Late last year I went to see Enda Walsh’s savage play, “The Walworth Farce.” It tells the story of an Irish family – a father and two adult sons – squirreled away in a squalid London flat. Their lives were shaped, warped really, by a brutally violent incident that took place when the sons were young. Rather than confront the past, though, they spend their days trapped inside the apartment, performing a terrifyingly fanciful version of those events – the same play, over and over again. “A day of twists and turns and ducks and dives and terrible shocks,” says the father as the performance reaches its climax. “A story to be retold, no doubt, and cast in lore. For what are we … if not our stories?” To which his son replies, as the family’s script requires, “We’re the lost and lonely.”!

During my time at today’s session I want to talk about the stories we tell. It seems a particularly opportune time to do because we are at a pivotal moment, an extraordinary moment, in the writing of civil rights history. Scholars that we are, we tend to wrap such moments in bloodless terms. We’re shifting the paradigm, we say, revising our understanding. But it’s much more than that. As we write the history of “the long civil rights movement,” we are trying to replace one of America’s most sacred stories with one of our own devising. And, if we’re to do
such a thing, it is incumbent upon us to think long and hard about the story we’re going to tell. Because what are we, in the end, if not our stories?

Let me start with the sacred. Ask most Americans when the civil rights movement began and they’ll tell you that it started on a Thursday evening, December 1, 1955, when Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. That single act of defiance, they’ll say, created a social movement that swept across the south of the 1950s and 1960s. It raced through the hallways of Little Rock Central High School in September 1957. It took its place at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960. It rode the bus toward Anniston, Alabama in 1961. It marched across the campus of the University of Mississippi in 1962. It filled the streets of Birmingham, Alabama with children in the glorious spring of 1963. It crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the outskirts of Selma, Alabama in 1965. And it died on April 4, 1968 – another Thursday evening -- in Memphis, Tennessee, on a balcony awash in the blood of a martyr.

There are a lot of reasons why that series of events has become a sacred story--- more sacred, I suspect, to white Americans than to African-Americans. But one reason strikes me as particularly important. Stop for a moment and think about the essence of that story. White Americans, it says – particularly white southerners – embraced the sin of racism. African-Americans walked into the face of that sin. They took that sin on their shoulders. They suffered for that sin. They died for that sin. And by that blood sacrifice they redeemed the soul of America. It’s a peculiarity of the great narratives of civil rights that their authors tend to take their titles from the Old Testament; even Taylor Branch, whose brilliant books are infused with religious thought, dipped into Exodus when he should have been trolling in the Gospels. It’s not
the flight from slavery that the standard story tells, after all. It’s the Christian story of
redemption, grafted onto the American creed.

You don’t need me to tell you that civil rights historians have long been uncomfortable
with that sacred story. Part of their discomfort has been evidentiary, historians’ stock and trade.
Even as the classic phase of the movement was unfolding historians were starting to trace the
depth roots of postwar activism; to take one example, Harvard Sitkoff published his first essay on
civil rights in the New Deal era just a year after Martin Luther King’s murder. Since then
countless historians have followed his example, digging deeper and deeper into the movement’s
past, showing how its roots twisted, tangled and, on occasion, branched in unexpected directions.
Think of the last paragraph of Steven Hahn’s amazing book, where he describes Bob Moses
moving into southwest Mississippi in 1961 and discovering a political tradition that stretched
back to the first days of freedom. Tangled roots indeed.

But it isn’t just the evidentiary question that bothers historians. They’re also troubled by
the nature of the standard story. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall makes that point explicit in her highly-
influential OAH presidential address of a few years ago. “The master narrative,” she says,
“ensures the status of the classical phase as a triumphal moment in a larger American progress
narrative.” I’ll put it a little differently. Redemption is by definition transformative, the
Christian version particularly so. In this, the most devout of western nations, the traditional
narrative tells us that we Americans have finally been freed from our nation’s original sin, that
we have been saved. That’s the triumphal narrative that Dowd Hall mentions. And from the start
civil rights historians bristled at it. Path breaking studies like A New Deal for Blacks and
William Chafe’s Civilities and Civil Rights celebrated activists’ courage and accomplishments,
of course. But their authors were also painfully aware that America’s racial dilemma has not
been solved, that the transformation remains woefully incomplete. So Sitkoff ended *A New Deal for Blacks* by stressing both the era’s accomplishments and severe limitations, while Chafe titled his last chapter on Greensboro “Struggle and Ambiguity” – a world away from a state of grace.

