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Review: *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* by Brian Ward

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RADIO AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE SOUTH, by Brian Ward.  
University of Florida Press, 2004

When many of us think of the civil rights movements of the late 1950s and 1960s, what comes to mind are emotionally charged TV images of state troopers firing tear gas at peaceful demonstrations or snarling police dogs and fire hoses turned loose on defenseless protesters. As important, powerful, and realistic as these media depictions were, they have overshadowed the contributions of other media to the civil rights movement and protests, particular those of Southern black-oriented radio. In his study *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South*, Brian Ward sets out to correct this imbalance. As he highlights, “radio warrants a prominent place among the many social and cultural institutions that shaped the African American freedom struggle and fashioned important changes in racial attitudes and arrangements in the South.” (358) In fact, his goal is much more ambitious than just highlighting radio’s interaction with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s: he surveys radio’s contributions from the 1930s through the 1970s, adding important layers to our understanding of the struggle for black civil rights in the American South over the course of half a century.

Ward’s book is divided into three parts which dovetails with the traditional narrative of the civil rights movement. Part 1 focuses on the era before the mass marches (1930s through the early 1950s) and emphasizes radio’s role as “a highly politicized vehicle for survival and resistance.” (110) The second part details the participation of local broadcasting during the height of the civil rights protests told through six specific case studies; not surprisingly, this is the longest section of the study. A shorter closing part, finally, investigates the period after 1965 and highlights the significant impact of black power on the battles over radio ownership and content.

In all of these sections it is important to stress that Ward deals with “black-oriented radio,” a term which encompasses all radio broadcasting directed at primarily black or racially mixed audiences with significant African American segments in the South. The vast majority of these radio stations were owned and operated by white owners. Black-owned radio stations were a miniscule proportion of all radio outlets in the South—only one existed by 1949 and fewer than a dozen by 1969. Even by the end of the 1970s, though the number had increased significantly to 140, black-owned radio stations represented less than 2% of the total number of stations operated in the U.S. While this trend in general represented a significant improvement and increased black activism over the air, Ward points out that black-owned and black-managed radio outlets did not always “demonstrate any greater commitment to public service broadcasting or community activism than did their white-run counterparts.” (283)

As the author emphasizes throughout his nuanced discussion, black-oriented radio, like its white-oriented counterpart, consisted primarily of entertainment. Yet it significantly assisted in maintaining a sense of black unity and pride as well as a sense of purpose. Especially prior to the 1950s radio stations focusing on black communities and social activism were forced to walk a perilous tightrope, and even the most courageous stations like WERD-Atlanta and WGIV-Charlotte became at best “tentative sites of

interracialism” (359) forced combat to both commercial and social pressures. By the late 1950s and 1960s, a number of black-oriented stations moved beyond the “Bible and blues” format of the earlier decades and actively supported the civil rights marches as much as possible, in some instances actively coordinating specific marches through coded messages, as in the case of WENN-Birmingham in the spring of 1963. It was not until climate change of the late 1960s and after activists put pressure on the FCC that many black-oriented radio stations were finally at liberty to give their deejahs freer reign to voice activist editorials and to actively participate in community mobilization. As Ward concludes, “attention to black political, social and economic issues was never greater on southern radio” than in the late 1960s and the 1970s. (361)

*Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* is an important contribution to the study of radio broadcasting and the civil rights movement. The scope of the study and the depth of the research are truly impressive. Ward’s study deserves a broad audience and should appeal to both scholars and general audiences.

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