

Reviews

Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 335 pp Paper \$17.95

Most accounts of the New Deal focus on the changing role of government during the depression era, exemplified by the proliferation of alphabet agencies that attempted to put FDR's reforms into practice. Race relations in the New Deal era are usually mentioned in passing, in connection with Eleanor Roosevelt's seemingly lone crusade to draw her husband's attention to racial injustice, the involvement of the Communist Party in the Scottsboro trial, the work of Mary McLeod Bethune as the director of Negro activities for the National Youth Administration, Marian Anderson's concert on the Capitol steps in 1939 after she was denied use of the Daughters of the American Revolution's stage, and finally A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington movement in 1941 that ultimately forced a reluctant FDR to issue Executive Order No. 8802, prohibiting discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries and the government. These incidents are often treated in isolation from the main currents of New Deal reform, and serve to highlight the pervasiveness of racism in American society in the 1930s, rather than measure the extent to which it was being challenged. If the "nadir of Negro life," to use Rayford Logan's phrase, characterized the era from the post-Reconstruction years to the first decades of the twentieth century, before the rise of black nationalism and New Negro consciousness, the situation for blacks in the 1930s seemed little better. Even though about a half million blacks joined unions through the CIO, mass unemployment struck hard at black inner-city districts in Harlem and the South Side of Chicago, where the black unemployment rate was three times that of whites. In the South, most blacks were trapped as sharecroppers in a backward rural economy. Riots in the North, most notably in Harlem in 1935 and Detroit in 1943, and lynchings in the South, which increased during the New Deal years, underscored the dismal state of race relations in the United States.

Given the half-hearted sporadic efforts of the Roosevelt administration in the field of civil rights and the desperate plight of African Americans in both the urban centers of the North and the rural districts of the South, the title of Patricia Sullivan's study of race and democracy in the New Deal era, *Days of Hope*, might seem inappropriate at best. Yet it is Sullivan's contention that "New Deal programs and legislation stirred the stagnant economic and political relationship that had persisted in the South...since the dawn of the century." According to Sullivan, a new generation of Southerners believed that these developments opened up new possibilities for a concerted challenge to the political status quo of the South. Part of the reason for FDR's lukewarm support for Civil Rights issues during the New Deal era was of course his fear of losing the support of conservative Southern Democrats, who were adamantly opposed to any legislation or government agency that might be suspected of dismantling the Jim Crow system of segregation in the South. However, Sullivan provides ample evidence for her claim that "the South, more than any other region, offered a striking dichotomy between mass popular support for New

Deal initiatives and a stiffening opposition among its elected representatives in Congress.” The heroes and heroines of Sullivan’s narrative are those men and women that sought to garner that popular support as a new power base of the disenfranchised by agitating for voting rights and the unionization of African American workers in the South.

The pivotal year in Sullivan’s account is 1938, when the rise of an anti-New Deal coalition in Washington prompted New Dealers to focus their attention on the registration of black voters and the abolition of the poll tax in the South. In the period from 1938 to the Progressive Party campaign of Henry Wallace in 1948, a loose liberal-labor coalition of groups, from the NAACP to newer organizations like the CIO-Political Action Committee and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, mounted a valiant effort to democratize Southern politics. FDR’s elected civil rights record emerges from this account in a somewhat positive light, because Sullivan emphasizes the way in which the New Deal ethos of expanded government intervention inspired a variety of groups to hope for a federal commitment to a thorough-going reform of the Southern political system. This coalition met with some success. In 1946, Osceola McKaine, the field secretary for the SCHW traveled throughout the South, organizing voter registration drives in what he called a “third revolution” Endorsed by the NAACP and the CIO, the SCHW managed for example during a 17-day registration drive to increase the number of black voters from 8,000 to 20,000.

By the end of 1946, the liberal-labor coalition was formed around re enfranchised black voters that could spearhead the establishment of a new economic and political order in the South. However, as Sullivan argues, the hope that the spirit of the New Deal and the commitment of the federal government would help this coalition fight for the democratization of the South and an end to racial injustice was ultimately side tracked by the advent of the cold war. The candidacy of Henry Wallace, who attracted large, biracial audiences on his swing through the South during the 1948 campaign, proved to be the last gasp of this coalition. After 1948, the victorious Democratic Party would once again placate its conservative Southern wing while largely ignoring the southern black freedom struggle.

Sullivan’s study comes on the heels of John Edgar’s *Speak Now Against the Day*, which treats the same period. Both volumes provide a valuable corrective to those accounts that downplay or ignore the relationship between the New Deal ethos and the collective efforts of southern activists to challenge the prerogatives of the Jim Crow South in the midst of economic depression. Together with other recent studies of race during the depression era, such as Robin Kelly’s *Hammer and Hoe* and Cheryl Greenberg’s *And Does It Explode?*, Sullivan’s study succeeds in documenting a glimmer of hope in a decade of despair.

John Edgar, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Knopf, 1994); Cheryl Greenberg, *And Does It Explode? Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford, 1991); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe, Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).