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Origins of the Movement and the Development of Protest: The Birmingham Campaign, 1963

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Origins of the Movement and the Development of Protest:
The Birmingham Campaign, 1963

By

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A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Abstract

ORIGINS OF THE MOVEMENT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROTEST:
THE BIRMINGHAM CAMPAIGN, 1963

by

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Adviser: Professor Frances Fox Piven

Social movement theory in the late twentieth century has offered competing explanations for the origins and development of protest. In an attempt to explain the American Civil Rights Movement, scholars from the resource mobilization (RM) and political process theory (PPT) schools have provided somewhat mechanistic and formulaic explanations for how the black protest developed in the southern states. This study takes the emergence and development of protest in Birmingham, Alabama, culminating in the Birmingham Campaign of 1963, as a case study to examine the claims of RM and PPT. An evaluation of the Birmingham Campaign suggests the emergence of protest is less dependent on the receipt of outside resources than RM and PPT suggest. Similarly, the Birmingham Campaign shows us that the development of protest proceeds in a far more unpredictable and spontaneous manner than either theory would lead us to believe.

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1. Introduction

From April 3 until May 11, 1963, local and national civil rights organizations launched a sustained campaign of protest against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. The month of chaos was largely considered a success for the struggling movement, which had suffered many high-profile defeats in the previous year. The Birmingham Campaign was an attempt to reverse the poor prospects of the movement by shifting the focus of its protest from the political elites of southern cities to the economic elites. It forced economic elites of Birmingham to negotiate with civil rights leaders, ended de jure segregation in Birmingham, and compelled the Kennedy Administration to attend to civil rights demands with greater urgency. But the Campaign also exposed a truth about the forces pushing the movement forward: they were not confined to the formal civil rights organizations. The sweeping economic transformation of the South in the preceding decades had made the movement possible, and it had not only affected the black middle class that largely organized the “official” movement. While the economic transformation had buoyed a small black professional class, it also created a large, precariously employed black urban working class in the South. Unlike the professional class, which had the resources and institutional leverage to launch limited “legitimate” protest, the precarious class had fewer options for directing protest. While poor Southern blacks made up the majority of movement participants, the major protest groups were undeniably run by the small professional class. Until Birmingham, the movement was largely organized by middle class blacks and channeled through the organizations and congregations that they controlled. After Birmingham, it was undeniable that grievances spanned the class spectrum.

Much of social movement theory, caught up in the impressive history of mobilization by civil rights organizations, ignores the grievances and actions of the precarious classes, confining them to an irrational realm of unfortunate disorganized destructiveness. This understanding of the Birmingham Campaign and the larger civil rights movement is not just selective, it misunderstands or ignores the historical and economic antecedents to the movement and the specific development of those antecedents

in Birmingham. It blinds us to the breadth of the movement by falsely locating its origins in developments that limit its scope.

Scholars of the Civil Rights Movement associated with the resource mobilization and political process theory schools have generally explained the movement through the rise and fall of movement organizations. In the view of these schools of thought, movements develop through some combination of internal organizing, outside assistance, and political opportunity. While an analysis of other forces propelling the movement is not entirely left out, these schools fall far short of being able to fully explain the Civil Rights Movement. The Birmingham Campaign is a perfect illustration of this shortcoming. Fully exploring the Birmingham Campaign and the historical, political, and economic circumstances that shaped it will provide not only a critique of resource mobilization and political process theory analyses of the Campaign, but a general critique of those theories' applicability to social movements. In order to assess the resource mobilization and political process theory schools, the works of three prominent theorists will be examined: Anthony Oberschall's *Social Conflict and Social Movements*, Aldon Morris' *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, and Doug McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*.

2. Origins of the Movement and the Development of Protest: Contesting Perspectives

In *Social Conflict and Social Movements*, Anthony Oberschall lays out a fairly standard Resource Mobilization Theory (RM) account of the Civil Rights Movement. While he does not address the Birmingham Campaign in much detail, Oberschall summarizes the RM perspective, claiming that it “predicts that substantial social movements must have a prior base grounded either in associations or in communal groups that are already formed and active prior to the start of the movement” (Oberschall, 214). In the context of the civil rights movement, that meant looking to groups like the NAACP, CORE, and others. Oberschall claims that these groups “provided a key support base for more grassroots and mass-oriented protest organizations” (Oberschall, 214). He also points to the role of the black church, which was “the closest thing to an independent communal and associational base not controlled by whites in the South” (Oberschall, 214).

Oberschall’s analysis mainly centers on the escalation of the movement rather than its origins. While he acknowledges that the internal generation of resources within southern black communities was crucial to the movement, his attention is mainly on external resources. Oberschall argues that while the resources within the black community were enough to launch the movement, external resources were crucial to its sustenance and eventual success.

In his analysis of the black social structure of the 1940s-1960s, Oberschall claims that in the 1940s, blacks were “a lower-class population group with no independent economic and geographic base” and that “the precarious economic base and vulnerability of the black population at all levels stand out sharply” (Oberschall, 209). Blacks had few institutions with any independence from whites and were highly dependent on whites for employment. It was a context of near-total social control. Not only could blacks not speak or act out against the white power structure, they could not pool the resources necessary to support such activism.

Oberschall notes that the move away from agricultural employment in the late 1940s and 1950s helped to “broaden the occupational range of the Negro middle class,” which allowed greater autonomy

from whites (Oberschall, 211). However, he also argues that many parts of the rural South, particularly the Deep South, had not changed significantly from the early 1940s. While many blacks had migrated to southern cities or to the urban North, in rural areas and small towns there “still remained a surplus of black workers, un- or under employed for much of the year” (Oberschall, 211). Oberschall argued that the persistence of this abundance of labor was “not a situation conducive to a strong bargaining position for raising wages or for pressuring whites into easing the segregation pattern” (Oberschall, 211). Because these communities had arguably less independence from whites than they had before the collapse of agricultural labor demand, it was necessary to gain outside resources to sustain any sort of movement. In bleak terms, Oberschall claimed that in these rural communities, “unless massive outside resources are poured into them and protection from physical violence is extended to the first blacks who break the pattern of subordination, protest against the segregation structure is not likely to come about simply from within” (Oberschall, 211). Despite massive migration and economic transformation, the more isolated southern communities were not sufficiently changed to open a window for protest. In these communities—unlike the Southern cities—outside resources were a prerequisite to even the first glimmers of dissent.

In the urban South, however, there were more opportunities for insurgency. Oberschall does not detail those opportunities extensively. Instead, he engages in a detailed study of class division among blacks in both Southern and Northern cities. Throughout this analysis, he continually claims that “advancement for a black family could be accomplished only through migration into a Southern city or to the North” (Oberschall, 211). However, in an effort to make his case about the stifling social control of the rural South, Oberschall overlooks the reality of the urban South for most blacks. All Southern cities, and Birmingham in particular, had a massive rural *and* urban labor surplus. The collapse of the cotton economy and urbanization did not involve blacks immediately ascending the class ladder in urban areas. Though opportunities may have been greater and social control less stifling, the experience of most blacks in the Southern cities was not hopeful. The displaced agricultural workers were mostly transformed into

tenuously employed urban laborers. Eskew notes that they were “the mudsills of [Birmingham’s] colonial economy” and worked as “charwomen, janitors, maids, and laborers” (Eskew, 86).

Apart from the economic circumstances of blacks in the urban South, Oberschall ignores another crucially important historical reality: the emergence of a new, more militant black consciousness in the Southern cities that could instigate collective action. He does not dwell on a shift in consciousness among blacks, because such a shift is only peripheral to resource mobilization theory. For RM theorists, the crucial development of the Civil Rights Movement was the flow of resources from outside supporters to national and grassroots groups, not a widespread shift in consciousness among blacks. However, Oberschall does not completely write off the importance of a change in consciousness among Southern blacks. He acknowledges that *Brown v. Board of Education* had “a tremendous psychological impact on blacks” which “raised their hopes and expectations” (Oberschall, 215). For the most part, however, he attributes the development of black consciousness not to advances in civil rights through Supreme Court decisions in the preceding decades and the economic shifts that altered black life, but to the development of a southern white resistance to the Court’s decisions. This analysis is notably different from one that takes into account the political, economic, and partisan shifts that occurred in this era, and their effect on black consciousness. If the development of a black consciousness is predicated on white southern resistance—which came particularly in response to *Brown v. Board of Education*—then the true mobilization of blacks must have come *after* the mobilization of white reactionaries.

