Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945–1986 (review)

Monte Piliawsky

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LET THE PEOPLE DECIDE: BLACK FREEDOM AND WHITE RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS IN SUNFLOWER COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI, 1945–1986. By J. Todd Moye. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 281 pp. Hardbound, $55.00; Softbound, $19.95.

Place and time are paramount considerations in conducting oral histories. As indicated by the place and time subtitle of J. Todd Moye's outstanding book, *Let the People Decide: Sunflower County, Mississippi, l945–1986*, the author microscopically examines the modern American civil rights movement in a single, rural Delta county over an extended duration of the four decades following the Second World War. In pushing the conventional periodization of the civil rights movement to the mid-1980s, Moye perceptively analyzes a crucial, but previously neglected finding, "the class differences that developed in African American communities over time [which] profoundly affected the goals and strategies of the movements they created" (23).

Civil rights organizers labeled Sunflower County "the worst county in the worst state" (20) as far as racial discrimination was concerned. Dominated by James Eastland, the arch-racist U.S. Senator, the locality also was the birthplace of the first White Citizens' Council, which contemporaries referred to as "white-collar Klans."

Moye makes a unique contribution to the historiography of the civil rights movement by delineating three distinct, though interconnected, stages in Sunflower County's black freedom struggle: the years surrounding the *Brown* decision of 1954, the mid-1960s "classical period", and the mid-1980s. The absence of a black middle class made civil rights organizing extremely perilous in the first phase of the movement, with the combination of overt physical terrorism by the Ku Klux Klan and financial pressure from white landowners and creditors quickly aborting the effort.

The leader of the 1960s stage of the Sunflower County movement was a homegrown sharecropper, Fannie Lou Hamer, the legendary founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Different "in important respects from the civil rights movement we have come to know from much of the literature" (38), Hamer's movement, which demanded decent food, housing, and jobs, was "a radical, poor peoples' movement and not a moderate, middle-class movement" (25). Significantly, Sunflower County's newly politicized poor black activists heaped their greatest scorn on the timidity of the black middle class, dismissing its members as "scared teachers" or "people peepin' through the bushes" (196).

The third stage of Sunflower County's civil rights movement coalesced in the mid-l980s around the issue of the superintendency of the Indianola public school system. In complete contrast to the previous two phases of the movement, this campaign was cross-class in nature, with members of Sunflower County's small, but growing, black middle class throwing "themselves wholeheartedly behind a cause that black workers also supported" (196).

Methodologically, *Let the People Decide*—the title derives from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee's organizing slogan—is an interpretive study that masterfully employs a synthesis of written sources and oral material. Moye's research is exceptionally thorough; he consulted hundreds of secondary sources—scholarly books, articles, and newspapers—as well as written documents, including over thirty archival collections. However, the creative essences of the book are the powerfully evocative personal stories that emerge from oral histories. Moye clearly distinguishes the role of oral history as a mode of inquiry, explaining that while oral history research "is not a substitute for archival research," it is invaluable "to flesh out the framework of events that are described in contemporary written documents," as well as "to tell stories that would otherwise go undocumented" (231).

In short, the book's twenty-five life stories furnish less a record of fact than the perceptions and consciousness of major historical actors, with Moye convincingly linking oral history with social conscience. The subjects lay bare their intimate feelings in moving autobiographical narratives of hardship, risk, disappointment, and triumph. Collectively, these accounts provide a retrospective assessment of the consequences of activism at both the personal and public levels: personally, with movement participants undergoing life changing transformations, and publicly, with a tabulation of the movement's accumulated gains and failures.

Moye assembled a remarkable biracial collection of subjects, about equally derived from each of the three generations of activism covered. The author conducted all the interviews in Sunflower County or in an adjacent community. Balanced in focus, the book traces the development of organizing strategies not only in the civil rights movement but also in the white resistance movement, with interviews of five white establishment leaders.

Moye's richly textured and eloquently written narrative poignantly depicts the harsh realities of African-American life in the Delta. To illustrate, Dr. L.C. Dorsey recalled that as a young girl of thirteen in 1952, she had calculated that her sharecropping family was owed $4000 for the year's labor, but at "settlement time" was forced to accept a measly $200. Dorsey referred to this moment when she recognized that her family had been blatantly cheated as her "coming of age" in Mississippi; she learned that day that "people were locked into this system, and the fear and lack of control made them take" whatever the plantation owner decided to give them (109).

The activism of five of Moye's twenty-five subjects spans the entire second half of the twentieth century, thereby providing a rare panoramic perspective of the changing state of race relations. Especially instructive is the autobiographical narrative of Reverend David Matthews, an African-American minister who boldly led a voter registration campaign in 1952 and in 1986 was chosen to be a member of Indianola's Bi-racial Committee. Equally revealing is the interview with Jack Harper, Jr. who from 1956 to 2000 served as Sunflower County's chancery clerk. Harper evolved ideologically "from leadership in the Citizens' Council to being a supporter of the local chapter of the NAACP" (212).

Moye's book should be read in combination with Kim Lacy Rogers' stunning oral history, *Life and Death in the Delta* (2006), based upon the life stories, from the 1930s through the 1990s, of twenty-eight African-American community activists from Bolivar and Sunflower Counties. Taken together, these works provide compelling collective memoirs of the trauma, suffering, resistance, and achievement of the civil rights movement in the darkest of venues, the Mississippi Delta.

Monte Piliawsky
Wayne State University

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