

The Long March for Equality

by Ary Gordien

Few histories of the African American fight for equality manage to shed their ideological bias. Caroline Rolland-Diamond offers an impressive overview that goes beyond oppositions to highlight the structuring lines of a two-century-old struggle that continues today.

Reviewed: Caroline Rolland-Diamond, [Black America. Une histoire des luttes pour l'égalité et la justice \(XIXe-XXIe siècle\)](#), Paris, La Découverte, 2016, 500 pp., € 24,50.

This book traces the history of African American social mobilization from the abolition of slavery to the present day. The author gives a meticulous and concise overview that deconstructs the idealization of the civil rights movement from 1954 to 1965, particularly through the figures of Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. The book thus complexifies binary oppositions (non-violent action and armed self-defense) and goes beyond simplified references to the most famous leaders and personalities.

African American history and national history

By exposing the complexities of American federal history, Caroline Rolland-Diamond provides an insight into the nature of black race relations and social mobilizations. Almost a century after the War of Independence that led to the birth of the United States, the Civil War pitted the industrialized northern states against the rural southern states over the issue of slavery. The economy of the southern states at the time depended directly on the slave labor of the descendants of African captives who had been shipped and enslaved. The racist institution of slavery thus politically and culturally shaped that part of the country, which was forced to abolish slavery after the north's victory. Rolland-Diamond shows that all of the

violence and racial conflicts that followed and which partly continue today are rooted in that refusal by the southern states to acknowledge equality between blacks and whites.

It was the fierce struggle waged by African American movements calling for civic equality that drove successive administrations to make legal provisions in an effort to combat institutional segregation and discrimination, and to impose them on the southern states with greater or lesser effectiveness and force. There followed violent opposition and resistance from that part of the country, particularly among movements advocating white racial supremacy. The book extensively documents that violence by tracing all incidences of lynching and murderous attacks on blacks by armed racist groups, usually carried out with impunity (pp. 28-31).

Recent debates in the United States over the celebration of a southern identity in the public space, and particularly the presence of the Confederate flag, illustrate the degree to which the tensions that are rooted in southern history remain relevant. After Barack Obama was elected to office, perceived by some as the symbol of a transition to a post-racial era, the backlash that came with Donald Trump's accession to the highest office in the United States may be partly analyzed through this prism. The billionaire had the support of white supremacist groups from which he has never tried to disassociate himself; meanwhile, following clashes between extreme left-wing anti-racist activists and white supremacists in late 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, the President has never openly condemned the racist movements.

Even before Trump was elected, police violence and the Black Lives Matter movement have served as a sad reminder that, nowadays as in the 19th and 20th centuries, racism, interracial tensions and the black struggle are not limited to the southern United States. Rolland-Diamond's book recalls the large-scale migration of African Americans to the north and then to the west between the start and the middle of the 20th century. That migration was unprecedented in America, and constituted one of the main ways for African Americans to escape the poverty and deadly racism that were rampant across the south. The economic conditions they encountered in the north and the racism they endured did not allow them to make lasting improvements to their situation. Restrictive laws limited and even prevented the settlements of blacks in white neighborhoods, regardless of their social class. This racial segregation led to the creation of the first ghettos, where unemployment, poverty and crime prevailed. Numerous police blunders and the impunity enjoyed by white police officers resulted in a high number of riots and protests starting in the 1940s.

Rolland-Diamond brings to light the election game played by the country's two main political parties, which generally preferred to secure the vote of white people, who were ill-inclined to accept racial equality, rather than ensuring that black civil rights were being respected. Between 1865 and 1876, the Federal State – controlled by pro-abolition northern Republicans – sought to provide military guarantees for civil equality between blacks and whites as provided for by law in the south, despite the violent actions of white supremacist

paramilitary groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. After the results of the 1876 presidential election were contested, the two main parties reached an agreement: the southern states were authorized not to uphold the law in exchange for the departure of federal troops. Racial inequality and racist violence were thus tacitly condoned.

Up until the 1960s, successive administrations sought to retain the vote of whites in favor of legal segregation in the south. The chronic problems of violence and poverty in ghettos in the north and west of the country sparked political reactions that were partly alike. The author's analysis thus challenges a popular belief regarding the positions and actions of Democratic presidents such as Roosevelt (pp. 136-139), Kennedy (p. 263) and even Clinton (pp. 468-474), who were often seen as being particularly favorable to the African American cause. Bill Clinton in particular capitalized on a perceived cultural and social proximity to black people.

A global, connected history

C. Rolland-Diamond is careful to specify how international history, from the two World Wars to the decolonization movement in Africa and the Cold War, has continually influenced the actions of black movements and American racial policy.