Oberschall claims that the white southern resistance movement shattered the paternalistic social relations of the South. While blacks had been dependent on whites for economic sustenance, they were also enmeshed in relationships with whites that prevented the development of an insurgency. These relationships were “clientage and brokerage relations” that “act as mechanisms of social control against those who step out of line and as a mechanism for distributing modest but tangible rewards to those who conform” (Oberschall, 219). They fostered a sense of everyday legitimacy for the system of domination in the South. However, Oberschall claims that “the Southern resistance movement against the Supreme Court desegregation decision weakened and, for some, shattered the trust, security and legitimacy upon

which paternalism rested” (Oberschall, 219). Again, Oberschall seems to be suggesting that the main motivating factor for black mobilization was white resistance, not the economic or political circumstances of blacks. Oberschall also claims that the white Southern reaction also helped to weaken the accommodationist leaders in the black community and empower more militant ones. While this may be true, it again ignores the problem—especially acute in Birmingham—of the masses of precariously-employed blacks in Southern cities. The Southern urban black experience was hardly paternalistic in the same way that the rural experience had been before the collapse of the cotton economy. When Oberschall credits white supremacist violence and the breakdown of paternalism for mobilizing most Southern blacks, he generalizes about the extent to which a paternalistic relationship was still intact across the South. For the large and growing numbers of black urban poor and middle class, many of the key relationships maintaining paternalism had weakened. While Oberschall is correct to highlight *Brown v. Board of Education*, the political and economic context in which Southern blacks interpreted this situation was easily as significant in transforming their consciousness as the text of the decision itself.

The most obvious counterexample to Oberschall’s analysis is the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956. It was a movement hatched by Southern blacks with little outside support. It also preceded the most virulent white resistance to integration, complicating Oberschall’s claim that it was white resistance that sparked the mass mobilizations of blacks. While he may be correct in suggesting that later black mobilization was galvanized by white resistance, the Montgomery example suggests that other factors were at play.

Oberschall’s explanation of the Montgomery Bus Boycott is complex. He claims that it was ultimately a pyrrhic victory, as it provoked massive white backlash that significantly curtailed black freedom and security in Montgomery:

In Montgomery, the bus boycott movement succeeded because the Supreme Court eventually sustained a decision of the U.S. District Court in declaring Alabama’s state and local laws on segregation in buses unconstitutional.... After that decision, white segregationist violence in the form of shootings and bombings erupted for a time, white juries refused to convict the culprits

and white leaders only reluctantly condemned the violence, and the City Commission of Montgomery passed several anti-black ordinances strengthening segregation in public parks and playgrounds (223).

Oberschall argues that the Montgomery Improvement Association, which had organized and sustained the boycott, was “not in a position to mount an offensive against these new segregationist measures” (Oberschall, 223). In this sense, the bus boycott was merely symbolic and mainly served to demonstrate the shortcomings and needs of the budding movement. Oberschall notes that the boycott was important because it elevated Martin Luther King, Jr. to national prominence, showed that a challenge to accommodationist black leaders was possible, and developed tactics for a wider movement. At the same time, it demonstrated “the depth and magnitude of the Southern resistance movement to all forms of change in race relations, which would be overcome only if massive outside support were mobilized in favor of civil rights” (Oberschall, 224). Even if we accept Oberschall’s analysis, an event that galvanized the black masses, shaped a movement with its tactical ingenuity, and signaled the emergence of new black leadership seems fairly significant. While it may have pointed to a broader and more difficult struggle, it did not necessarily show that blacks were powerless without outside support. While blacks certainly suffered serious blowback from the boycott, it hardly seems like an event that highlighted the *limits* of black power in Southern cities. Instead, it seems to signal that Southern urban blacks, acting in a radically transformed political and economic context, could actually organize and wield power. Rather than demonstrate that they were a foundering, politically impotent minority group, the boycott showed that southern blacks could act collectively, pool resources, and win battles as they never had in the past. It showed that mass defiance was now possible and very likely.

Aldon Morris’ *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* also adopts the Resource Mobilization model, albeit with some major caveats. Morris blends the RM model with aspects of the Weberian theory of charismatic leaders. He also critiques central aspects of Oberschall’s RM analysis, shifting the focus from outside resources to the development of “movement centers.”

Morris' primary critique of Oberschall's RM analysis is that Oberschall tends to "overemphasize the importance of outside factors," which "can unnecessarily restrict the scope of analysis of social movements" (Morris, 281). Because Oberschall's analysis "assigns heavy weight to outside elites and events, it does not reveal the scope or the capacity of the movement's indigenous base" (Morris, 281). Morris' research into the origins of the movement shows that "the overwhelming majority of local movements were indigenously organized and financed" (Morris, 281). By placing much greater weight on indigenous resource mobilization, Morris portrays a civil rights movement that was more self-directed and more based in the organizations—both local and broad-based—formed in the black community.

Morris introduces the concept of "movement centers," which he claims were formed at the earliest stages of movement-building and "enabled significant collective action to 'explode' in the early 1960s" (Morris, 76). These centers provided the "organizational framework" out of which a larger movement developed (Morris, 76). They were not necessarily physical spaces, but networks that emerged out of oppressed communities that had finally accumulated the resources necessary to challenge their oppression:

A movement center has been established in a dominated community when that community has developed an interrelated set of protest leaders, organizations, and followers who collectively define the common ends of the group, devise necessary tactics and strategies along with training for their implementation, and engage in protest actions designed to attain the goals of the group.... The pace, location, and volume of protest in various communities are directly dependent on the quality and distribution of a local movement center (283-4).

Morris' definition of a movement center clashed with critiques of bureaucratization of movement groups. While Morris seems to be describing a somewhat loose-knit network of individuals and groups in a specific geographic area, the most prominent civil rights organization in the 1950s, the NAACP, was highly bureaucratic. Morris points to the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as examples of "nonbureaucratic formal organizations" that connected and facilitated the work of various movement centers (Morris, 285). For Morris, the nonbureaucratic-but-formal organization model was most appropriate for wide-scale social protest "because they facilitate mass participation, tactical

innovations, and rapid decision-making” (Morris, 285). They were able to focus the resources of a community without developing a conservative, slow-moving bureaucratic machine.

While Morris’ description of movement centers is a compelling explanation of how the early Civil Rights Movement built strength without the risks of bureaucratization, it is unclear exactly how many of the most well-known movement groups fit in to the movement center model. While the MIA seems like a good example of a movement center, the SCLC and the SNCC were much broader-based groups with somewhat unclear community bases. Morris claims that “the SCLC functioned as the decentralized arm of the mass-based black church...that mass base was built into the very structure of the SCLC” (Morris, 89). Even if we take Morris’ claims seriously, they do not explain the willingness of many Southern blacks to join the movement before the founding of the broad-based South-wide organizations, which were founded *after* the Montgomery bus boycott and other early actions. While it is undoubtedly clear that broad organizations can help coordinate protest, their relatively late emergence does not explain why so many blacks outside of Montgomery and other movement centers were willing to risk so much early on. By focusing so much on the development of organizations, Morris might be sidelining the widespread shift in consciousness among blacks and their increasing orientation towards protest in the mid-1950s.

Another conflict in Morris’ analysis is his focus on the importance of organization building with his simultaneous emphasis on *already-existing* organizations and institutions. While he criticizes Piven and Cloward’s praise for the movement’s early focus on what he terms the “counterproductive process of organization-building,” he seems to suggest that the power of movement centers was their rootedness in already-existing institutions (Morris, 74). He claims that it was “organization-building” that produced these centers, but also notes that the task of activists was often to marshal the resources of these organizations toward protest. That seems a separate process from “organization building.” While it is undeniable that some coordination and organizing was necessary to launch an effort like the Montgomery bus boycott, a distinction must be made between “organization-building” and forging new alliances that can better mobilize resources.

In addition to his concept of “movement centers,” Morris adds a curious entrepreneurial and Weberian twist to his explanation of the early Civil Rights Movement. While he adopts the core tenets of Resource Mobilization theory, Morris is careful to note that “the presence of indigenous resources within a dominated community does not ensure that a movement will emerge” (Morris, 283). He credits activists “who seize and create opportunities for protest” with generating movements, claiming that these activists often possess “strong ties to mass-based indigenous institutions” and must “redirect and transform indigenous resources in such a manner that they can be used to develop and sustain social protest” (Morris, 283). Activists, then, play a definitive creative role in creating a movement, providing an entrepreneurial boost that the simple accumulation of resources cannot provide.

Morris’ claims about entrepreneurial activists are tied to his claims about movement leadership. He links the emergence of leaders to the development of movement centers, but is careful to note that “most leaders are not created by their movements” but were “usually leaders in other spheres of the community before the onset of the movement” (Morris, 285). Leaders play similar roles to activists, but are more powerful in building a movement if they possess charisma. Morris argues that Weber’s theory of the charismatic leader is important to the early civil rights movement because it “maintains that charisma has an independent effect on movements rather than being peripheral” (Morris, 279). While Morris notes that charismatic leadership cannot itself generate a movement, it is an important explanatory factor in the growth and success of a movement. For Morris, leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. “facilitated the mobilization of the movement because they had *both* organizational backing and charisma” (Morris, 279).

