist Party intrigue. By "stripping the wartime Harlem uprising of its historical and political context," Ellison is able to create archetypes that "reinforce negative generalizations about how leftists characteristically act and think." (318–9) Through exhaustive analysis of the archival material, Foley makes the convincing argument that the author's eventual posture of liberal anticommunism transformed the *Invisible Man* into "a far less humane and antiracist novel that it might otherwise have been." (23) Instead of the "images of fraternity and activism so badly needed to help them confront the crying issues of the times," Ellison offered, in the tendentious epilogue, a reaffirmation of the status quo.

Foley's *Wrestling with the Left*, a work of literary history, is at the crossroads of scholarship reinterpreting the struggle for black equality and the literature of the left. Beginning with Daniel Aaron and *Writers on the Left* (1961), a book that reinforced many of the negative presuppositions about the proletarian literature of the 1930s, this effort has matured considerably. The polemical attacks in the style of Irving Howe and Louis Coser have diminished, at least in the consideration of popular front literature. It has given way to a more sophisticated though left-inflected genre.²⁵ For example, William J. Maxwell also

25. For example, Alan Wald, *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (London 1990); *ibid.*, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill 2007), Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (New York 2001), William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York 1999), as well as Denning's *The Cultural Front* and Foley's *Radical Representations*. Typical of Daniel Aaron's appraisal of left literature was his

illuminates the left-wing influences in Ellison's early writings. He dismisses the idea that his *Negro Quarterly* ruminations were the product of his nascent literary modernism. Yet Maxwell takes Foley to task in her earlier essays for asserting too dramatic a rupture between his communist and liberal phases. According to Maxwell, "*Invisible Man's* many meditations on existential and historical time, for their part, tell a different story of relationship, continuing dialogue on vanguardism and belatedness whose outlines were revealed as Ellison bolted from the scene of Scottsboro [and] emigrated to Harlem communism."²⁶

If Foley has decisively recovered the ethic of progressive humanism purged from *Invisible Man*, she is reluctant to consider Ellison's legitimate grievances with the Communist Party. Cliches, historical misrepresentations, and literary elisions aside for a moment, *Invisible Man* might be read as the culmination of Ellison's struggle to imagine a black freedom movement more authentically democratic than the one he encountered in Harlem. Even if that struggle failed, as Foley argues, the "images of fraternity and activism so badly needed" come at the cost of minimizing CPUSA centralization, opportunism, and plain bad behaviour. Foley prudently wants to avoid the anti-communist labels of "dogmatism" and "Stalinism" that permit historians to dismiss a movement rather than analyze it. In their "reductiveness, they answer the question of causality before it is asked." (18) The author also correctly points out that, despite internal divisions and external repression, the party continued to oppose "police brutality, segregated housing, employment discrimination, and resurgent southern violence." (20) Yet since Foley, like Porter, invites us to consider the contemporary relevance of her work – "the invisible man's original plan for expanding his own and others' humanity...continues to require our serious consideration" – it is reasonable to ask whether no-strike pledges and patriotic national unity resembled "socialism in one country" to African Americans. It is equally pertinent to ask if it echoed Booker T. Washington's counsels of patience and submission. That brand of political expediency was the source of disillusionment for many an American communist, black and white.²⁷ Its

observation that in the 1930s, "'social consciousness' became for some revolutionary enthusiasts a legitimate reason to abnegate literary responsibilities"; *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961 [1992]), 10. Yet Aaron also acknowledged the idealistic motives that moved gifted writers such as John Dos Passos to join the party and the John Reed Clubs. See Michael Kazin, "The Agony and Romance of the American Left," *American Historical Review* 100 (December 1995): 1493. There is certainly no unanimity on the virtues of proletarian literature. For a recent, almost categorical dismissal of proletarian fiction as an exercise in literary mediocrity and mechanistic propaganda, see Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York 2009), chapter 4.

26. William J. Maxwell, "Creative and Cultural Lag: The Radical Education of Ralph Ellison," in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (New York 2004), 79.

27. Eric Arnesen makes the point that many practitioners of the Long Civil Rights movement

contemporary echoes are in a mainstream labour movement that too often considers racial issue an impediment to class solidarity.

