



The Sixties

A Journal of History, Politics and Culture

ISSN: 1754-1328 (Print) 1754-1336 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsix20>

Building a Latino civil rights movement: Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and the pursuit of racial justice in New York City

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To cite this article: Michael Staudenmaier (2015) Building a Latino civil rights movement: Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and the pursuit of racial justice in New York City, *The Sixties*, 8:1, 109-112, DOI: [10.1080/17541328.2015.1014169](https://doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2015.1014169)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2015.1014169>



Published online: 23 Feb 2015.



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transnational terror commandeered by the RAF to the contemporary vicissitudes of radical Islamism. In today's media depictions of Islamic State women, for example, we see the specters of Meinhof and Ensslin. Here again, death returns in the female form. The points of continuity and rupture between these representations require our attention. Melzer's cultural history the German Far Left gives us a more nuanced understanding of terrorism and the sexual politics that shoot through it.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2015.1069948>

Building a Latino civil rights movement: Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and the pursuit of racial justice in New York City, by, Sonia Song-Ha Lee, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2014, 352 pp., US\$34.95 (clothbound), ISBN-10 1469614138

At the beginning of this densely packed and thought-provoking monograph, Sonia Song-Ha Lee makes clear her book's bold stance: "Puerto Ricans, I argue, were as vital as African Americans in shaping New Yorkers' notions of 'race,' 'ethnicity,' and 'minority' in the civil rights and Black Power eras" (p. 3). *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement* takes a collaborative rather than competitive approach to proving its thesis, documenting the extended interaction between these two distinct populations and the movements that emerged from them. Lee's book represents the most fully formed example of a recent trend in studies of the Puerto Rican diaspora that emphasizes links and parallels with black history in the northern urban centers to which both groups of citizen migrants flocked after World War II. Examining settings as diverse as labor organizing, anti-poverty campaigns, and struggles around public schools, Lee contributes in significant ways to current scholarly discussions of both racial formation in migration and race-based social movements.

The overall narrative arc of the book runs roughly "division – unity – division." Lee begins with a macro-level overview of the racial environment that confronted the two communities in the post-war era, focusing primarily on the differences between them. The ambiguity of Puerto Ricans in light of the liberal displacement of "race" in favor of "ethnicity" appears as the primary source of this division on the cusp of the 1960s. Lee echoes other scholars in noting that the growing influence of "culture of poverty" discourse during the 1960s led outsiders to associate Puerto Ricans with African Americans, but points in novel ways to the friction that at least at times persisted between the two groups. In one of many fascinating vignettes that dot the narrative, Lee notes that US congressman Adam Clayton Powell, perhaps the most high profile black New Yorker in the early 1960s, "made a fatal error" by proposing "that instruction in all Puerto Rican schools be conducted in English to ensure 'American loyalty' among Puerto Rican children" (p. 86).

Needless to say, this did not endear him to Puerto Rican civil rights activists either on the island or in the diaspora. Similar differences in perspective, as well as racial stereotyping by both African Americans and Puerto Ricans, marred early attempts by labor organizers to use shared experiences to bring together rank and file textile workers across boundaries of identity.

By the mid-1960s, however, a new generation of black and Puerto Rican professionals, especially social workers and community organizers, took the stage and began to develop collaborative projects that bridged these barriers. The timing was perfect, as the announcement of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty greatly increased the resources available to community-based groups engaged in anti-poverty work. Much of Lee's book concentrates on tracking the work of multiple organizations, including some in which leadership was deliberately shared between the two communities. While the extended narration of organizational structures and conflicts over resources and leadership can get a little confusing, Lee makes a number of crucial points very clearly. For instance, African American activists, more established in New York and better connected in political terms, took a chance on building alliances with Puerto Rican leaders. Here, she spotlights Cyril Tyson, father of world-renowned astrophysicist Neil Degraase Tyson. The elder Tyson's political outlook and life experience, including his marriage to the Puerto Rican gerontologist Sunchita Feliciano Tyson, led him to suggest to skeptical African American organizers that "if you have a black *numero uno* [number one], let's have a Puerto Rican *numero dos* [number two]" (p. 156).

Some of the best material in Lee's book comes in the chapter on education and schooling. She paints the struggle for community control of schools as both a high point for collaboration between African Americans and Puerto Ricans and as the moment at which the civil rights trajectories of the two groups began to diverge. Both groups viewed community control as a way to develop anti-racist and high quality educational options for children previously marginalized or ignored in New York's public schools. In a highly segregated city like New York, community control represented a repudiation of the long-standing integrationist model of the civil rights movement. It also, in Lee's telling, marked a crucial turning point in the racial formation of the city's Puerto Rican community: "At the same time that black parents abandoned their hopes to integrate their children with whites, Puerto Rican parents also gave up hopes to be treated as white" (p. 174).

Lee is particularly attentive to the roles played by women in the movements that she analyzes. Many of the organizations in *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement* were led by Latinas at least as much as by Latinos. Antonia Pantoja, for instance, is one of the most prominent figures in the book. She founded the youth-empowerment organization *Aspira*, and was one of the first Puerto Rican leaders to fully identify with African American struggles, even going so far as to opine that by the late 1950s "I fully realized and understood that I was a black woman" (p. 110). Still, Lee stipulates the limits of a gendered analysis: "Despite the dominance of women in the community control movement," she writes, "they did not identify themselves publicly as 'women' or as 'mothers.' They preferred to emphasize their identity as 'black' and 'Puerto Rican'" (p. 196).