The organizational backing of the black church points to another aspect of Morris’ account of the early civil rights movement that differs from traditional Resource Mobilization theory: his insistence that “religious beliefs, music, and sermons” played a central role in the development of the movement (Morris, 282). These cultural factors, combined with the specific tactics of the activists and the centrality of charisma, which were largely sidelined in the Resource Mobilization model, are important to Morris’ account of the early civil rights movement. It is unclear exactly how these factors worked with the more

materialist components of the RM model, except that they provided extra incentive for the masses of southern blacks to join the movement.

Into the mix of variants on Resource Mobilization theory, Doug McAdam introduces his Political Process theory. Explicated in *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, McAdam's Political Process model adopts a more Marxist view of power, which "embodies a clear understanding of the latent political leverage available to most segments of the population" apart from their ability to accumulate and mobilize resources (McAdam, 37). Like the Resource Mobilization model, McAdam's theory sees social movements as "political rather than psychological phenomena," but adds that "any complete model of social insurgency should offer the researcher a framework for analyzing the entire process of movement development rather than a particular phase of that same process" (McAdam, 36).

Criticizing both RM theorists as well as those that highlighted the historical context of movements, McAdam argues that "neither environmental factors nor factors internal to the movement are sufficient to account for the generation and development of social insurgency" (McAdam, 39). Instead, he acknowledges that insurgency is not an automatic reaction, insisting that "cognitive liberation" is a crucial prerequisite (McAdam, 37). "Cognitive liberation" hinges on the "collective perception of the legitimacy and mutability" of oppressive conditions (McAdam, 35).

For McAdam, cognitive liberation is built not solely through organizations, but through political and economic shifts. He points particularly towards the posture of the Roosevelt administration to blacks as well as the decisions of the Supreme Court in the 1940s. Roosevelt's simple acknowledgment that lynching was murder as well as his political and Court appointees were enough to significantly elevate hopes among blacks:

Beginning in the mid-1930s, both the Supreme Court and the executive branch under Roosevelt were increasingly responsive to the black community... the symbolic effects of this shift were to far outweigh the limited substantive benefits that flowed from it. Indeed, the symbolic importance of the shift would be hard to overstate. It was responsible for nothing less than a cognitive

revolution within the black population regarding the prospects for change in this country's racial status quo (McAdam, 108).

McAdam cites polling data that suggests visions of a better future were not “peculiar only to black notables” but were “widespread within the black population” (McAdam, 109). The cognitive liberation fostered by a more receptive political environment reinforced greater mobilization among blacks, resulting in a cycle of “black action and symbolic government response that produced only limited substantive gains but widespread feelings of optimism and political efficacy” among blacks (McAdam, 111-12). This cycle repeated—with notable interruptions—until the civil rights movement fully developed and was able to support widespread insurgency.

While McAdam gives cognitive liberation a central role in the development of insurgency, he also retains central features of the RM model. The symbolic successes and subsequent actions were made possible through the “most organized segments of the southern black population: the churches, colleges, and local NAACP chapters” (McAdam, 128). He notes that a “fundamental tenet of the political process model” is that social movements are “collective phenomena arising first among those segments of the minority community characterized by a high level of prior organization,” adding that outside of this context individuals band together “only rarely and with great difficulty” (McAdam, 128-9).

Unlike Morris, McAdam does not stress the organization of these institutions themselves, but rather their ability to provide the budding movement with members, leaders, and a communication network. The difference between McAdam and Morris here seems to be in the development of new groups. While Morris saw the emergence of new movement groups as crucially important, McAdam argues that “the movement did not require the development of new institutional structures but was able instead simply to appropriate existing leader/follower relationships [of existing organizations and institutions] in the service of movement goals” (McAdam, 132). While new groups like SCLC did develop, they emerged out of existing relationships. It was not their emergence that was significant, it was the pre-existing connections.

While Morris thought that entrepreneurial activists redirected the resources of existing institutions, McAdam argues that the early civil rights movement simply redefined those institutions. He claims that “in the case of most church-based campaigns, it was not so much that movement participants were recruited from among the ranks of active churchgoers as it was a case of church membership itself being redefined to include movement participation as a primary requisite of the role” (McAdam, 129). By locating the emergence of the movement *within* already-existing institutions, McAdam did not need to explain the early movement in terms of newly-formed groups. In contrast to Morris, McAdam is explaining how the movement, which first produced a successful mass mobilization in 1955, emerged prior to the development of so many iconic movement groups. All of the necessary ingredients for the development of a movement—members, leaders, and a communication network—already existed, they just needed to draw on the increased cognitive liberation built over the previous decades to activate a movement.

Morris criticized Oberschall’s focus on outside resources as dismissive of internal capacities for mobilizing resources. Similarly, McAdam sees the involvement of outside groups as “reactive,” arguing that “external involvement will occur only after the outbreak of protest activity as a response to the perceived threat or opportunity embodied in the movement” (McAdam, 61-2). The Political Process model maintains a fairly skeptical view of elites, suggesting that “elite involvement in insurgency will be motivated by a desire to control, exploit, or perhaps even destroy the movement rather than to assist it” (McAdam, 62). In McAdam’s account, the origins of the civil rights movement were relatively free of elite involvement. While Oberschall sees this as a shortcoming, pointing to the pyrrhic victory of the Montgomery bus boycott, McAdam sees it as the period in which movement goals were most clearly articulated and the true foundations for success were laid.

3. The Missing Pieces—The “Disorganized” Dimension of the Civil Rights Movement

RM and PPT theorists point out that it was the emerging black middle class that recognized they had the most to gain from an end to segregation, and thus led the charge to abolish the Jim Crow system. While this may be an adequate explanation for why the dominant local and national movement groups were composed mostly of the black middle class, it is an insufficient explanation for the emergence of the movement as a whole. While the black middle class may have seen an opportunity for advancement, most blacks in the north and south experienced the post-war period as one of dislocation and economic stagnation. Surrounded by widespread post-war prosperity, blacks were increasingly forced into ghettos and enjoyed few of the post-war economic gains that launched so many groups into the middle class. If America’s post-war rising tide was thought to lift all boats, it had left most urban blacks struggling to stay afloat. As Piven and Cloward explain,

Among blacks the experience in the post-World War II period was... devastating, for millions who were forced off the land and concentrated in the ghettos of the cities. Within these central city ghettos, unemployment rates in the 1950s and 1960s reached depression levels. The sheer scale of these dislocations helped to mute the sense of self-blame, predisposing men and women to view their plight as a collective one, and to blame their rulers for the destitution and disorganization they experienced (12).

These urban blacks, who were forced into urban ghettos north and south, experienced a “cognitive liberation” that was sharply different from that of the black middle class. Instead of just recognizing that they were paid less than comparably-educated whites or shut out of key middle class institutions, low-income blacks in urban centers simply recognized a common, desperate plight in a new context. Forced off the land, they were also cast free from the paternalistic strictures of the plantation system, leaving them more free to resist white supremacy and more likely to recognize their circumstances as unjust and collective.

These low-income, precariously employed urban blacks did not play a major role in the “official” organizations of the civil rights movement. However, the fact that they underwent a significant and profound “cognitive liberation” is not acknowledged by PPT and RM theorists. Because these theorists

focus only on the various movement groups, they miss a major element of the movement—the transformation in consciousness of the black urban underclass.

This missing element is a massive oversight. It narrows the explanatory power that PPT and RM theorists have in making sense of every stage of the movement. In particular, it narrows any attempt to explain the events of April and May of 1963 in Birmingham. PPT and RM theorists have little to say about the first black urban riot of the civil rights movement. Their dearth of explanations is telling, but it also negatively affects our understanding of the Birmingham Campaign and its symbolic importance to the development of the movement.

Birmingham is perhaps the best example of a southern city with a massive black underclass that was poorly integrated into all of the city's white and black institutions. The city's history, as well as its economic and social geography, tell us a great deal about how and why the Birmingham Campaign developed as it did. History and geography also shed light on what RM and PPT theorists are missing.

4. A Mixed Elite and an Ironclad Political Alliance

In the 1950s and 1960s, Birmingham's economy shared more in common with the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest than most urban centers in the South. Many of its jobs were in heavy manufacturing and the metal industries, and it had a greater ethnic diversity among whites than most Southern cities. However, the political alliances that northern industrial cities had fostered during the New Deal era had not developed in Birmingham. Instead, "throughout most of Birmingham's history, the interests of the industrial and financial elite and lower middle class [whites] coalesced in a defense of racial discrimination" (Eskew 12).

When "labor leaders and liberal politicians promoted biracial unions and a politicized working class" during the 1930s, the "Big Mules" who owned or managed the major industries in Birmingham arranged a uniquely southern foil to the movement for industrial democracy (Eskew 12). Instead of accepting and organizing against a class-based political alliance, the "Big Mules," who historian Glenn Eskew links to the original Bourbon ruling class of the South, simply reinforced the racial wage gap by further entrenching employment discrimination. They stymied a class-based movement by making clear to the white working class that they "had nothing to gain from desegregation except competition with black workers over a limited number of low-wage jobs" (Eskew 12). Because the owners and managers of local industries could always point to the labor surplus that the black community represented, they were able to make clear to working class whites that finding common cause with blacks was not in their economic interests.