If the movement’s leading historians have always been uncomfortable with the classic narrative, though, only in recent years have they started to solidify a different story. It’s been a long time coming. Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein presented its first draft two decades ago, in their now classic JAH article, “Opportunities Found and Lost.” Their framework gradually worked its way into a number of important monographs, most of them published in the last ten years. And it was solidified by Hall’s brilliant 2004 presidential address, which gave the new paradigm the name that has since swept through the field. In the last year or two there have been major conferences premised on the new paradigm. And University of North Carolina Press has launched a new program, funded by almost a million dollars from the Mellon Foundation, to give the paradigm an even firmer foundation in both print and digital forms. We are now, all of us, working in the shadow of “the long civil rights movement.”

One of the most admirable aspects of Hall’s address is the honesty and humility that runs through it. The “long civil rights movement,” she says, is intended to be “a more robust, more progressive, and truer story” than the classic narrative, intended “to make civil rights harder. Harder to celebrate as a natural progression of American values. Harder to cast as a satisfying morality tale. Most of all, harder to simplify, appropriate, and contain.” That’s such a wonderful formulation. Hall isn’t claiming the absolute authority of the new paradigm. Instead, she says, the “long civil rights movement” is meant to be a truer story than the classic narrative it seeks to replace. Its truth is rooted in evidence, of course; by expanding the movement’s history, by including activists and ideologies long overlooked, we will make it more robust. But the new
paradigm’s claim to being truer is also rooted in the hard edge of the lesson it teaches. No longer will we – or more accurately our students and readers – be trapped by the fanciful story of redemption. Instead we will tell them a story made better because it is steeped in the ambiguity that has defined the sensibilities of our field for so long.  

The outlines of the new story are undoubtedly familiar to almost everyone in the room. The long civil rights movement began, says Hall, “in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s,” a moment when American public life seemed extraordinarily malleable, when the political economy and racial order suddenly seemed open to fundamental change. Into that opening stepped an eclectic group of activists – the Popular Front -- clustered around the left-wing of the labor movement. That group coupled demands for racial justice with a sweeping economic agenda that envisioned an American version of western European social democracy; an agenda that would limit corporate power, dramatically expand the welfare state, bring a measure of democracy to the factory floor, and in the south, at least, break the link between capitalism and racial domination. That promising politics came to a catastrophic end in the late 1940s, when the Red Scare shattered the left and scattered the activists who had gathered around it. The radicals’ collapse, in turn, narrowed the basis of postwar reform by stripping it of its economic agenda. For the African-American freedom struggle the loss was particularly devastating. “Within the civil rights movement,” says Robert Korstad, “the absence of radical union based leaders and institutions marginalized economic concerns. Activists’ demands for income re-distribution and workplace security simply did not have the resonance they once had. The black challenge of the 1950s and 1960s came to be understood as a single-issue attack on Jim Crow and not as a more broad-based critique of racial capitalism.” That’s not to say that in
its classic phase the movement didn’t accomplish great things. But they were not as great as they might have been, if only the movement of the 1930s and 1940s had managed to survive.4

There is no doubt that this new paradigm is far more robust than the classic narrative. Thanks to the extraordinary work of historians like Glenda Gilmore, whose Defying Dixie is a marvel, it’s now impossible to study the southern civil rights movement without seeing the centrality of the radical tradition. We have an ever-growing body of literature pushing the long civil rights movement into the north, a trend marked by the publication of Tom Sugrue’s stunning Sweet Land of Liberty. And with Civil Rights Unionism, Robert Korstad takes us deep into a southern working-class life that not so long ago we’d imagined could only be studied through the methodological thicket of infra-politics. Comparisons are always dangerous. But I think it’s fair to say that civil rights history has never been more vibrant or vital. So at first it wasn’t quite clear to me why, when I started thinking about this talk, my mind kept drifting back to a play about the ways that stories trap us. Gradually, though, I realized that what concerns me about the emerging paradigm isn’t the evidence – that’s its great glory – but the arc of its story. In particular, I can’t stop myself from wondering whether we really have rewritten the classic civil rights narrative quite as thoroughly as we imagine.

