Thinking about Honey

Back in 1998, Harry and I taught a version of this course, which included the nineteenth century and many different books, but we used both Honey and Gabin, as we are doing now. At that time, Honey represented our first foray into the topic of labor and civil rights—a topic we have been discussing for the past two weeks. Also, last time around we had a history of the rise and fall of the House of Labor—a much better foundation in labor history (based on Montgomery 1989—see 1998 syllabus for complete citation).

This time, however, we have benefitted from a much better foundation in Marxist theories of capitalist crisis and from an analysis of the Wobblies, which provided our base for considering craft versus industrial unionism and various flavors of Left politics: Socialist, Socialist Labor, communist and Anarcho-syndicalist—to which we have more recently added Social Democratic liberalism. Actually, I had forgotten that last time we did not include Dubofsky’s history of the Wobblies. That was something that we added when we did our popular music and political protest course.

So, re-reading Honey makes me think about all that we have been discussing and how this relates to the story that Honey tells—at least in the first week’s readings—intro and parts I and II.

Particularly in Part I, Honey clarifies the nature of the Jim Crow South and the Southern Democratic party, including the Crump machine. So far we have been focused on the North and West and on the Progressive Republican and New Deal Democratic parties. Here we are reminded that there were two two-party systems in the U.S. between 1860 and 1972.

The presidential election of 1860 destroyed the Whig party and fundamentally changed the Democratic party and the nature of bipartisanship. The Republican party became the party of the Freedmen and remained so until first Johnson and then Nixon marked a partisan realignment that is so apparent today. The Democratic party became the party of the white man—the Redeemer party that re-established hegemonic whiteness and eventually institutionalized Jim Crow law—legal segregation and the personal, political and economic repression that Morris (1983) labelled “tripartite oppression.”

The Progressive Republican party of the North and the New Deal Democratic party did not exist in the South. FDR managed to secure the Southern Democratic acceptance of New Deal programs only because they did not extend to agricultural and domestic workers (which constituted most Southern blacks). The struggle between Northern Democratic machine politicians, who effectively controlled the immigrant vote, and Progressive Republicans, who promoted civil service as an antidote for the machine, was unknown in the South.

Thus we see how the federal government was largely unwilling to defend the rights of Southern labor under the terms of the Wagner Act or to extend the employment opportunities of the NRA to Southern blacks. The opening story of how Thomas Watkins was driven out of Memphis in 1939 captures the essence of Jim Crow and Boss Crump. Crump managed to keep the unions out of the major manufacturing plants and to keep blacks under control. As Honey reports, “The basic conditions that kept southern labor unorganized and underpaid remained in place. At the same time, one-man rule grew stronger, providing one of the starkest examples of a repressive social order found all across the Deep South.” (p. 64).

What is truly amazing in this context are the labor uprisings of 1939-1941. This raises a series of questions about the AFL and CIO organization, leadership, strategy, opportunities and tactics, which might help us to understand what happened.

Questions for Consideration

1. How did a black AFL union and a white CIO union manage to cooperate to win a major victory in 1939?
2. How was a black CIO union defeated by a white AFL union in 1941?
3. What happened between 1939 and 1941?
4. Why would black dock workers, in 1937, organize as an AFL union, despite the fact that the CIO had a better record of promoting civil rights (see Honey, pp. 83-7)?
5. Consider the possibility that black and CIO militancy succeeded in the drive to unionize Firestone and thereby challenge capital flight. Was the victory for the AFL really a defeat for labor?

**Honey 2**

Rather than creating a new document that I might or might not be able to copy to our website, or simply doing nothing to inspire your writing or our discussion before tomorrow afternoon, I decided to add this postscript to last week’s document—still called Honey1.

This week we really need to come back to a more global perspective on race, class, and gender to understand how “racial and sexual taboos especially forbid white women and black men from any sort of contact outside the master-servant relationship” (Honey p. 195). We also need to consider both the unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism and the converging and diverging paths of the struggles for racial and gender justice, 1830-1968. This takes us into a set of literatures that includes McAdam on Black Insurgency and Freedom Summer, along with a series of historical and sociological studies of abolitionism and feminism.

My Social Movements course website should have most of the sources, so I won’t worry about that here. Suffice it to say that Abolitionism was, arguably, the first social movement (unless we want to include religions and empires—cults and nationalist or internationalist wars of conquest and resistance to same). Here I am following Tilly and Woods on the discovery of the social movement as a “modern” repertoire of political contention. We can discuss this later if you would like.

Briefly, beginning in about 1830, Abolitionists, including Garrisonians and more radical (revolutionary) strains, were beginning to threaten the federal consensus that congress would not entertain abolitionist talk. Reaction to the threat of abolitionism was varied—violence and attempts to temper or channel racial violence, away from burning runaway slaves and freedmen accused of crimes in the hill-country bordering the plantations, toward hanging or paramilitary campaigns that were both more effective and more “civilized.”

Women from the North and South and black men and women, including Frederick Douglass, were abolitionists. They attended the London Abolitionist conference where women were relegated to balcony seating and Douglass joined them in protest. This gender discrimination within Abolitionism inspired Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others to organize the Senneca Falls (NY) convention in 1848, which is generally recognized as the birth of the gender justice movement—although it might be that Aristophanes was inspired by something to write Lysistrata in 410 BC.

That possibility notwithstanding, between 1848 and 1863 (January), the date of the Emancipation Proclamation, the struggles for racial and gender justice were compatible if not always cooperative ventures that were rooted in similar but different gender and racial experiences in a racist, patriarchal USA, where neither blacks nor women had any rights that white men were legally required to obey. It was only in the context of emancipation and civil rights, notably voting rights, that the cleavage between gender justice (Stanton and Susan B. Anthony) and advocates of Civil Rights—Radical Republicans and more moderate voices, including Horace Greeley and others, developed.

Women decided to advance their claim to suffrage by contrasting the disenfranchised professional or middle class white women and the recently freed black men, who had neither religious nor educational guidance that might serve to protect them from demagogues (implying perhaps that Radical Republicans were included in this category). Why these nice white ladies decided to follow this path would be an interesting question for another course, where we could read Stanton and Anthony and Margaret Fuller, and look at the Grimké sisters, Lucretia Mott and, of course, Garrison and Douglass.

For our purposes, we can simply recognize that the problems facing white women and black men, the AFL and the CIO, cannot be laid at the feet of the Southern racists and corrupt politicians, who are obviously the bad guys here, in Honey’s account.

Questions

1. How did USA entry into WWII change the situation that blacks and the CIO faced in 1941—after the AFL won the Firestone election? Did this generate resources or political opportunities (divided elites, powerful allies, and a reluctance to repress challengers)?
2. How important were black men and white women in leading the charge against the AFL-Crump-local capitalist alliance? In what way were they uniquely capable of challenging the governing coalition?
3. How was this similar to and different from the campaigns of 1937-1941 that we discussed last week?
4. How is it that the good guys lost again? Why did blacks and women and industrial unions all fall victim to McCarthyism and the red purge of the Fifties? Were there strategic errors? Who messed up? How?
5. Was this just another cycle of political opportunities, leaving the residue of reform, or were the challengers fooled again?
6. How did these struggles in Memphis set the stage for the Civil Rights campaign that followed? How significant is it that MLK, Jr. was shot in Memphis?
7. Reece McGee came to Purdue in the Mid 1960s after writing a letter to the editor of a Texas newspaper, explaining why the assassination of JFK “had to be in Dallas." Yes, he had tenure, but that was not enough to protect him. Are we still fighting for race, class, and gender justice? How are we doing? Who are we forgetting?