It is no accident, then, that Southern cities like Atlanta that had more mixed economies did not experience the turmoil that Birmingham did. As Eskew points out, Bull Connor and his brutal suppression of protest "logically evolved from Birmingham's industrial heritage and its peculiar socioeconomic and political composition" (Eskew 12). While Atlanta's political and economic elite could negotiate with integrationists largely on their own terms, Birmingham was saddled with a white working class and industrial ownership class whose political power prevented such negotiation. While the owners of Birmingham's industrial plants lived elsewhere, Atlanta had more "indigenous capital," that "promoted

economic expansion at all costs” (Eskew 14). Birmingham’s main employers were more rigid, seeing low wages as their ultimate concern. As owners of extractive industries, they cared little about the city’s image or reputation.

However, the economic elites in Birmingham were hardly a monolithic group. The leaders of the movement groups, including Fred Shuttlesworth and Martin Luther King, Jr., realized that while the political situation in Birmingham was unshakeable, the schisms among the economic elites could be exploited to the movement’s benefit. They engaged a group of local non-industrial elites led by Sidney W. Smyer, a real estate executive. According to Eskew, “Smyer had realized the need for race reform after Birmingham received negative publicity following the vigilante violence that greeted the Freedom Riders in 1961” (Eskew 13). His faction of the white power structure represented the economic interests that were willing to accept some desegregation and might “sacrifice segregation for some pecuniary gain” (Eskew 13). The movement, as conceived by the formal movement organizations, had the task of exacerbating the division between Smyer’s group of economic elites and the industrial managers and owners—many of whom lived in the North—who relied on wage segregation.

Smyer’s coalition, which included prominent Chamber of Commerce members, was more closely aligned with the service economy. They were drawn from sectors that were more sensitive to the public image and investment climate of Birmingham than the distant owners of the extractive industries. While they were not as politically connected on the local, state and national levels, they did represent the emerging southern service economy that had already come to dominate Atlanta. Their priorities were minimizing disruption, forging conservative compromises, and keeping national civil rights leaders out of town. They also sought to reshape the governing structure of the city and “achieve the elusive goal of merging the suburban communities with the central city” (Bains 171). Such a merger would bring more “moderate” whites connected to the service economy into the city’s electorate. It would also provide greater balance in City Hall to the unyielding interests of the industrial elites.

The divisions among the black community were also pronounced. While there was undoubtedly crossover between the precariously employed Birmingham blacks and the constituencies represented by

Fred Shuttlesworth's Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the official movement groups generally focused on campaigns that middle class blacks could participate in. While the movement groups—particularly the ACMHR—represented a sharp contrast to the conservatism of traditional black leadership organizations, there were limits to the extent to which they could organize poor blacks. Birmingham blacks had strikingly different capacities for organized protest.

The economic diversity among Birmingham's blacks was striking. Eskew surveys the various black enclaves in Birmingham and their widely disparate income levels. On Birmingham's south side, blacks had an average annual income of \$1,500. In that area "black laborers and maids rented houses from absentee landlords" (Eskew 8). Slightly more affluent blacks lived in Tittusville, where median income was \$3,627 and "slightly more than half owned their homes" (Eskew 8). Across the city, the black middle class lived in College Hills and Graymont, "a formerly white community...with a median income of \$5,281" (Eskew 8). Much of the black middle class that populated these areas was made up of educators, who received lower wages than their white counterparts. Overall, median income for blacks was strikingly lower than that of whites. Bains points out that "median income for black families in Birmingham was \$3,000, which fell quite short of the \$6,200 mark for the relatively smaller white families" (Bains 161). Even white steel workers earned "an average family wage of \$6,600," double that of the average black family. The gap demonstrated the deeply segregated labor market in Birmingham, in which a fixed number of blacks were needed as educators and the rest were relegated to low-skill positions. While only 2.9% of the city's white workers held low-skilled positions, "38% of the black labor force worked in these jobs" (Bains 161).

There are no reliable analyses of the economic positions of the Birmingham Campaign's participants. However, it is clear that the initial protesters mainly came from Baptist congregations that drew from the black middle class. As the protests widened, the movement mobilized a wider swath of the community. Considering the limited numbers of the black middle class, and the fact that much of the middle class did not support the protests, it seems reasonable to assume that many protesters were lower

income. While it is unlikely that they were the desperately poor from the city's south side, they could not all have been educators, college students, and insurance salespeople. Taylor Branch depicts many of the congregants who attended mass meetings as housekeepers, manual laborers, and seasonal workers.

The most important and unifying aspect of the Birmingham black community, however, was the fact that it was more geographically confined and separated from whites than it had ever been. Despite the differences in black income and the geographic separation of black neighborhoods, by the 1950s, blacks in Alabama were in closer proximity and more separate from white surveillance than they had ever been before. Unlike McAdam, Oberschall and Morris, Piven and Cloward credit this new proximity and separation with enabling protest: "concentrated, separated, more independent of white domination than ever before, southern urban blacks burst forth in protest" (*Poor People's Movements*, 208).

Further disputing the RM and PPT explanations for the emergence of protest, Piven and Cloward argue that these theorists overemphasize the importance of lateral relationships in society. The movement groups that were formed were not insignificant to the specific development of the Civil Rights movement or the Birmingham Campaign, but they were not the only generators of protest. While Piven and Cloward note that "people have to be related to one another; they must have some sense of common identity, some sense of shared definitions of grievances and antagonists, some ability to communicate," they point out that these requirements "do not depend on the dense and enduring lateral relationships" that PPT and RM scholars made central to their analyses (*Normalizing*, 310).

Piven and Cloward's analysis might best explain the actual events of the Birmingham Campaign and the ways in which an economically diverse and partially indifferent black community interacted with the "organized" protest movement. In light of the wavering black support for the protests, the conflicts and opposition among organized groups, and the wildly varying events that took place during the Campaign, the highly organized depiction that RM and PPT theorists lay out seems inaccurate.

5. The Labor Movement and Wealth in Birmingham

Despite its industrial economy, Birmingham never became a union town. As organized labor spread rapidly in the mid-1930s, most of the foundries and plants in and near the city fought off unionization drives by bringing in black strikebreakers. New Deal politicians supported integrated—or at least bi-racial—unions, and the idea began to gain ground in Birmingham. Much of the white industrial working class in the city was of Italian descent and had only tenuous connections of convenience to the rigid segregationist ideology that had long dominated the city. In order to head off the growing support for cross-racial solidarity, the economic elite, which Eskew calls the “neo-Bourbons,” decided to “strengthen the colonial economy and reinforce[] the race wage” (Eskew 12). Just as bi-racial unions were forming in other parts of the country and a serious movement for industrial democracy was taking hold, Birmingham was moving in the opposite direction.

The decision to reform the original Bourbon system rather than acquiesce to the new contours of the industrial economy was a fateful one. It was an opportunistic move by the local ruling elite, but it actually made the shared prosperity that industrial democracy promised—and, to a large degree, delivered—impossible. By suppressing unionization, local elites yielded to the demands of U.S. Steel executives in Pittsburgh and New York. They kept the local industry extremely profitable for that company, but they also hindered the further development of a service economy by reinforcing the “colonial” economy. By guaranteeing continued low wages for U.S. Steel, the local elite made it difficult for the workers at that company to share in the post-World War II economic boom to the extent that those in other sectors did. To a certain extent, the inability of industrial workers to form strong unions kept the entire Birmingham region from developing a modern economy in the way that neighboring cities could. Where unions did form, the legally segregated labor market, compounded by union rules that required segregation, made their bargaining position weak. With an officially-excluded mass of underemployed black laborers, the few unions in Birmingham knew that U.S. Steel and other industrial giants in the city would always have a potential alternative if the unionized workers proved too disruptive.

In addition to these hindrances for Birmingham unions, there was the problem of exercising electoral muscle. Eskew estimates that “in 1953 only 60,000 to 65,000 of the possible 212,520 residents [of Birmingham] were registered to vote” and of those only about 15,000 were union members. Of those 15,000, most were members of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which mostly represented the higher skilled and higher wage jobs in the region. In 1954, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unsuccessfully “protested its inability to register semiskilled and unskilled workers” (Eskew 86). By keeping almost all of the unskilled laborers—unionized or not, black and white—off the voting rolls, the local political and economic class guaranteed that cross-racial political coalitions could not form. By preventing the formation of a voting block that could resemble the larger national Democratic coalition formed during the New Deal, the city was able to maintain a political elite that was largely immune to threats by organized labor and class-based solidarity.