The problem lies in the new paradigm’s intellectual roots. As Halls say, the “long civil rights movement” is “intimately tied” to “The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order,” a framework that has itself become paradigmatic in mid-twentieth century political history. That doesn’t go quite far enough. In fact, “the long civil rights movement” and “the rise and fall of the New Deal order” are the same story, both in the dynamics they trace and the turning point they identify. The “Rise and Fall” narrative, in turn, was built upon the classic storyline of what was once quaintly called the new labor history; hardly a surprise, since many of those scholars who
shaped the “Rise and Fall” paradigm – Steve Fraser, Gary Gerstle, Nelson Lichtenstein, Michael Kazin – were trained as labor historians. The new labor historians took their storyline from the revolutionary work of EP Thompson. Like Thompson, they told how a particular group of workers drew on their traditions and their experiences to create a sense of class consciousness that pit them against the capitalist order. There was a confrontation, sometimes small, other times epic. And in the American telling, at least, workers almost invariably lost, defeated by business interests, the state, their own leaders, even, on occasion, by themselves. That’s the storyline that runs through the new labor history’s first great piece, Herbert Gutman’s “Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America”; through David Montgomery’s masterwork, *The Fall of the House of Labor*; like Hall’s extraordinary *Like a Family*; and through a massive literature on the CIO. From the most influential work on the 1930s – Lichtenstein’s *Labor’s War at Home*; Gerstle’s *Working-Class Americanism*; Fraser’s early essays on Sidney Hillman, all of which stress the social democratic promise of the 1930s, lost and betrayed in the late 1940s -- the storyline passed directly into the “Rise and Fall” narrative, and from there to the “long civil rights movement.” And therein lies the pivotal problem.

Let me try to explain. What makes the labor storyline problematic for civil rights history is that it bears a striking resemblance to the redemption story the new paradigm is trying to replace. (It may be more than a coincidence that Thompson was born and raised in a family of Methodist missionaries.) Both stories center their narratives on the development of a moral community set within a corrupt society. Both emphasize the enormous value of moral witness, the defense of righteousness in the face of fierce opposition. And, most importantly, both assume that history pivots on transformative moments shaped by that witness. To be sure, the results are dramatically different. Rather than salvation, the labor history story ends with defeat and
declension; a story built not on what the courageous accomplished but on what might have been. As Hall says, that’s a harder story. But it’s not a fundamentally different one. Listen to the last line of Korstad’s *Civil Rights Unionism*. “Perhaps only when another generation of activists refashions the dreams of the 1940s to fit the contours of the new century,” says Korstad, “will the legacy of racial capitalism be laid to rest.” That’s the voice of the prophet promising redemption.

And that isn’t enough, it seems to me. If we really want to tell the movement’s history in a way that is both truer and harder, then we need to set aside the comfort that redemption offers, to imagine a different story altogether. I’m still trying to think of precisely how that story might be told; I realize that some of you here today will have a much better sense of that than I do. But I’d like to offer a few tentative suggestions, to sketch out a story that trades transformative moments – found or lost – for a long, slow slog of a struggle against deeply entrenched social, economic and political structures that, while diminished, have yet to give way; a story centered more fully on Chafe’s powerful formulation of “struggle and ambiguity”; a story as Reinhold Niehbur might have told it, of moral men and women struggling to transform a society shaped by the enduring power of sin.

Some of the critics of the long civil rights movement have warned, rightly, about the tendency to stretch the definition of a movement too far. But the point can also be overstated. In a recent essay Eric Arensen argued the southern Popular Front can’t be considered a movement because only “a small number of black Southerners and an even smaller number of whites participated in campaigns against the segregationist order” while “the vast majority did not. And for those on the front lines, activism itself came in fits and starts.” But that’s a fair description of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, too, when most people, black and white,
stayed on the side lines, no matter how many now claim to have marched with Dr. King. The test of a movement isn’t in the number of participants. It’s whether a group of people – even a relatively small group -- have organized a systematic political campaign to effect change in the existing order.\(^5\)

We have an enormous body of literature detailing precisely that sort of activism from emancipation forward. That’s not to say that a single national civil rights movement suddenly appeared in 1863 and sustained itself forever more. Until the 1930s those campaigns overwhelmingly took place on the local level. Obviously there were national organizations, but even the most powerful, like the NAACP, did most of their work through substantially autonomous branches. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has said that the civil rights crusade of the 1960s created a “movement of movements.” That’s a wonderful term, but it might be better applied to the freedom struggle of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: a movement rising in this neighborhood, that town, the county next door, those localized struggles shaped by a wide range of traditions, ideas and political currents; their outcomes determined by the particulars of time and place.

