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What's Left without the Left?: How Anti-Communism Shaped the Civil Rights Movement

The Cold War Era was a truly turbulent time in American history, though perhaps nothing on the homefront was felt as strongly as the growing Civil Rights Movement, and the American labor movement. These movements were strongly intertwined at the beginning of the Cold War Era, but as time progressed these movements grew apart, and at points became hostile towards each other. The Cold War Era was defined by the power struggle between Capitalism, embodied by the United States, and Communism, practiced by the Soviet Union. The two superpowers were engaged in an ideological quagmire, which eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Due to the severity of the struggle between Capitalism and Communism, America developed a strong anti-communist sentiment. Men like Senator Joseph McCarthy whipped this ideology into a fervor, due to the potentially cataclysmic stakes of war between two diametrically opposed nuclearly armed superpowers. This anti-communist fervor was strong enough to ruin livelihoods and relationships, as well as the blossoming alliance between the Civil Rights Movement and the American labor movement. Due to the anti-communist sentiments of the Cold War Era, the Civil Rights Movement had split away from the broader American left, which led to infighting within the movement and prevented it from achieving its original goals.

Although the American labor movement and the Civil Rights Movement diverged over time, the two started with very similar goals. The 1940's brought significant progress on the problematic white supremacist sentiments which plagued the early American labor movement.

The Congress of Industrial Organizations' inclusive policies, "created a union movement that broke, however incompletely, with American labor's historic embrace of white supremacy," (Heideman). The American labor movement had finally become a truly multiracial, working-class force that practiced stronger advocacy for all. The labor movement, even before this turning point initiated by the CIO, had a history of racial justice championed by socialists. This concept can be seen as far back as Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, in which he boldly calls for "Equal liability of all to labour," and hoping to concentrate economic production "in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation," which would include minority groups which were excluded from participation in society at the time (299). Marx even went as far as to proclaim his desire "to abolish countries and nationality," which would eventually lead to the end of nationality and race, and thus end discrimination based on race (297). Though imperfect, this shows the American labor movement was more willing to accept racial diversity and reject white supremacy than other elements of society. The history of the multiracial labor movement in America and the longstanding desire for left-wing groups to create an equal world which included ridding the world of racial disparity would make these two movements natural allies. Unfortunately for them, the Cold War prevented this powerful alliance from thriving beyond the late 40's and early 50's.

An explicit example of anti-communist sentiments which harmed the Civil Rights Movement can be seen in the media coverage of it. While civil rights activists and American leftists had often worked together, this pairing could not last forever due to the media's anti-communist sentiments. Right from the outset of the Cold War, "anti-Communism had emerged as a powerful litmus test for mainstream black civil rights activists," which forced many civil rights leaders to turn on their communist allies or be left voiceless. This especially hurt

activists who “operated as public figures and in national organizations,” as they became unable to coordinate broader left-wing action on civil rights without potentially losing their influence and setting the movement back greatly (Gore). This negative media coverage led to the promotion of anti-communist civil rights leaders, who gained large sway over the movement. The rise of anti-communist leadership and organizations began to sour the relations between the Civil Rights Movement and the American left. This alone would not have shaped the capabilities of the Civil Rights Movement, as anti-communist leaders in the movement often still sought greater societal equality under capitalist economies. However, the media’s propensity to link the Civil Rights Movement with communism made this very difficult. Many southern outlets framed the Civil Rights Movement in a way that linked “civil rights to communist subversion and other radical deeds.” One paper, *Human Events*, went so far as to have over a quarter of its articles about Little Rock linking the crisis “to communism, organized labor, or other radical activities,” with “slightly more than forty percent of the items” accusing the NAACP of similar activities (Major). This clearly illustrates the press’ attempt to link the Civil Rights Movement to communism, in order to weaken the impact of the movement and draw it under the fire of the anti-communist sentiments of the time. Many leaders of the Civil Rights Movement realized the situation the media’s coverage put them in. Pauli Murray notably declared “the danger of being an active anti-Communist is that we spend all our time fighting the Communist to the detriment of the cause we profess to support,” (Gore). The media coverage of the Civil Rights Movement, in both promoting anti-communists within the movement and linking the broader movement to communism, had a disastrous impact on the cohesiveness of the movement. In order to maintain influence, leaders often had to abandon their communist or anti-communist allies, and disavow them in the media and to their supporters, which led to a nearly irreconcilable rift in the

movement. What originated as a coalition between American labor activists and black leaders, became a frenzy of leftist infighting that left the Civil Rights Movement unable to properly achieve its goals.