In addition, the post-WWII years saw demographic shifts in the city that created greater unease among the middle-class whites that made up the electorate. Starting around 1950, wealthier residents of Birmingham’s white middle class communities starting moving to suburbs. Long-established communities like the West End saw an outflow of community leaders and an inflow of new, unknown residents from other parts of the city. As cohesion and familiarity were tested, social shifts also occurred. Eskew recounts how “a decline in wages, property values, population, and employment status, plus an increase in female workers” heralded a new, increasingly mechanized working economy (Eskew 89). The effects of these shifts were tremendous and largely caused whites in such neighborhoods to “strike[] out at the most obvious elements of change in defense of an increasingly archaic racial status quo” (Eskew 89). Whether it was fear of growing black communities or the increasingly precarious economic circumstances that many whites faced, the political system registered the worldview of these downwardly mobile whites in a racialized way.

These tensions were perhaps best embodied by Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor. Connor was a product of this white lower middle class and “epitomized its values and protected its interests while accepting the broad directives of the Big Mules” (Eskew 90). Despite his humble origins, Connor had

sided with the “Big Mules” of Birmingham early on. Before he moved into government work, he worked for Tennessee Coal and Iron and developed a reputation as a brutal repressor of unionization drives. The brutality had been necessary in the face of the New Deal, and he “carefully separated black from white in order to hinder working class solidarity” (Eskew 91). The obsessiveness and brutality with which he did this in the private sector was matched when he became the Police Commissioner. Connor’s jump from union-busting to enforcer of segregation was no accident. It reflected the concerns of Birmingham’s “Big Mules” and demonstrated interconnections between labor supply, unionization, and the racial divide that made Birmingham such a racially rigid city.

In a sense, the economic and political elite were attempting to prevent the development of lateral relationships between whites and blacks from developing. While blacks were more concentrated than ever before, the political and economic elite’s main concern was that they not find common cause with poor whites. On this point, most social movement theorists would likely agree. Where they begin to diverge, however, is on exactly which parts of the black community rose up to challenge this system of segregation and how they did so.

Most social movement theorists trace the movement’s origins to formal organizations and their ability to solicit outside resources. Locating the origins in specific places, RM and PPT analysts fail to acknowledge the breadth of protests. By focusing only on “official” protesters, they are blind to the large crowds of supportive, “disorganized” blacks that frequently gathered to watch the disciplined, non-violent movement activists take to the streets. As the Birmingham Campaign wore on, these “non-movement” crowds played increasingly important roles in the development of the Campaign and the trajectory of the civil rights movement.

6. Violence and Property Destruction in the Birmingham Campaign

Not only do PPT and RM analysts sideline or ignore the more violent outbursts of the Birmingham Campaign, they seem to exclude them entirely from the umbrella of tactics that they consider legitimate protest. Understanding the Birmingham Campaign as the outgrowth of the ACMHR and the SCLC, two explicitly non-violent groups, they founder in their explanations for the violent and destructive events that marked the Campaign.

On Sunday, April 14, 1963, after the arrest of Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy and Fred Shuttlesworth, a solidarity march of about 500 people left the Thirgood CME Church. They intended to go to the Southside Jail, where the three leaders were being held. However, Bull Connor had ordered the main avenue leading to the jail blocked. The march turned into an alley and was stopped by officers. After the paddy wagons removed most of the demonstrators, violence broke out. In his account of this event, Eskew estimates that the number of black bystanders watching this small march “numbered from 1,500 to 2,000” (Eskew, 246). As it moved through the poorest and most heavily black neighborhood in Birmingham, it drew attention—and apparently sympathy—from onlookers. When the paddy wagons had left, people from the massive crowd started pelting the remaining police with rocks. As the sidewalks swelled with irate neighbors, the police grew nervous and “with raised billy clubs” they “turned on the nonmovement participants in the protest” (Eskew, 246). Though they were able to disperse the crowd quickly, the skirmish was a sign of things to come not only in the Birmingham Campaign, but the national Civil Rights movement as well.

Before moving on to the other incidents of violence in the Birmingham Campaign, it is important to assess how RM or PPT theorists might have explained this event. Though it was relatively minor in the scope of the two month Campaign, it generated a *New York Times* article that “emphasized the black violence” and clearly put Bull Connor’s police force on edge (Eskew, 247). It could not have been overlooked in any honest assessment of the Campaign’s events. Yet, presumably because the acts of violence were not committed by “official” movement group members, the theorists do not incorporate the rock-throwing into any part of their analysis. Despite the fact that the actions were taken by a group of

blacks sympathetic to the marchers who likely shared similar goals (or at least similar enemies), the rock-throwing was not significant enough to command the attention of RM or PPT theorists.

The later instances of violence, however, were more widespread and more difficult to ignore. On Saturday, May 4, 1963 a small protest of children was again halted by Bull Connor's forces. A number of teenagers were detained for praying on the City Hall steps, others were detained for marching without a permit. According to Eskew, "violence erupted when police turned their attention away from the activists and toward the crowd of unorganized African Americans watching the event unfold" (Eskew 271). Again, the Birmingham Police had become more concerned about the growing groups of onlooking blacks than the protesters themselves. Eskew estimated that the bystanders numbered about 3,000 and grew increasingly unruly when no protests were allowed, brazenly violating police orders to stay out of a nearby park. According to Eskew, "angry black men mockingly danced about the elms and waved their arms, daring the defenders of white supremacy to sic the dogs and shoot the water" (Eskew 271). When the police did respond with their fire hoses, much of the crowd dispersed. However, a "riotous remnant hurled rocks and shards at white officials" and people on nearby rooftops "rained down bricks and bottles" (Eskew 271).

While the May 4 outburst was contained easily by police, it offered confirmation that the April 14 event had not been an isolated incident. While PPT and RM theorists still evaluated the movement in terms of the organized movement groups and congregations, it seems that the Birmingham Police had already recognized that the support for the movement in the black community extended far beyond the churches in which the city's black middle class prayed. Whether or not the thousands of onlookers who hurled projectiles maintained official affiliations with the "legitimate" movement groups, they clearly had some of the same grievances that had motivated those groups. And, unlike in previous decades when most Southern blacks were separated from each other and under close surveillance by local whites, they lived in close proximity in urban ghettos. Though police and white supremacist violence was nothing new in these neighborhoods, the agitation stirred up by the "legitimate" demonstrators had clearly opened up a space for these poorer, less organized blacks to wield their own disruptive power. These new dynamics of

the Birmingham Campaign would become undeniable a week later, when the first urban riot of the decade grew out of an attempt to take the life of Martin Luther King Jr.

Just after 10:45pm on the night of May 11, 1963, two bombs exploded in Birmingham. One destroyed part of the A.G. Gaston Motel, at which Martin Luther King had been staying during the Campaign. The other struck the house of MLK's brother, Reverend A.D. King. The bombs, which had been planted immediately after a massive Ku Klux Klan rally, sparked an almost immediate violent reaction in the black community. After the blast at the motel, "the arrival of the white squad cars sent the black crowd into a rage. Now the former bystanders hurled bricks and bottles at the officers. Members of the mob shouted 'kill 'em! Kill 'em!' at the policemen, who, waiting for reinforcements moved back" (Eskew, 301). Rioters burned and looted a 28 block area around the motel. Eskew estimates that "2,500 black people participated in the violence" (Eskew 301). The Birmingham Police responded with overwhelming and indiscriminate violence.

Shockingly, this event, which motivated President Kennedy to offer Sidney Smyer—the city's leading businessman—federal troops and a declaration of martial law, is not explained in PPT or RM accounts of the Civil Rights movement. The May 11 riot was the final mass event of the Birmingham Campaign and caught the attention of federal authorities and the local economic elite more than any other in the two month Campaign, but it received only fleeting mention by the RM and PPT theorists. McAdam sees federal intervention at the end of the campaign as a result of white violence, not a combination of white violence and the black response (McAdam 178). More significantly, McAdam and the others offer no explanation for the riot, seemingly consigning it to an undefined category of non-movement activity.

Piven and Cloward identify this shortcoming, arguing that RM and PPT theorists sideline the important social movement activity of "lower-stratum" groups. While the middle class church members who organized the formal organizations of the Birmingham Campaign were able to withdraw their participation from the city's downtown stores and pool their resources to avoid the worst repercussions of protest, it is likely that many of the poorer participants in the Birmingham riot did not shop at those stores at any point and had no resources to pool. Piven and Cloward suggest that "lower-stratum protesters have

some possibility of influence—including mobilizing third-party support—if their actions violate rules and disrupt the workings of an institution on which important groups depend” (*Normalizing*, 319). In this case, they were disrupting the fragile public peace that the white community had long depended upon in the wake of police or white supremacist violence.

