

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s, researchers asked black children at St. Cecilia School in Chicago, “If you could change the world in any way you wanted, what change would you make?” With all of the decade’s youth protests, it was the type of question that increasingly interested sociologists and political scientists who wanted to understand better the political socialization of children and how to control or predict young people’s political activism.¹

I am under no illusions that even the most enlightened scholars (or parents) can control or accurately predict what young people might do, say, or believe. This volume, however, asks a similar question about youth activism during a similar time period: How did young people and popular conceptions of children and youth influence the black freedom struggle and help to change America’s racial landscape? On one level, this book adds to our understanding of childhood as a social construct. Specifically, it explores when and why the nation’s sentimentalized construction of childhood began to include African American children, both rhetorically and in reality. It looks at how shifting ideas about childhood and youth influenced political struggles over black Americans’ place in the nation’s sociopolitical order. Social constructions of childhood and public discussions about youth have had a significant impact on America’s racial politics. Building on the work of children’s historians, this book also recognizes children and youth as important agents of change. It examines the ways that young people contributed to the civil rights movement and explains why so many young Americans joined the struggle for racial equality in the late 1950s and early 1960s.²

Young people and ideas about them lie at the center of this study. But it is a history of the civil rights movement—the kind that recognizes the long history of the movement—as much as a history of children, youth,

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and our ideas about them. This book begins in the early twentieth century, a time of heightened interest in the welfare of children but also a time in which white southerners—and even white liberals sympathetic to the plight of blacks—generally accepted the pickaninny descriptions of black children commonly encountered in books and advertisements that defined African Americans as a child race in need of white guidance and incapable of assuming the full rights of citizenship. Black leaders challenged such stereotypes, often drawing on ideas about childhood to prove the respectability of the race. W. E. B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) frequently used images and stories of young blacks who perfectly embodied conceptions of the ideal white middle-class child to challenge negative stereotypes of blacks and demonstrate the political fitness of their parents (or at least their fathers) and the race. This strategy for racial progress, however, had a downside: by focusing on images of young African Americans who reflected childhood ideals, race leaders in some ways obscured the problems that most black children faced. Indeed, such a focus may well have perpetuated notions of the undeserving black, since childhood ideals were all but impossible for most African Americans to achieve.

By the 1930s, ideas about childhood had shifted, influencing perceptions of black Americans and their struggle for greater civil and political rights. Scholars generally identify 1930 as marking the triumph of sentimental over economic conceptions of childhood in America—as the beginning of the historical period in which American children from all classes became “priceless.”³ The same year, the White House issued the Children’s Charter (appendix A), a document that identified nineteen “rights of childhood” that the nation pledged to help all of its children, including black children, achieve. Childhood became in some respects a political as well as an emotional category, a developmental stage that carried with it certain rights and that obligated certain protections from the state. Childhood also became, at least to some people (and in official American discourse), a racially inclusive category.

Armed with ideas about children’s rights in a democracy, race leaders, reformers, and civic and educational leaders increasingly emphasized the discrepancies between childhood ideals and the plight of young underprivileged blacks. Scholars have shown that during the Great Depression, blacks pressured the Justice Department and the NAACP to address local concerns, working-class African Americans made a place for themselves

in labor unions, various organizations campaigned against lynching, and Washington-based activists pushed for African Americans' equal inclusion in New Deal programs and government employment.⁴ At the same time, black and white scholars, reformers, educators, and organizations interested in America's young people began to forge a youth-centered racial liberalism that would at least indirectly influence the course of the civil rights movement. Historians have identified the importance of the 1930s to the struggle for racial equality. This book adds to that scholarship by suggesting another reason why that decade is crucial to understanding the civil rights movement. The rise of youth subcultures and the exigencies of the Great Depression fueled interest in the problems of youth, especially the problems of rural and black youth. Reformers and influential government and private agencies who addressed youth issues increasingly criticized Jim Crow's effects on young people and suggested that all of the problems of all of America's youth—including its most destitute—could best be alleviated through a system of universal and equal education.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, ideas about education, rhetoric about the rights of childhood, and national security concerns converged with ideas about African American civil rights to influence the Supreme Court decision in the *Brown* case. Scholars of the civil rights movement have debated both the reasons for the Court's 1954 ruling and its significance (or lack thereof) to the movement. They have detailed important local struggles that influenced civil rights strategies, including the push for desegregated schools. They have outlined the ideas and vision of NAACP lawyers and the work of the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Section. They have looked at the influence of social scientists, judges, international sentiment, World War II, the cold war, New Deal liberals, and unions. Indeed, a considerable body of scholarship tells us much about the context of *Brown* and about how America began to dismantle legal segregation and build a mass movement dedicated to racial and economic justice.⁵ This book builds on that work, adding another layer to the complex history of *Brown* and the fight for African American civil rights. Like many other studies of the black freedom struggle, this volume identifies *Brown* as a watershed in movement history. But *Brown*'s significance cannot be fully understood without looking at it in the context of widespread beliefs about childhood and the rights of childhood and in relation to the public debates about childhood, youth, education, and national security that occurred in the years leading up to the ruling. These debates linked ideas about childhood, youth, and