But for all their variety, the movements were always bounded by the enormous power of the American racial system. It’s such an obvious point, but in our understandable urge to uncover agency I fear we sometimes overlook it. We need to remind our readers – remind ourselves – of the terrifying complex of forces activists confronted: the intermingling of widely-shared racist ideas, institutional arrangements and appalling violence. It’s a point that my colleague Hasan Jeffries makes in his powerful new book on Lowndes County, Alabama. During Reconstruction African-Americans in that most benighted of places built a local movement designed to secure political power. But it was crushed beneath the enormous weight of white supremacy; and for
almost eighty years it remained suppressed. Steven Hahn describes the waves of activism that
took hold among the sharecroppers of Philips County, Arkansas – the Knights of Labor in the
1880s, a branch of the Colored Farmers Alliance in the 1890s, an emigration society in the late
nineteenth century, and in 1919 a union movement shattered when rampaging whites slaughtered
over a hundred African Americans. A similar, though less dramatic, example runs through a
book I wrote a few years ago on the 1925 Ossian Sweet case. For a brief time Detroit became the
center of a movement to battle the spread of residential segregation. But the movement was
defeated by the linkage of racism and the forces of the real estate marketplace, the combination
buttressed by mob violence. I’m not trying to suggest that we should turn this “movement of
movements” into a grim series of defeats. But I do think it’s important to recognize that the
struggle wasn’t just long; it was also brutally hard and terribly, terribly costly.

In the 1930s and early 1940s circumstances changed. A single, completely coherent
national civil rights movement didn’t suddenly emerge; most of the era’s struggles remained
local, as they would throughout the classic phase of the movement. But those local struggles now
took place in new economic and political contexts. The collapse of sharecropping, wartime
In the Roosevelt administration, meanwhile, African Americans and their allies saw an activist
state that they believed they could turn to their advantage. The surging labor movement created
new venues for civil rights struggles, as did a strikingly transformed Supreme Court. And yes,
the Popular Front mattered too, for all the reasons that the new literature makes clear. In this new
context the movement of movements coalesced into a freedom struggle that was more broadly
based, more national in scope than anything that had come before. In short, a long civil rights
movement did begin in the New Deal era.
Instead of parsing that movement, though – dividing it into distinct, competing phases– we need to explore the connections that run through it. We need to build on the insights that Hahn and Jeffries have offered us, tracing how national activists tapped into the memories of long-ago local movements. Although we have to recognize ideological divides – there’s no point in claiming that there weren’t difference between, say Walter White and Angela Davis – we also need to explore the ways in which different traditions played into and off of each other, as Peniel Joseph suggests, particularly at the grass-roots, where ideological consistency is not always held in the highest regard. And, most fundamentally, we need to acknowledge the significant consistencies between the movement of the pre- and postwar eras, now obscured by the declension narrative. The range of issues that the prewar movement engaged – disenfranchisement, public accommodations, educational opportunity, housing, employment, racial violence, police brutality, anti-colonialism, and economic justice – all carried into the postwar era, sometimes in different forms, often with remarkable consistency.

Let me stress the economic issue, the centerpiece of the declension narrative. To be sure, in its current formulation “the long civil rights movement” recognizes the important role non-communist radicals like Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph played in the 1950s and 1960s. But they argue that discontinuities outweigh continuities.”In the south,” Hall bluntly says, “the Cold War destroyed Popular Front institutions and diverted the civil rights movement into new channels.” I don’t think the evidence supports that position. Even after the Red Scare – undoubtedly a devastating period -- the movement was infused with the social democratic vision the CIO had helped to fashion, a vision that intersected with strands of religious thought that coursed through the movement. The shop floor continued to be a major site of African-American activism, with workers linking their struggles to a wide range of non-union groups, from Urban
League moderates to the most militant of Black Nationalists. And some of the most powerful industrial unions remained committed to the cause, albeit imperfectly. Those connections assured that the movement of the postwar era maintained a strenuous commitment to economic reform as an integral component of racial justice. At the height of the Montgomery bus boycott – that most integrationist of struggles -- Martin Luther King condemned capitalism’s “tragic exploitation” of the poor and called for a democratic redistribution of wealth; by 1958 he was telling audiences that materialism was “far more pernicious” than communism and urging black and white workers to join together in “a quest for economic justice” – sounding every bit like the radical activists whose agenda had supposedly been shattered a decade earlier.