Bains points out that “between 1957 and 1962, there were seventeen unsolved bombings of Negro churches and homes in the Birmingham area” (Bains 167). In all of those instances of brutal violence, there were no known collective, violent responses from the black community of Birmingham. On the night of May 11, in the wake of mass arrests, the release of police dogs on minors, random arrests, and two bombings, the pattern of non-response to provocative violence was reversed. While the riot was certainly not an organized, coordinated effort to affect policy or drive a wedge between factions in the opposition, it was a decisive factor in both of those changes. Because the riot was not associated with a formal organization, it created an institutional disruption that could “arouse an array of third parties, including important economic interests,” (*Normalizing* 319). Notably, President Kennedy’s first call to a Birmingham leader after the riot was not to any member of the city’s divided political elite, but to Smyer, a businessman who was concerned about the political and social stability of the city in which he owned a great deal of property. Not wanting the reputation and investment climate in the city to suffer, Smyer was empowered by the events of the Birmingham Campaign to negotiate separately from the fractured and entrenched political elite. The May 11 riot added urgency and greater legitimacy to Smyer’s negotiations with the integrationists. As Piven and Cloward suggest, the riot may have been an instance of “disruptive protest” that “makes an important contribution to elite fragmentation and electoral dealignment” (*Normalizing* 321). Though the electoral effects would accumulate over time and take place on a scale that dwarfed local Birmingham politics, there is no doubt that it played a role.

In the hours after the May 11 riot, the Kennedy White House’s deliberations were revealing. They considered the implications of sending federal troops into a former Confederate state. The Alabama State Police that had been sent in to quell the riot had used greater brutality than even the Birmingham Police. According to Branch’s account, this posed a problem: “unless the Administration was willing to brand the

state troopers as the threat to public order—in effect, to declare war on Alabama—it would have to justify the use of federal troops as a means of quelling the Negroes, not the whites” (Branch, 797). Branch surmised that this situation would empower the moderate whites of Birmingham to blame the disruption on the integrationists and walk away from the agreement they formed with the movement leaders. The Kennedy Administration recognized that if the agreement fell apart, the black community would be outraged and, in the words of Kennedy, “uncontrollable” (797). Piven and Cloward argue that “it was the confrontation between the people and the police that was [the Birmingham Campaign’s] distinguishing feature and the source of its influence on the national government” (*Poor People’s*, 241). If federal troops were brought in to police black neighborhoods, they would be seen as reinforcing the racist local law enforcement. Rather than a corrective to Bull Connor’s brutality, the federal government would be interpreted as simply a more effective version of the local police.

Of course, moving federal troops in to patrol black neighborhoods would not only portend further chaos in Birmingham, it would also send signals to blacks in both the north and south that the Kennedy Administration—and the Democratic Party more generally—was siding with segregationists. This was an untenable position for a party that increasingly needed Northern black votes to win elections.

The Kennedy Administration eventually decided to deploy U.S. Army troops near Birmingham. In Branch’s telling, “this maneuver would give the nation’s liberals the appearance of movement in support of the agreement [between moderate whites and the integrationists], while positioning the troops to intervene” (Branch, 798). It would also put Bull Connor and Alabama Governor George Wallace on alert that the federal troops could intervene at any point without also giving them an excuse to pressure local merchants to cancel the agreement.

With federal troops outside the city, the Justice Department conferring with the “Senior Citizens’ Committee” through Sidney Smyer, and gauging the reactions of the movement leaders, Kennedy was able to pressure the white moderates to fully accept the agreement while also encouraging a return to order. Previous efforts by the Administration to broker a compromise between the white moderates and

the movement had proved unsuccessful. It was the dramatic events of May 11 and 12 that brought them some success, largely on the movement's terms.

One month after the May 11 riots, President Kennedy announced that he would soon introduce a civil rights bill. Before the Birmingham Campaign he had introduced a weak bill and had simply allowed it to languish in Congress. Piven and Cloward point out that the Birmingham Campaign had "forced federal action" (*Poor People's* 244). They point to Kennedy's June 11 speech as a full-throated justification of the Birmingham Campaign's central demands, and emphasize the effect the speech had on blacks across the country. For the first time, the president had fully endorsed the goals of the civil rights movement and had pledged concrete action to achieve them.

The Birmingham Campaign, from the sit-ins and childrens' marches to the full scale riot of May 11, had pushed the Kennedy Administration to support the civil rights movement. The Campaign's successful strategies, along with the spontaneous energy and violent reactions of both whites and blacks, had further isolated southern whites from the national Democratic Party and further consolidated blacks as a core, reliable Democratic constituency. These trends had been evident for quite some time, but the movement's tactics exacerbated them. The Birmingham Campaign became an especially dramatic moment in a long process of destroying the one-party dominance of the south.

While it is clear that riot of May 11 had tremendous effects on the movement and the political system, it is important to understand the circumstances out of which these acts of violence emerged. Birmingham's black underclass had long been subject to brutal treatment by the Birmingham Police Department. In the early 1950s the NAACP had appealed to the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Steel to force reform in its ranks. According to Eskew, random beatings of blacks by Birmingham police were extremely common, and deaths in the city jail were a common occurrence. While media coverage of the (also frequent) brutalizing of whites by city police was common, coverage of violence against blacks was almost unheard of. Because police violence was almost always against individual blacks, the police attacks on civil rights protesters were probably unique. For the first time, blacks—often middle class—

were openly defying the Birmingham Police in large numbers. These attacks were witnessed by black bystanders in even larger numbers. Rather than isolated acts against lone black men, these acts of police violence were undertaken in a context that was already riven with defiance and collective action. While the protesters' defiance was aimed at the economic elite, their actual conflicts on the streets were with the police department. These everyday tormentors of blacks might have seemed an apt target for the crowds of blacks watching from the sidewalks. Rather than understand the actions of these crowds as irrational and apolitical, as RM and PPT theorists tend to, it would be better to understand them as an integral part of a wider movement. Rather than aberrant outbursts, these actions can be seen as having "continuity with organized social life" (*Normalizing Collective Protest*, 301). However, these actions were only possible in a context of general defiance that had been ushered in by the "official" protesters. They made it possible for the community to respond to police violence in a way that it had not through the decades of random beatings and church bombings by white supremacists. The acts of violence committed during some points of the Birmingham Campaign were deeply connected to "normal" social life, but they were only possible in circumstances in which others were engaged in defiant action.

While RM and PPT analysts of the Birmingham campaign would draw a sharp line between the actions of "official" protesters organized and deployed by movement groups and those who engaged in rioting, the context in which both groups acted was similar. The "official" protesters marching to pray on the steps City Hall or integrating lunch counters were challenging prevailing norms by making "efforts to alter the parameters of the permissible" (*Normalizing*, 303). Similarly, those who engaged in rioting were breaking a long-standing norm proscribing any response to police or white supremacist violence. While these actions are obviously very different, they are both examples of defiant rule-breaking. In this sense, they are dissimilar to a community meeting or a press conference. For RM and PPT analysts, however, rule-abiding collective action and rule-breaking collective action are often bound together. In the end, however, Piven and Cloward point out that the rule breaking actions of "lower-stratum" protesters are consigned to the margins and disparaged as "irrational and apolitical eruptions" (*Normalizing*, 323).

7. Wavering Support—From a Movement of Middle Class Churchgoers to a Widespread Revolt

RM and PPT analysts depict a movement that is largely directed and drawn from the membership of established organizations. Morris suggests that new organizations are important to the development of a movement. McAdam believes movement participants are drawn from already-existing repurposed organizations. While it is undoubtedly true that movement organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress of Racial Equality, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee were crucial to devising movement strategy and encouraging participation in the movement, the actual development of the Birmingham Campaign suggests that movement organizations are not the exclusive force propelling movements forward.

In his account of the Birmingham Campaign, Taylor Branch details how movement leaders struggled to mobilize Birmingham's black community on numerous occasions. By late April 1963, the protests were losing media coverage to other civil rights-related events. Having been denied additional parade permits, the central figures in the Campaign found it difficult to convince their communities to risk arrest when the momentum of the protest was flagging and the strategic direction unclear. After attempting to re-start the struggling protest several times, the leaders decided to enlist children in the struggle, strategically using them to fill the City Jail. On May 2, 1963 the "D-Day" youth march set out from Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and changed the dynamic of the movement. Branch termed this strategic move "the children's miracle" (Branch, 756). By using children, movement leaders were able to re-energize the protest with the anger of the (now jailed) childrens' parents. They also had sufficient numbers to shut down the central business district of the city, halting commerce.

Between the church and the business district, however, was Kelly Ingram Park. In the park, police confronted the children with fire hoses, and unleashed torrents of high-pressure water on children as young as eight. Connor's forces momentarily stopped the children's march towards downtown. The march stopped long enough for scenes of immense brutality to be caught on camera. Footage of the children being brutalized by police motivated the city's black elite—who were secretly negotiating a

settlement of the protests with city leaders—to fully endorse the leadership and tactics of the movement leaders. As in other instances of police violence, the bystanders watching the march reacted angrily. Outraged at the vicious treatment of children, onlookers threw bricks and rocks at fire hose wielding police. As the skirmish between bystanders and police escalated, the children continued to pour out of the church and continue downtown. Realizing they were being outmaneuvered, the police unleashed dogs on the protesters and bystanders.