For example, the acceptance of black soldiers in the United States army was the subject of repeated resistance among military staff. Enlisted as early as the Civil War, these soldiers were systematically relegated to subordinate duties and subjected to racist humiliation. At the same time, the book highlights the sense of freedom some African American soldiers enjoyed when they temporarily settled in Europe after the First World War, particularly in France where, despite its vast colonial empire, people never experimented segregation and racial relations as violent as in the United States. After the Great War, the return of African American men who had an increased awareness of the harshness of the regime in their own country can explain both the renewed pride and aggressiveness of the protest movements for racial equality (one example is the Harlem Renaissance) and the concern and radicalization of white supremacists determined to "put blacks back in their place".

Following a somewhat comparable logic, public condemnation of the racist ideology and politics of the Nazi regime during the Second World War provided a timely opportunity to denounce treatment of African Americans. On the other hand, during the Cold War the fact that the Soviet Union and, more generally, the international communist movement explicitly condemned the segregation and treatment of blacks did not do black activism any favors.

However, decolonization movements, particularly in Africa, gave the movement new momentum. The idea of an international struggle against white domination and "black nationalism" gained influence in the 1960s and 1970s. This nationalism combined, on the one hand, a racial awareness that had resulted from the experience of extremely violent racism and, on the other hand, the effort to develop a narrative on the identity of a group and its culture. The group was thus defined as being the owner of that culture or those traditions, which were necessarily redefined, revitalized and even invented. The author shows that, for certain movements (Garveyism, Nation of Islam), that nationalism aimed to develop a separatist policy whereas for others such as the Black Panther Party, the aim was to gain recognition of a cultural specificity within the United States in order to reinterpret certain bodily, clothing and cultural practices and thereby re-establish them as "African". These different nationalist approaches offer an insight into the fault lines that existed within black movements.

Ideology, class and gender

C. Rolland-Diamond focuses on the broad heterogeneity of the African American population in order to better explain the absence of a single community of interest and a lack of agreement with regard to what positions to defend and which actions to carry out. In particular, early on in the book the author presents the two strategies adopted by black activists at the end of the 19th century. In the north, an educated elite called for the immediate recognition of racial equality. In the south, faced with local institutions' relentless determination to maintain racial separation and, above all, deadly racist violence, some black political figures adopted gradualist positions. Without challenging segregation, they called on black people to exercise patience by getting organized independently first within their own community in order to improve their situation. Rolland-Diamond shows how, far from being opposed, these two strategies were usually combined, with the focus alternating between the two (p. 13).

The author clearly intends to go beyond the binary and normative opposition that is commonly taken for granted. There is a tendency to idealize the civil rights movement of the period between 1954 and 1965, which advocated non-violence, whereas the organizations that concurrently - and increasingly during the decade that followed - defended direct action and even armed self-defense are presented as being an unlawful diversion from the original movement. Instead, the author shows that this opposition is simplistic and misleading for many reasons. Beyond leaders' positions, direct action and violence were sometimes imposed as vital necessities for many African Americans, whether activists or not. Even Martin Luther King, mindful of the danger his activism posed to himself and his family, kept a loaded gun in his home (pp. 313-314).

The author shows that other dividing lines were more closely related to social class and gender, and to the intersection of those variables. Without entering the field of women's studies or taking up the notion of intersectionality, she sets out to make black women's voices heard, particularly working-class single mothers. She analyzes their social-economic situation over the course of the book and reveals the marked disparity with that of black men and white women. Although often very pragmatic, the forms of social mobilization used by disadvantaged black women have often been ignored, despite the major importance of their actions for generations of African Americans (pp. 401-408).

Contemporary questions, comparisons and flows

From the birth of hip hop and the election of Barack Obama to the 9/11 attacks and hurricane Katrina, in the final chapter the author insightfully addresses the contemporary problems facing African Americans, and her epilogue finishes with a discussion of the Black Lives Matter movement. This overview could have been rounded out with a presentation of the current situation of historical organizations and a summary of the movements and organizations that have emerged more recently (the Afrocentrist renewal of the 1980s-2000, or the Afro-pessimist movement).

The economic power and cultural hegemony of the United States mean that the future of African Americans is attracting interest worldwide. The African American population and the various struggles it has waged are often held up as examples. Despite the historical specificities of the United States, in Africa, the Americas and among black populations in Europe it is the shared experience of racism and racial devaluation that is often taken to be the common denominator. This leads to mirrored forms of identification and can be the glue that binds people in a feeling of transnational racial solidarity, as Garveyism and other pan-Africanisms illustrate. There have been flows, reciprocal influences and instances of the transfer of ideas and political movements from one sphere to another, and these continue today. Over the past 15 years in France, racism, racial discrimination and the specific fate of populations that are excluded on the grounds of ethno-racial characteristics - whether real, assigned or claimed - have become increasingly prominent on the political agenda. Whereas the United States is often held up as a model or counter-model, Rolland-Diamond's meticulous contextualization paves the way for future comparisons of race relations and of the forms of social mobilization against racism that exist on both sides of the Atlantic.

First published in lavedesidees.fr, 2 May 2018. Translated from the French by
Susannah Dale with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

Published in *Books & Ideas*, 30 August 2018.