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the rights of young people in America with the future of democracy and the role of public schools.⁶

Brown was pivotal to the movement partly because ideas about childhood, youth, and the rights of young Americans influenced both the Supreme Court ruling and the subsequent presentation of the black freedom struggle to the American public. Whether it was *Life* magazine talking about students who wanted to integrate and suffered because of closed schools, Martin Luther King Jr. giving speeches about his daughter's feelings of inferiority, or activists from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee using propaganda photos and stories that illustrated the effects of racism on black children, the national press and African American leaders and organizations argued for desegregation and for racial equality by calling on ideas about childhood, youth, and children's rights, ideas on which the Supreme Court also called to explain its 1954 ruling against segregated public schools.

Not surprisingly, those ideas influenced public perceptions of the movement. In the domestic-centered decades after World War II, linking African American civil rights to ideas about childhood and to images of young people helped make the movement meaningful, even compelling, to blacks as well as to a white American public not yet committed to the idea of racial equality. Ideas about childhood help to explain *Brown* as well as answer one of the other central questions that scholars have asked about the civil rights movement: Why did the movement achieve a level of success for that short period of time in the 1950s and 1960s? One reason, this book suggests, is that connections between the struggle for racial equality and ideas about childhood brought sympathy and a measure of support for the black freedom struggle at a time when ideals about home and family, parents and children, strongly influenced the nation's political culture. It is no coincidence that the Supreme Court ruled against segregated and decidedly unequal schools and that the South was widely criticized for physically and mentally attacking young blacks during the so-called golden age of the American family. Despite the inaccuracies of popular historical memory of the era and regardless of whether or not the ideals expressed in popular television shows such as *Father Knows Best* (which first aired in 1954) reflected reality, the 1950s and early 1960s were a time in which the nation glorified domestic life and Americans had clear conceptions about what constituted a proper childhood.⁷

The same connections between ideas about childhood and the struggle

for racial equality that helped make possible some of the black freedom movement's success, however, ultimately limited support for African American civil rights.⁸ White America was willing to come to the aid of young blacks and childlike adult civil rights protesters but was less willing to address the economic concerns of the black community or to support more radical black strategists.

Ideas about childhood and youth were not alone in influencing the struggle for racial equality. Equally important were young people themselves, who have indeed changed the world; they have been significant, often autonomous, political actors. Ideas about childhood and assumptions about the relative lack of value of young people to the movement have often obscured the extent of youth participation and influence. Nonetheless, young people played crucial roles in the black freedom struggle. In fact, children and youth who participated in the sit-ins and other protest demonstrations of the early 1960s built on a militant youth organizing tradition that began in the 1930s. During that decade, the NAACP, in response to youth activism and fears about potential youth radicalism, developed (with the help of and pressure from young members) a strong youth program that officially encouraged the use of direct-action techniques. Moreover, from the time the NAACP organized youth councils and college chapters in the 1930s, young people pushed the association and thus the movement in more militant directions.

Looking at young people and youth organizing in the civil rights movement helps us to better understand youth influence on the movement. It helps us to see more clearly the nature and dynamics of the NAACP and it reveals the importance of the pre-*Brown* period of the movement's history. Placing young people at the center of the movement also helps to explain the most militant and studied period of civil rights protest — that is, it helps to clarify why many Americans supported the struggle for racial equality and why young people engaged in widespread protest against Jim Crow and for the expansion of black civil rights in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This focus also gives voice to people we rarely consider in the stories we tell about the civil rights movement.

If looking at notions of childhood and young people themselves in the African American freedom struggle markedly changes the way we understand that struggle, then it is less certain that we can clearly define — or, rather, set age limits on — children and youth. This book suggests that childhood and race were (and are) shifting social constructs with con-

siderable political meaning; childhood and youth have never been fixed categories. To be sure, significant differences exist among six-, fifteen-, and twenty-four-year-olds. But ideas about childhood and the term “child” were often applied to young people of all those ages. Indeed, the age and developmental differences between little girls trying to integrate elementary schools in New Orleans, teenagers marching in the streets of Birmingham, and college-age activists organizing voter registration drives in the Mississippi Delta were usually lost as activists and the media presented the story of the civil rights movement to the American public. This book’s use of childhood, children, and youth, its inclusion of the experiences, perspectives, and contributions of elementary school-age children, adolescents, and young adults, reflects the indistinctness with which words such as “child” and “youth” were often (and still are) used. The ambiguity of those terms has not diminished their influence or made the young people who have moved in and out of socially constructed categories of childhood and youth (or other names we have assigned them) any less significant as historical and political actors.