In Branch's account, the use of children and Connor's violent reaction to those children was a "moment of baptism for the civil rights movement, and Birmingham's last effort to wash away the stain off dissent against segregation" (Branch 759). The television footage and photographs from that day are some of the most famous of the civil rights movement. Branch noted that after the "children's crusade," officials from the Justice Department and Birmingham's moderate white elite "perceive[d] that dissent against King was evaporating in Negro Birmingham" (Branch 762). The antagonistic tactics that King, Shuttlesworth, Bevel and others pushed had long divided the community and made the black elite uncomfortable. When white commentators, including Robert Kennedy, stressed the welfare of black children in Birmingham, movement leaders could now easily retort that segregation clearly threatened the welfare of black children. Bull Connor had viscerally proven the danger of segregation to black children, and it was hard for wavering commentators to speak up in favor of blacks while decrying the audacious movement leaders.

The children's crusade revitalized the Birmingham Campaign. "D-Day" had once again swelled the ranks of the movement. Incensed parents were willing to go to jail because their children were already there. Non-committal blacks now firmly felt the urgency of immediate, militant protest.

Despite the centrality of the children's crusade to the Birmingham Campaign and the civil rights movement as a whole, RM and PPT analysts say relatively little about it. Interestingly, the organization of the crusade and its unfolding bring several tenets of RM and PPT perspectives into question. In Branch's telling, the recruitment of children was a haphazard, somewhat spontaneous process. Children were not recruited through congregations, but through their schools. Though the "official" movement encouraged

youth protest, the mobilization did not fit into the confines of movement organization that RM and PPT analysts describe. Radio disc jockeys promoted a mass walkout and popular students encouraged others to join. According to Branch, movement leaders decided that they should “send volunteers to jail over the objections of their parents” (Branch 755). The students were not mobilized by the SCLC, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, or even the Baptist congregations that birthed the movement organizations. It was cobbled together through hype, and drew on the frustrations of young people eager to participate in a movement. In other words, their involvement did not grow out of new “lateral integration,” but through existing lateral integration and the somewhat spontaneous developments that can grow out of those relationships. What was important was not the existence of those lateral relationships, but the fact that those students were suddenly willing and inspired to join the movement.

Similarly, the actual unfolding of the children’s crusade depended on the spontaneity of the childrens’ actions and the response of bystanders and the police. The reactions of bystanders and police significantly altered the movement and produced some of the most iconic images of the movement. Without police provocation and the angry reactions of bystanders, widespread sympathy for the unfortunate violence against children might never have developed. RM and PPT analysts never mention the threat of violence by black onlookers as a crucial factor in determining the outcome of the movement, but it was central to the children’s crusade. In the days following May 2, as the children’s crusade escalated, the reality of angry bystanders intervening in protests continued to shape their outcome. By the height of the Birmingham Campaign, when protesters took over the central business district, protesters had been joined by bystanders as they routed around police lines and flooded the shopping area. According to Branch, movement leaders knew that “half or more of the Negroes [] paralyzing the retail district were bystanders who had joined spontaneously upon seeing the demonstrators run wild without getting arrested. Many did not have the slightest training or interest in nonviolent discipline” (Branch 778).

The reality of this triumphant moment in the Birmingham Campaign is difficult to fit into RM or PPT analyses. When protesters were finally able to shut down the central business district and strike a

decisive blow to the city's economic elites, they were able to do so because they had ignited the energies of bystanders who had no previous experience in the organized movement. Similar bystanders had enabled them to gain access to the downtown area by distracting Bull Connor's police forces. This unplanned synchronization between the organized and unorganized movements, between strategy and spontaneity, had made one of the most triumphant moments of the civil rights movement possible. If its history is written without any acknowledgement of the spontaneity that made it possible, much is being missed. An accurate analysis of the Campaign must take into account the "organized" movement based in well-known movement groups and Baptist congregations, as well as the less organized elements that made its achievements possible.

8. An Incomplete Campaign—Resource Mobilization and Political Process Theory Versions of the Birmingham Campaign

Perhaps the most striking sentiment shared by RM and PPT analysts is that social movements are “political rather than psychological phenomena,” (McAdam, 36). While they disagree on many points, RM and PPT analysts are unified in rejecting the central assumption of earlier malintegration theorists—that psychological pressure is instrumental in forming movements. While Piven and Cloward applaud RM and PPT analysts for moving past an understanding of social movements as mindless eruptions, they perhaps go too far and “normalize” some of the more unusual forms of collective protest. Piven and Cloward assert that malintegration theorists do not claim that “breakdown is a necessary precondition of normative forms of group action,” such as community meetings or electoral rallies, but rather that it sought to explain non-normative, rule-breaking behavior (*Normalizing*, 306). They point out that in RM and political process theory, “because protest grows out of everyday social organization, which creates collective capacities, RM analysts claim that it is normal.” (*Normalizing*, 308). Because protest emerges from pre-existing institutions, it is by definition normal and organized. It results from deep social integration, not any sort of breakdown.

Obviously, the events of the Birmingham Campaign considerably complicate this model. While the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and the SCLC were clearly a force in organizing the Campaign, it went far beyond those groups as well. While RM theorists simply assert that movement groups were able to marshal resources and mobilize members, McAdam claims that institutions were actually redefined to become movement oriented. As noted above, McAdam claimed that “it was not so much that movement participants were recruited from among the ranks of active churchgoers as it was a case of church membership itself being redefined to include movement participation as a primary requisite of the role” (McAdam, 129). Both schools of thought, however, locate collective protest in institutions, not in psychological pressure on a population.

However, the more rebellious, less programmed actions of the Birmingham Campaign seem not to have erupted from these institutions or their membership at all. Key movements in the Campaign were

spontaneous and involved the participation of bystanders who quickly mobilized—sometimes violently—against police and white supremacist violence. While RM and PPT analysts generally exclude the May 11 riot from the Campaign as a whole, they also do not adequately take account of the earlier actions involving supportive bystanders, which were crucial in shaping the trajectory of the movement. These incidents, in which large numbers of Birmingham blacks reacted to police attempts to halt “official” movement demonstrators, are tellingly not explained by RM and PPT analysts. They are instances of collective protest that did not seem to grow directly out of movement groups and institutions. Instead, they emerge from sympathy with protesters and, most likely, a shared experience of police violence. While they are not mindless outbursts, they certainly have a psychological component. Political and psychological phenomena in a social movement are far more difficult to separate if one looks at the actual unfolding of events rather than simply the structures, decisions, and actions of movement groups.

They May 11 riot, of course, also had a psychological dimension. The horrifying violence of the white supremacist bombings drove many Birmingham residents to set fire to buildings and attack police. The riot did not emerge from movement groups, but was instead a spontaneous action. But the riot was undoubtedly a form of collective protest. It was disorganized and unruly, but it falls within the broad parameters of what malintegration theorists sought to explain. However, RM and PPT analysts separate the riot from other forms of collective protest, conflating some forms of non-normative collective protest with normative behavior and consigning other forms of non-normative protest to an unexplained realm outside of movements altogether.

McAdam explains political process theory as an attempt to explain social movements as political phenomenon rather than psychological phenomenon. He asserts that “the factors shaping institutionalized political processes are argued to be of equal analytic utility in accounting for social insurgency” (McAdam 36). Political cues, in other words, can act as inducements to protest to an equal or greater degree than conditions of societal breakdown. While this seems to explain the emergence of the civil rights movement during a time of relative prosperity and increasing political opportunity for southern blacks, the power of psychological pressure should not be written off entirely. A movement that was

primarily driven by political cues would be highly institutional and organized, but the Birmingham Campaign shows that a movement's most consequential actions and moments are anything but.

McAdam also argues that “a movement represents a continuous process from generation to decline, rather than a discrete series of developmental stages” (McAdam, 36). This is certainly true, and efforts to explain an entire movement through one campaign are ill fated. However, one must also look at discrete campaigns like the one in Birmingham to discern how movements develop. While there are not simply a series of discrete stages, there are a series of events that unfold in reaction to each other. As the Birmingham Campaign shows, these events are not all guided and planned by institutions or groups. Instead, they unfold unpredictably and are beyond the control of many movement leaders. This reality complicates McAdam's “continuous process” of movement development. While the concept seems correct, it might not be specific enough. Instead of being a series of communications between movement groups and political and economic elites, the “continuous process” must include unplanned actions and unintended consequences. Though McAdam notes that the “continuous process” makes movement outcomes unpredictable, he does not seem to grasp exactly how unpredictable the day-to-day development of the Birmingham Campaign actually was.