Near the end of the book, Lee pairs the divergence between black and Puerto Rican movements with growing class divisions within each movement. This approach simultaneously inverts and reiterates now out-of-favor narratives that divide the decade into "good sixties/bad sixties."¹ Lee clearly does not align herself

with liberal scholars who disavow the radical turn of the late 1960s out of a distrust of youthful extremism or from a frustration with what Todd Gitlin has called “the bogey of race.”² Instead, she is rightly concerned with the conservative and bourgeois tendencies that gained influence in black and brown nationalist circles by the 1970s, all under the cover of radical politics. Still, Lee appears to share two core convictions of the traditional “good sixties/bad sixties” model: a preference for the multi-racial coalitions of the early and mid-1960s over the separatism that supposedly characterized the last years of the decade, and a down-playing of the distinction between bourgeois and revolutionary nationalism that was of great importance to both black and Puerto Rican radicals by the end of the 1960s. Thus, for example, Lee argues that:

“although some black and Puerto Rican antipoverty leaders would later use the War on Poverty structure to emulate white forms of political control, their initial efforts between 1964 and 1968 centered on creating more inclusive and cross-racial spaces of political mobilization”. (p. 164)

The implied equivalence between black, Puerto Rican, and white nationalist politics seems misplaced, although certainly many opportunistic people of color adopted the mantle of nationalism during this era.

Part of the problem is that Lee’s narrative minimizes the role of avowed radicals in the development of the movements she analyzes. *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement* is more focused on the trajectories of “mass” organizations than of those that struck an explicitly “left” stance. There are passing references to the militant wing of the Puerto Rican independence movement, and to black radicals like Malcolm X, but Lee fails to address the general role of the New Left or the impact of anti-colonial struggles (in Africa, Asia, or the Caribbean) in the particular story she has chosen to tell. Were New York’s Puerto Rican and African American communities especially isolated from these larger trends? Is it possible that such experiences were the sole purview of a small cadre of self-declared nationalist radicals? While the decision to focus on mass-based civil rights groups is perfectly reasonable, it does seem to leave out some crucial elements of the story as the 1960s became the 1970s.

None of this should detract from the overall value of Lee’s work. *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement* offers a nuanced take on the intertwined trajectories of black and Puerto Rican activists over the course of the long Sixties, and covers an impressively wide range of struggles. It offers an informed and comprehensive analysis of a crucial but little-known episode in the racial formation of Puerto Ricans, and provides rich evidentiary material to anyone interested in comparative racial formation and/or the role of social movements in the post-war urban north.

Notes

1. This phrase was apparently coined by Alice Echols in “We Gotta Get Out of This Place,” 15, though she credits the conceptual framing to Winifred Breines, “Whose New Left?” For a nuanced assessment of the framework and its critics, as regards the black freedom movement in particular, see Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, xxxi–xxxvi.
2. Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 348.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2015.1014169>

Thai stick: surfers, scammers, and the untold story of the marijuana trade, by Peter Maguire and Mike Ritter, foreword by David Farber, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, x + 236 pp., \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16143-3

With the appearance more than a decade ago of bestselling books on salt, cod, oil, and tulips, American publishing discovered the hidden life of things. Such works are the closest the American mainstream comes to Marxism and its idea of the commodity fetish. Behind what sits on our table or fills our gas tank lie universes of economic and social relations, concealed by the things themselves and their circulation as exchange value.

Strong on geopolitics and global commerce, the genre was weak on what most concerned Marx: human labor. As if filling this void, profiles of men at work began populating American culture, especially via reality TV. Particularly alluring have been tales of toil at civilization's edge, like Alaska's crab fishing fraternity on *The Deadliest Catch* (Discovery). Yet far from hard-headed lessons in labor economics, such shows trade in male fantasies of escape from the drudgery of most terrestrial work. Real men, of remarkable courage, experience vocation as both personal destiny and quest. For them, filial ties and the caprice of nature are vastly more important than any boss or institution.

At the same time grew pop culture fascination with the political economy of vice, and the drug trade most of all. Such depictions range from racy histories of legendary excess (*Cocaine Cowboys* on CNBC); to trenchant social analysis as serial drama (HBO's *The Wire*); to prosaic accounts of street hustlers and backwoods suppliers (NatGeo's *Drugs, Inc.*, Discovery's *Moonshiners*); to harrowing stories of smuggling gambits gone wrong (NatGeo's *Locked Up Abroad*). Uniting them all is an American mythology of perilous freedom within a fateful game of risk–reward.

Like a bail of smuggled pot tossed into the sea, into this well of interest splashes Peter Maguire's and Mike Ritter's captivating book *Thai Stick: Surfers, Scammers, and the Untold Story of the Marijuana Trade*. *Thai Stick* hits the high notes of current tastes. Drawing on oral histories with former smugglers, it recounts the intricate deal making and derring-do that brought Middle and Near Eastern hashish and then Thai sticks – elegant sheaves of exquisite Thai marijuana – across