What I’m proposing, then, is that we see “the long civil rights movement” as exactly that: a long, complex, multi-faceted movement that linked the local and the national and that confronted a broad range of discriminatory practices decade after decade. That framing may sound celebratory, as if I’m trying to flatten out the conflicts and divisions that often cut through the movement; as if I’m trying simply to make the triumphal march a little longer. My intention is exactly the opposite. Make “the long civil rights movement” genuinely long and its story inevitably darkens, because we’re forced to see just how much struggle was required to bring about fundamental change. Take the battle for voting rights as an example. Peter Lau’s important and under-appreciated book, Democracy Rising, shows that in South Carolina African Americans were mounting local campaigns against disenfranchisement as early as the 1910s; campaigns that looked a lot like the voter registration efforts that SCLC and SNCC mounted forty-five years later. In the 1930s those campaigns intersected with regional efforts to topple the poll tax and the NAACP’s legal assault on the white primary. Those broader efforts gave the South Carolina movement new weapons and new vigor: in 1944 state activists mounted a
challenge at the Democratic national convention almost precisely like the MFDP’s famous challenge in 1964. But for all the courage and creativity that South Carolina’s activists brought to their campaign, it wasn’t until 1965 that disenfranchisement was finally ended. So it took half a century of struggle on the local level – and thirty years of a national campaign – simply to secure the most basic of American rights.

And that was a victory. As we extend the range of issues that the long civil rights movement confronted, we’re also forced to face its defeats. Local campaigns against residential segregation went national in the 1930s as activists confronted the segregation of newly-developed public housing and attacked restrictive covenants, one piece of the institutional arrangements that split American cities along the color line. Those campaigns intensified in the postwar era, particularly in the 1960s, when open housing drives dominated municipal politics in Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, and other cities and a range of organizations pushed for national legislation. Gradually the furies of the past started to fade: though incidents still occur, it’s impossible to imagine the widespread violence that sustained residential segregation in the middle decades of the century happening today. But the racial system didn’t give way: today the nation’s major metropolitan areas remain overwhelmingly segregated.

Economic justice remained almost as elusive. It’s important to say that in the 1960s and 1970s the movement forced the federal government to create a web of programs – the EEOC, an expanded welfare state, affirmative action – that together helped to improve the lives of millions of people: between 1959 and 1974 the percentage of African Americans living in poverty fell from 55 percent to 30 percent. At 30 percent, though, the African-American poverty rate was almost three times that of the population at large. Since then progress has been painfully slow. In 2008 24.7 percent of African American lived before the poverty line, double that of the
population in general and triple that of whites. The concentration of segregation and poverty, in turn, produces catastrophic results. In Detroit, a city whose population is 85 percent African American and strikingly poor, the infant mortality rate is just slightly above Gaza’s. There’s the darkness that the long civil rights movement exposes. After decades of struggle in pursuit of the nation’s promise, after all the sacrifices activists made, after the exhilarating moments of profound transformation – stretching from the 1930s to last year’s presidential election -- significant portions of the American racial regime remain firmly in place, not because of a single moment of declension but because that regime was, and in many ways still is relentlessly, fiercely powerful.

It may seem perverse to argue that by extending the history of civil rights we extend the history of racism as well. Isn’t that the darkness that Enda Walsh’s play warns of? Abandon the old stories, with the twists and turns and ducks and dives, and we are suddenly lost, adrift in a world that seems far crueler that we thought it was. It’s true that, in my telling, the world is a crueler place. But in my mind that fact makes the movement all the more impressive, because decade after decade its activists insisted on bearing witness to their principles – often at enormous cost – despite the fact that racism persisted, that they were often defeated, that redemption didn’t come. And they bear witness still. I think it’s fair to say that in the past thirty years, as the New Deal gave way to the New Right, the struggle for racial justice lost the national framework that gave it a center from the 1930s into the 1970s. Without that framework, activism has reverted to the form it had early in the last century: a localized movement of movements, operating in neighborhoods and churches, union halls and college campuses, drawing on a wide variety of tactics and traditions. Maybe this movement of movements will experience that transformative moment when the last portions of the racial system finally give way. Maybe not.
The arc of the moral universe is very, very long, after all, and we still don’t know whether it bends toward justice.
Notes