McAdam acknowledges that the “pace and character of insurgency come to exercise a powerful influence on the development of the movement” through the effect they have on political opportunities, the level of social control, organizational strength, and socioeconomic processes. However, he fails to grapple with the actual character of the insurgency at some of the most crucial moments. As Piven and Cloward note, he ignores the Birmingham riot altogether and, when discussing other riots he “ignores the question of why they occurred” (*Normalizing*, 316). While McAdam is correct for insisting that movements must be analyzed as a “continuous process,” that process cannot only include selected elements of protest. In order to fully comprehend the Birmingham Campaign, one must recognize that all forms of non-normative collective behavior affect the trajectory of movements. By excluding riots from his explanation for movement emergence, success, and decline, McAdam fails to explain key moments in both individual campaigns as well as the movement as a whole.

Aldon Morris also has a somewhat restrictive analysis of the Birmingham Campaign. In an interesting twist on RM, Morris sees the Campaign as an effort to generate an indigenous mobilization of resources in order to shut down the city and force elites to compromise. He argues that rather than seeking to provoke white supremacist violence, as McAdam and others suggest, the Campaign was simply an effort to halt the normal machinations of the city. In a 1993 article titled “Birmingham Confrontation Reconsidered: An Analysis of the Dynamics and Tactics of Mobilization,” Aldon Morris expanded on his prior analysis of the Birmingham Campaign, arguing more forcefully that it was not the provocation of police violence that triggered federal concern, but rather the Campaign’s ability to interrupt the normal functioning of the city. According to Morris, the Kennedy Administration’s pressure on local elites was a “response to the widespread breakdown of economic and social order” (Morris, 623).

While this reading of the Campaign’s events is a welcome divergence from other RM scholars, who focused primarily on the movement’s ability to attract outside sympathy, it is not entirely correct. The Campaign did, of course, bring great disruption to Birmingham. It threatened the viability of several downtown businesses and essentially blocked most economic activity for at least two days. However, the economic elites from Smyer’s Senior Citizens’ committee were not just concerned about the immediate disruption of businesses. They were landowners and service sector employers rather than industry magnates, and were thus much more concerned about the investment climate in the city. Needing to increase land values and attract outside capital, they did not want Birmingham to be seen as a center of backwardness and white supremacist violence. Eager to quell the Campaign in as quiet a manner as possible, they were forced to the bargaining table not just through the Campaign’s ability to disrupt commerce, but its ability to tarnish Birmingham’s reputation. Nervous about further violence, the Senior Citizens’ committee could be persuaded to make concessions. Pressure came not only from Campaign leaders but also the Kennedy Administration, who were concerned about the effects of violence and disorder on their fragile electoral coalition.

While Morris issues an important corrective to RM theorists who overemphasize external resources, his emphasis on creative street tactics also ignores the power of violent imagery in bending the economic elite to the will of movement leaders.

In another departure from standard RM theory, Morris argues that charismatic leaders played a central role in generating and directing the movement. He credits charismatic leaders not with initiating movements, but with seizing opportunities for growth and success. For Morris, charisma had an “independent effect on movements” rather than just an incidental one (Morris, 279). Having clear leaders who could galvanize large number of people to take risks was essential to sustained campaigns like the one in Birmingham. When these leaders had “both organizational backing and charisma,” they were capable of massive, sustained mobilizations that could challenge white supremacy (Morris, 279).

Though the presence of national leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and local leaders like Fred Shuttlesworth was important to mobilizing church members in the initial phases of the movement, their ability to do so diminished significantly as the Birmingham Campaign wore on. By late April 1963, the Campaign needed the spectacle of the “children’s crusade” and the violence deployed against children in order to rejuvenate itself. The tactical innovations that saved the campaign repeatedly were not usually the ideas of the charismatic leaders. The most important strategic ideas were more commonly the work of low-profile activists like James Bevel and Ella Baker. Bevel had even pressed the idea of the children’s crusade despite misgivings from several of the “charismatic leaders” that Morris highlights.

Morris claims that, in addition to the strategic skills of activists, leaders possess charisma. Charisma enables them to communicate the movement’s message widely. This may be the case, but it does not follow that the confines of the movement fall along lines that charismatic leaders lay out. While leaders can articulate a movement’s message and speak for the organizations they represent, they cannot necessarily speak for all those who consider themselves part of the movement. For instance, the bystanders who threw bricks when they witnessed police attacking protesters might have been galvanized by Martin Luther King Jr.’s message, but they might have seen the movement from a different perspective. The point is not that Martin Luther King did not have a relevant message, but that the forces animating

the movement were broader than those he could mobilize. While King's message may have resonated, it could not define the movement for all its participants.

In addition to his Weberian analysis of the movement, Morris tweaks RM theory slightly by highlighting the importance of nonbureaucratic formal organizations. These did, in fact, allow quick decision making and flexibility in the Birmingham Campaign. It is impossible to imagine an overly bureaucratic or cautious organization allowing the use of children in protest or deciding to swarm the central city in a flood of chaos. While there were clashes between the national organizations like SCLC, CORE and others and the local organizations and congregations, the loose structure of all of these organizations allowed them to avoid the pitfalls of over-bureaucratization that often hinder movements. However, it is also important to reiterate that many of the key moments of the campaign were not planned or voted on by *any* organizations, but developed through the interplay of forces on the streets. In addition, the reactions to the white supremacist bombings of May 11 significantly altered the trajectory of the Campaign. These reactions were not discussed, voted on or planned by anyone, nor were the reactions of bystanders to violent police arrests of protesters. Though the nonbureaucratic formal organization was important to the early civil rights movement, and the Birmingham Campaign in particular, they cannot explain how the movement or the Campaign developed.

Like Morris, Oberschall misunderstands the origins of the Civil Rights movement and the development of the Birmingham Campaign. By focusing on the difficult social circumstances of southern blacks, he blinds himself to the new opportunities for collective protest that southern blacks found in the urban south. Because he assumes the prerequisite for protest are strong pre-existing organizations and resources to sustain those organizations, he assumes that protest can only emerge in communities that possess those things. This is not only a misunderstanding of the Birmingham Campaign and the diverse social forces that shaped it, but a class-biased understanding of the movement as a whole.

If Oberschall's analysis were true of the Birmingham Campaign, the Campaign's success would be highly dependent on outside support. Instead, the forces that escalated the Campaign were almost

entirely endogenous to the city's black community. Of course, bail money and legal defense funds were necessary, and those were collected mainly from northern liberals. However, by the end of the campaign, the purpose of street mobilizations was not to endure symbolic, morally superior acquiescence to the police, it was to fill the jails, provoke white violence, and shut down the city's commercial center. This was done with masses of people, not masses of external capital or support.

The Kennedy Administration's support was, of course, crucial. The federal government was able to place enough pressure on the city's local business elite to eventually make concessions. However, this pressure was applied *as a result of* the actions by civil rights activists in the streets. Because the black community in Birmingham was concentrated and relatively free from white surveillance, they were able to mount a protest of their own. External resources were not a precondition to the Campaign, they flowed in as a result of it. Though Oberschall is likely correct that rural southern blacks were still not independent enough from white control to mount significant protest, he errs when he ignores the fact that urban southern blacks were able to generate protest without external support.

9. Conclusion

In 1963, Birmingham was a violently segregated city with an unusual economy for an urban area in the South. It was heavily industrial, but the largest industrial operations were controlled from far away. There was low union density and a long history of settling labor disputes by using the massive surplus of black workers to break strikes. Unlike most northern cities, a New Deal Democratic coalition had not fully developed. There was no alliance between poor ethnic whites and blacks. However, an emerging service sector was beginning to pull more weight in the area's economy. Eyeing Atlanta as an example, the leaders of this sector wanted to avoid intense racial clashes in order to repair the city's backward, carpetbagger image and create a favorable investment climate.

In the years after World War II, many wealthy whites had moved out, into the ring of suburbs surrounding the city. This shift, combined with a massive in-migration of rural blacks, created a general feeling of unease and social dislocation in the city. It was in this context that anxious whites elected Bull Connor as head of the Birmingham Police. It was also in this context that tens of thousands of urban blacks were concentrated in black neighborhoods for the first time. Removed from plantation life, they now lived in close proximity. Largely confined to menial, precarious labor, they were nonetheless able to create a fragile economy separate from whites.

While official protest against segregation was initiated largely by the black middle class, many of whom were members of "official" movement organizations or activist congregations, the conditions that made protest possible were more widespread throughout the community. Birmingham's blacks were concentrated, and no longer under the intense surveillance of whites. The dissolution of the plantation economy had landed them in ghettos, and they were largely left out of post-war prosperity. Though middle class blacks were able to gain a foothold in the professions, many were still excluded from even menial industrial work.

It was these conditions that led to the protests of April-May of 1963. While Resource Mobilization and Political Process Theory analysts locate the origins of the movement in external resources, movement organizations, or pre-existing institutions, Birmingham shows us that the true

origins of the movement are broader historical shifts and the pressures that those shifts placed on the black community. Resources and organizations are not insignificant, but an understanding of the Birmingham Campaign that is limited to those factors will omit large swaths of the black community. They show us a class biased and non-comprehensive view of the true origins of both the Birmingham Campaign and the broader civil rights movement.

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