The phenomenon of anti-communist action in the Civil Rights Movement is also made clear through the actions of the movement's leadership. Martin Luther King Jr. is a great example of this. King was an immensely influential socialist, and leader of the Civil Rights Movement who is often credited with its successes. An example of King's anti-communist rhetoric can be seen in "Letter from Birmingham Jail", in which King writes that if he "lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, [he] would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws," shortly after comparing the communist government of Hungary's treatment of the freedom fighters to Nazi Germany's treatment of Jewish people during the Holocaust (226). While this may seem reasonable to the audience he wished to attract the attention of, it is quite a direct condemnation of communism that would have baffled his communist allies. While King's critique of the Hungarian Communist Party was warranted, this would have been a divisive comment for the broader movement. Another instance of anti-communist action by leaders of the Civil Rights Movement can be seen in the adoption of capitalist policies. The Freedom Budget is a great example, with its lack of "tampering with private supply and demand," and sole usage of "an enlightened self-interest" being a rebuke of the use of class politics to achieve racial justice. This also led to the formation of an "intimate alliance with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party," rather than sticking to their radical allies. The adoption of capitalist policies can also be seen when austerity measures began to be embraced by the leaders of the Civil Rights movement, from the Congress of Black Equality adopting Nixon's policy of "black capitalism", to black city governments which became

“the agents of austerity against black public workers,” (Heideman). These policies and writings all display that many leaders of the Civil Rights movement leaned into the anti-communist sentiments of the Cold War Era in order to attempt to gain political clout and pass menial reforms. Despite the success of these efforts, they greatly undermined the Civil Rights Movement’s success and posed future roadblocks to collaboration with radicals which would be needed if the movement ever sought to achieve more than just legal equality. As such, the anti-communist sentiments of the era led to the failure of the Civil Rights Movement to achieve the true societal equality they sought, in return for legal equality and collaboration with typically apathetic moderates in an attempt to keep the gains of the movement.

The consequences of the split between the Civil Rights Movement and the left, both internally and externally, were felt very harshly. The immense progress made prior to World War II in bringing “Jim Crow and the larger American caste system... on their last legs” was swiftly crushed, dealing a “hammer blow to the movement for racial equality,” (Heideman). What was once a strong, multiracial, and intersectional coalition truly threatening the powers that be was reduced to a movement which could only go as far as legal equality before slowly tapering off. Not only were leading Black Communists and Socialists silenced, but “many non-Communist civil rights activists... were [also] silenced by attacks directed at the CPUSA,” (Gore). The use of anti-communism as a weapon to divide the Civil Rights Movement from the American left-wing, and fracture the movement from within was lethally effective at weakening the movement. This led to a movement that was built on the idea of a truly racially just society decaying into one which only sought legal equality, which did not truly do away with the issues caused by slavery and segregation. The fallout of this failure has been tremendous, spanning from repeated incidents of police brutality, to “Black families' median and mean wealth” being “less than 15

percent that of White families,” (Bhutta et al.). While these activists gained the right to vote and the right to be treated equally under the law, they had to give up on any goals of a truly equal society to get there.

The original goal of the Civil Rights Movement, the creation of a society that is truly just on racial lines, was greatly stifled due to the broken ties to the American left and infighting caused by the anti-communist sentiments of the Cold War Era. Despite the best efforts of Civil Rights leaders from varying ideologies, infighting crippled the unity of the movement and the ability to progress beyond legal equality. Despite the failures of the Civil Rights Movement, it is crucial to both acknowledge its successes and the modern attempts to re-establish a multiracial, working-class coalition. The passage of the Civil Rights Acts in America was no small feat, and though solely legal equality was imperfect, it was a significantly better option than the Jim Crow status quo. Although the American left and the politics of Civil Rights are no longer a completely united front, the recent unionization pushes in America, along with the massive rise in the notoriety of Black Lives Matter clearly reveal these two groups are far from giving up the fight for equality. Maybe they’ll pick up the torch of the Civil Rights Movement and successfully light the fire of true equality for all, regardless of race.

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