

# “Long Civil Rights Movement” Initiative Launched

(continued from Page One) of Southerners, yet we have not captured their reflections on these sweeping changes, nor have we subjected them to the historical scrutiny they deserve. These memories persist nevertheless, affecting the way we live in the present and shaping the choices we make about the future. This lack of understanding of our recent past impoverishes public discourse, undermines civic engagement and investment in public institutions, and truncates our ability to devise

remedies for the inequalities that surround us. Such are the consequences of moving through what philosopher Walter Benjamin termed “the storm of progress” without understanding or accounting for the past. By documenting the long civil rights movement, we seek to recover a hidden history of the most challenging elements of the civil rights movement, trace the movement’s ongoing legacy, and account for the

forces that have undermined the dream of a just and inclusive South.

In order to capture the complexity of the post-1960s South, our project examines three distinct but overlapping dimensions of the long civil rights movement. The trajectory of the struggle for racial justice in the South will be one dimension of the project. We will pick up the story where many current histories and popular understanding leave off, namely with the passage of landmark anti-discrimination legislation: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Often seen as the culmination of civil rights agitation, these laws can also be taken as the starting point for a history of implementation, contestation, and transformation in the struggle for racial equality and justice, one that stretches into our own time. (Sociologist Orlando Patterson aptly calls this history “the ordeal of integration.”) Since the 1960s, ordinary black and white southerners have set out, willingly and unwillingly, to build integrated institutions; in effect, to build a new society on the ruins of the old. We seek to document this transformation and to probe the subjective experience of integration—its achievements and limitations, the benefits that have accrued and the price that has been paid, and the legacy of what might have been.

A second dimension of the project takes off from Bernice Johnson Reagon’s evocative description of the civil rights movement as the “burning struggle” that provided inspi-

ration, tactics, and personnel for many of the social justice movements that followed, among them the struggle for inclusion, equality and justice of other racial and ethnic groups; the Black Power movement; labor organizing and union democracy campaigns; the women’s movement; and significant elements of the anti-war movement, environmentalism, and the counterculture. We seek to document the generative role of the civil rights movement in launching and shaping movements whose major manifestations lie not in the 1960s but in the 1970s, 80s, and beyond. We will trace these continuities and connections, but we will also account for the fissures that have limited the development of a unified progressive agenda.

The third dimension of the project concerns the forces of reaction and resistance that arose in response to these social justice movements and that often constituted social movements in their own right. A full history of the long civil rights movement and the post-1960s South cannot be told without accounting for the forces that shaped and ultimately blunted the promise of racial, sexual, and economic equality. In this component of the project, we will probe the roots and mechanisms of resistance, drawing attention both to their institutional manifestations and their expression in daily life. This is the dense web of action and reaction we seek to sort through so as to trace how the South traveled from the movement of the 1960s to the present, and to document how much and in what ways the South has changed in the wake of the 1960s.

Our long civil rights movement project aims at an ambitious set of goals. We plan to:

- create new first-person source material on the recent South for use by future generations of students, scholars, and citizens;
- foster new scholarship and creative nonfiction writing that promotes a reckoning with the past and a spirit of historically informed civic engagement;
- enrich UNC’s southern studies courses and involve students in research on the South in which they live and whose future they will inherit;
- encourage public history projects, such as exhibits and performances, aimed at affecting how Southerners remember the past and make decisions about the future;
- enliven public school curricula.

We are now piloting the North Carolina portion of this project under the auspices of our “Listening for a Change” initiative, funded by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. In the coming years, we will launch a south-wide initiative. We are interested in hearing your ideas, and especially interested in hearing from potential contributors, as we envision a broadly collaborative, interdisciplinary, and multifaceted study of the post-1960s South. For more information, contact SOHP associate director Joe Mosnier at (919) 962-5931 or [mosnier@unc.edu](mailto:mosnier@unc.edu). ■

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Race was a vital factor in both regional and national political realignments in the post-1960s period. In 1973, Maynard Jackson emerged triumphant as the first black mayor of a major Southern city.