

Department Stores and the Black Freedom movement: Workers, Consumers, and Civil Rights from the 1930s to the 1980s

Review Number: 2430

Publish date: Friday, 27 November, 2020

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ISBN: 9781469648668

Date of Publication: 2019

Price: £48.28

Pages: 328pp.

Publisher: The University of North Carolina Press

Publisher url: <https://www.uncpress.org/book/9781469648675/department-stores-and-the-black-freedom-movement>

Place of Publication: Chapel Hill, NC

Reviewer: Katherine Ballantyne

Traci Parker's book, *Department Stores and the Black Freedom Movement: Workers, Consumers, and Civil Rights from the 1930s to the 1980s*, is an engaging study of the intersections of race, class, gender, labour, and activism in an arguably quintessential 20th-century American space: the department store. Straddling the vast historiographies of civil rights and labour studies, Parker's study deftly carves out its own place. Parker asserts that ideas of 'Americanness', and equality more broadly, can be seen in a different light when viewed through the lens of consumers, workers, labour rights activists, and store owners (p. 21). Parker argues that focusing on department stores as the site of this analysis demonstrates how these stores 'promoted a racialized democracy even as they inadvertently exposed the blatant contradictions of a Jim Crow society espousing democratic ideals' (p. 4). African Americans's campaigns to shop in and utilise facilities in department stores, unlike other sites of desegregation campaigns, were not about simply access, Parker contends. Instead, the negotiations were about a combination of the right to shop in these spaces and a rise in consumerism among the black middle class. There is a vast amount of detail in the book, with often striking examples and engaging images.

The first chapter sets the scene, describing the early department stores in the United States and detailing the experiences of workers and shoppers alike in these institutions. Chapters two and three cover the rise of the department store movement. Parker presents this as the efforts of African American employees within these companies to secure positions equivalent to their credentials and the efforts of consumers from the black middle class to engage with consumerism. As Parker describes, 'The world of department stores was arguably one of the most effective sites for providing African Americans with opportunities to simultaneously engage consumption as sites for resistance and liberation' (p. 12). The fourth chapter contextualises the movement within what Parker argues was a rising 'modern black middle-class consciousness in the 1930s and 1940s' (p. 13). In the fifth chapter, Parker analyses the department store movement within the context of the lunch counter sit-ins of the early 1960s, tracing the significant gains made during the period. The sixth and final chapter examines the affirmative action cases at Sears, Roebuck and Co. into the early 1980s, concluding the book's depiction of the department store movement's rise and fall.

A major question arising from this book is how 'place' affected the activism that occurred – how department stores, labour unions, and workers reacted to policies and pushed for change across various parts of the country. After the Taft-Hartley Act (1947), southern and Sunbelt states passed right-to-work laws, but the act is only briefly mentioned in the book (p. 101 and p. 149). Given the prevalence of labour unions' activism in this narrative, as well as the significance of 'region' to labour history in the United States, this seems an unusual decision. Parker deftly describes the intersection of labour and civil rights historiographies throughout the study, but central to these is the idea of location. Recent scholarship has documented the importance of 'place' in civil rights activism in particular.⁽¹⁾ Parker's argument that the department store movement emerged in the 1930s and ended in the early 1980s complements the idea of a 'long' movement, a spirited debate from the civil rights movement's historiography.⁽²⁾ In focusing on a longer period of time, however, Parker's book deemphasises the geographical differences across the national study, a similar critique to that raised of the 'long' movement focus.⁽³⁾

This is particularly relevant in chapter five, 'Worker-Consumer Alliances and the Modern Black Middle Class, 1951-1970', which opens with Parker's argument that the post-Second World War era was 'ripe' for a significant shift in labour politics of retail (p. 149). Carving its own place within the existing historiographies of the labour and mid-century civil rights movement, the chapter opens with a brief overview of the sit-in movement's association with protests based in lunch counters across the South. This is followed by a section on campaigns for workers's rights in department stores in Washington, D.C. and Charlotte, North Carolina. While it is perfectly reasonable that not everything related to a topic can be covered in a book (despite one's best efforts), this was an opportunity to address significant differences between the North and South, not to mention elsewhere in the country. The two particular historiographies within which the chapter situates itself have contended with regionality over the past few decades. Studies have challenged southern exceptionalism, considered the civil rights movement in the North, and so on, and the department store movement that Parker has documented seems perfectly suited to such a comparison. Focusing just on the fifth chapter, what were the differences, if any, between stores in Washington and Charlotte and other cities outside of the South? Does this change when department stores outside of cities are considered? I am thinking particularly here of towns and suburbs where branches of these department stores were located, but where the politics of shopping and hiring varied greatly from the major cities. The rest of the book would have benefitted from further acknowledgement of this geographical variation, if it existed. Including examples from outside the Northeast and Midwest, or even stores such as Belk, from North Carolina, or Dillard's, from Arkansas, would have added to the strength of Parker's argument that the department store movement, when viewed nationally, contributes to a greater understanding of this period. It may be that these stores do not have archival collections that were accessible, but some acknowledgement of regional variation would have strengthened the analysis of the department store movement. As well as the importance of geographical location, it is worth considering the influence class had on store locations. Suburban spread is discussed in later chapters, particularly chapters five and six, but more examples of stores outside urban areas like Chicago and New York would strengthen Parker's analysis. These examples, detailing experiences of working in these stores, consumer experiences of shopping, and labour campaigns, would help to contrast what the department store movement looked like in more rural areas (of course, depending upon source availability).

As Parker aptly describes, the 'death of the department store movement' from the late 1960s on gave rise to larger box chain stores (p. 183). The book mentions Wal-Mart and Kmart as prominent examples in this retail shift, but I wonder if other stores complemented the narrative, or complicated it, particularly those emerging after the early 1980s. For example, where do major bookstores like Barnes & Noble, Books-A-Million, and Borders fit into the department store movement? Does adding them into the analysis shift the focus, or impact the chronology described in the book? Their focus on providing a space for customers to enjoy the products for sale, with comfortable seating, a retail-focused emphasis on functioning as part of the local community, and incorporating coffee shops within their facilities echoes the department store model of the early twentieth century.

In conclusion, Parker's book on the department store movement is thoroughly-researched, thought-provoking, and engaging. It is a significant contribution to the historiographies of civil rights and labour, and makes a substantial argument for future research in an emerging field: consumerism within the long black freedom struggle.

Notes

1. See especially T.J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, 2008); *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles outside the South, 1940-1980*, ed. J. Theoharis and K. Woodard (New York, 2003); C. Lang, 'Locating the Civil Rights Movement: An Essay on the Deep South, Midwest, and Border South in Black Freedom Studies', *Journal of Social History*, 47 (2013), 371-400.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. In particular, see J.D. Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past', *The Journal of American History*, 91 (2005), 1233-63.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See especially S.K. Cha-Jua and C. Lang, 'The "Long Movement" As Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies', *The Journal of African American History*, 92 (2007), 269.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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