Historian Ellen Schrecker has provided a convincing solution to the dilemma that Foley confronted, namely, the dual character of the party. She examined the “complicated and contradictory nature of a political movement that was *both* subservient to the Kremlin *and* genuinely dedicated to a wide range of social reforms, a movement whose adherents sometimes toed the party line and sometimes did not even receive them.”²⁸ Foley is certainly cognizant of this dichotomy. Even if we accept Schrecker’s description, the party was never as monolithically “rigid” at the local level as critics would have it.²⁹ Yet had Foley pursued Schrecker’s line of inquiry further, she may have deepened her elucidation of why Ellison, “who took his left politics, as a source of both radical and existential joy” (17), wrote such a “conflicted and contradictory text.” (7) This is not to invite a replay of Cold War recriminations and polarities. Instead, it is to encourage what J.R. Uhlmann has described as the effort to “embed the party story in the life and culture of the United States.”³⁰ Ellison was wrestling not only with his leftist convictions, as Foley contends; he was also trying to find a place for black leadership and self-determination. Like Du Bois, he was struggling to interpret radicalism in an American context.

What was additionally frustrating to black progressives was that, during the Third Period, the Communist Party *did* insist on the necessity of black leadership in any legitimate working-class movement. This was a case that Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay convincingly made to the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern in 1922.³¹ Paul Robeson understood that as well. As Robin Kelley writes, the incomparable Robeson understood that “black self-determination was not simply a matter of guaranteeing democratic rights or removing the barriers to black political and economic power, nor was it a matter of creating a [black] nation...It was about promoting and supporting an independent black radical movement that could lead the way to a revitalized international working-class assault on racial capitalism.”³² It was a conviction, Kelley argues, which Richard Wright, C.L.R. James, and Claude McKay understood as well. Foley’s analysis suggests that the young Ellison

thesis downplay A. Philip Randolph’s consistent opposition to racial inequality throughout the war, which included leadership of the famed March on Washington movement. “Reconsidering the Long Civil Rights Movement,” 33.

28. Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes, McCarthyism in America* (Princeton 1998), xv.

29. This is an argument which historian Randi Storch has made in *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots, 1928–1935* (Urbana and Chicago 2007.)

30. J.R. Uhlmann, “Moving On—Towards a Post-Cold War Historiography of American Communism,” *American Communist History* 8 (2009): 24.

31. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston 2002), 54.

32. *Ibid.*, 54.

would have agreed. If “suitably updated to encompass the historical conditions and political landscape of the twenty-first century” (349), Foley’s provocative analysis might indeed contribute to a regeneration of the idea that ‘becoming more human’ requires cooperative action, collective resolve, class solidarity. It might require something more promising than is, than Ellison’s conciliatory injunction, that “America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain.”³³

Wrestling with the Left demonstrates that Ellison was grappling with issues that have troubled working-class activists since the Eight Hour Movement in 1886. How, for example, do labour movements reconcile American sensibilities to the demand for class or racial unity? How do they tap into traditions of American dissent, establish effective political organizations, without descending into demagoguery and dictatorship? What vision of an alternative America is powerful enough to draw on existing traditions of cooperative action and defuse the rhetoric of acquisitive individualism? African American activists have posed similar questions since abolitionists debated whether the American Constitution should be redeemed or immolated as a slaveholder’s bill of lading. As Eric Porter understands, W.E.B. Du Bois asked the very same questions. How do blacks achieve political self-determination while building a countervailing force against racialized capitalism? *Wrestling with the Left* demonstrates that Ellison was asking those questions. His answer was to adopt the liberal consensus view that popular protest was inimical to American liberal individualism. That answer did little to resolve the issues that nettled him enough to write *Invisible Man*.

Both *The Problem of the Future World* and *Wrestling with the Left* seek to restore the 1940s as a period of lost opportunities and roads not taken toward a more humane and democratic America. That project is an indispensable corrective to the version of civil rights crusade that prevails in popular culture today.³⁴ Yet however electrifying additional salvage missions into the history of the “long civil rights movement” might prove, they should not obscure the devastating effectiveness of the campaigns to discredit, disrupt, and destroy it. Echoes of the popular front era were certainly evident in the labour-oriented vision of racial equality that Martin Luther King championed in the 1960s. No sensible historian should try to diminish the courage and genuine accomplishments of that movement. Yet lacking the institutional network, economic clout, and unifying social democratic ideology of the popular front era, its gains were necessarily limited. It could not hope to reform the substructure of economic inequality. It could not claim a united, bi-racial, working-class front located in trade unionism and on the political economy of urban decline. It could not eradicate the exclusions written into national policy by the New Deal itself, let alone corporate America. In an era of global integration, when

33. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York 1952), 435.

34. Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1237–9.

black, white, and Hispanic workers face so many of the same adversities, a new version of social movement unionism promises a challenge to the primacy of capital. The era of the older Du Bois and the younger Ellison continues to offer the most promising possibilities.