

WARRIORS WITHOUT WEAPONS

Road To Freedom: Photographs of the Civil Rights Movement, 1956–1968

Atlanta: High Museum Of Art, 2008

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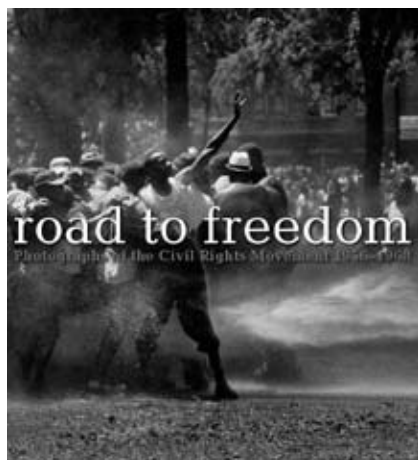
“Road To Freedom: Photographs of the Civil Rights Movement, 1956–1968,” organized by Julian Cox, curator of photography at the High Museum of Art, is one of the most noteworthy exhibitions devoted to photography of the Civil Rights Movement in years.¹ Cox’s catalog essay provides a first-rate overview of the era and the role that small, black-and-white photographs played in shaping and preserving it. The exhibition, consisting of some two hundred photographs by about fifty photographers, covers events from the Montgomery Bus Protest to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination and is based on the High’s vastly expanded permanent collection of Civil Rights-era photography.

When King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington, DC, in 1963 it was a time when some thought ideals could be achieved through interracial cooperation. In this non-violent struggle for justice, members of “The Movement” had learned they needed mainstream media attention and organized actions whose resulting images helped to facilitate social change.² Within this zeitgeist, Danny Lyon, a young, white northerner, was recruited by James Forman to be the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s first official photographer. Lyon ruminates, “The Movement pictures which were most effective were a type of propaganda. These ‘kids’ were in a holy war to bring down the evil of segregation. [Bob] Adelman’s picture of a cluster of demonstrators, two with arms aloft as they are hit by the water, is straight of out an image from the French Revolution by David.”³ Such images signify what Cornell Capa called “The Concerned Photographer”⁴ and represent one of classic photojournalism’s last hurrahs.

Eventually, the courage and patience to withstand name-calling, beatings, attack dogs, fire hoses, jail, and bombings ended. Even Forman, exhausted and frustrated by the lack of real change, quipped, “If we can’t sit at the table [of democracy], let’s knock the fucking legs off!”⁵ Within this extended background of hateful white violence and national inaction, discouragement gave way to the angry despair of urban riots and the separatist preachings of the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam.

The brief window of holistic collaboration, producing historic civil rights legislation, closed as many of the whites who participated as organizers, fundraisers, demonstrators, and photographers no longer felt needed or wanted. Thus began the era of select identities that diverted multiculturalism from its promise to make society more tolerant of diversity to one that “Balkanized” and compartmentalized American

culture.⁶ The result is that the Left, which historically fought for a diverse and inclusive society, found itself supplanted by a New Left that annulled the idea of a common nationality for an America of separate identities—turning us either into victims or oppressors. The New Left ideals were widely embraced in the university and in the arts. This produced more minority programs and hires, but also generated an edict that only members of a particular group are qualified to teach or make work about the subject matter pertaining to these experiences,⁷ making what you are more important than what you do.



Historically the Left embraced an America based on the universalist principles of the Enlightenment, summed up by King as when people “will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”⁸ Instead, identity politics rooted in ethnicity that celebrated separate “cultures” became the basis for public life. This was reflected in how The Movement fragmented to factions, from those opposing the Vietnam War to Women’s and Gay/Lesbian Rights. Paradoxically, this form of self-segregation and reversal of values permitted conservatives to attain political dominance by claiming to defend the common social good against “special interest groups.”

Numerous professional photographers, such as southerner Charles Moore, northerner Bruce Davidson, and *Life*’s Bill Eppridge, covered the conflict, but amateurs, such as Lonnie J. Wilson, made historically compelling photographs too. The snapshots of Wilson, a Birmingham detective, inadvertently capture the power the authorities unleashed against ordinary citizens whose transgression was to have been born black. But it was the photographs made by the Associated Press’s Bill Hudson of the 1963 police dog attacks in Birmingham that so outraged President John F. Kennedy and ignited belated federal action.

Road to Freedom demonstrates how photography has been effectively utilized to provoke change by making visible the harsh reality of the Jim Crow segregationists laws, revealing how visual information can affect society. This group of photographs confronted people: it made some think and others connect with the call for equality, showing that informed viewers can transform the world.

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ROBERT HIRSCH’S *latest books* Seizing the Light: A Social History of Photography, Second Edition and Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Equipment, Ideas, Materials, and Processes, Third Edition, will be released late this fall. His visual and writing projects can be seen at www.lightresearch.net.

NOTES 1. “Road to Freedom: Photographs of the Civil Rights Movement, 1956–1968” was on view at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, June 7–October 5, 2008, and is now a traveling exhibition. 2. After he was brutally murdered in Money, Mississippi, for allegedly whistling at a white woman in 1955, the mutilated face of Emmett Till in his coffin was published in *Jet* magazine, which helped to mobilize the Civil Rights Movement. 3. “Time will Tell, Part Two.” See Danny Lyon’s blog: <http://dektol.wordpress.com/2008/06/14/time-will-tell-part-two/>. 4. Cornell Capa, ed. *The Concerned Photographer* (New York: Grossman, 1968). 5. James Forman in “American Experience: Eyes on the Prize, *Bridge To Freedom*” (1965), produced by PBS. 6. Todd Gillin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked By Cultural Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996). 7. An example is Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s controversial 1965 Department of Labor report “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” 8. Martin Luther King, “I Have a Dream,” Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC, August 28, 1963.