

Dr Helen Laville: the role of women in the civil rights era

Transcript start

Hi, I'm Helen Laville and I'm a Lecturer in the Department of American and Canadian Studies here at the University of Birmingham.

My current research is investigating the role of white women in communities, mostly southern communities, in the civil rights era in America.

There's been a lot of work done on women in civil rights, but it tends to focus on the movement itself. On women who are in groups that were struggling to change racial practices in America. Groups like the Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee who were working to get rid of segregation across the South.

There's nothing wrong with this approach, it's very interesting. Partly the reason I'm not doing it is there's been a lot of work done on it and historians like to look at different things. But partly there's a problem of perspective and that just focussing on women or on the movement really misrepresents the era as a whole.

If we only focus on people who are trying to change things, then when we're assessing what gets changed there's a tendency to blame them too much for the failures. So, there's this approach whereby we say while civil rights didn't do all it could have done, that must be because these people who were trying to change things didn't succeed.

So we tend to look for the failures of civil rights to become really entrenched, to deliver racial justice in America as being a problem with people in the movement - the movement didn't do enough.

That ignores the people who were making up the vast majority of these communities in the South who were not accepting the change. There's been some work that looks at the extremes of this. We're probably all familiar with the images of Bull Connor and Birmingham for example, or the KKK, people who were absolute segregationists, who did their utmost to fight against integration and the civil rights movement.

But that's only ever going to be a small section of any southern community. If you go to the South, it's just not the case that the majority of people were out and out vicious segregationists. The majority of people in the South of the 1950s and 60s were passive segregationists. They probably preferred segregation but they weren't prepared to join an organisation to fight for it.

What I'm looking at with women in the communities in the South is what made women become involved in civil rights. What made women who felt they were community leaders take a stand and what kind of a stand did they take. How did they react to civil rights coming to town. And mostly this happened when schools desegregated. Women felt they had a strong role in school desegregation. Women were mothers, with children, they were people interested in children's education and the good of the community.

So when you've got violent reaction to school integration as you see in Little Rock, Arkansas, when schools were eventually shut down. Women were particularly concerned in Little Rock that their town looked bad. That their town looked like it was dominated by, frankly, rednecks, lower class people and this was really harming their civic reputation both nationally and internationally.

So I'm looking at why these kinds of women start to agitate and work for civil rights. There is a tendency amongst some historians to look back at any of the work white women did for civil rights and to say it's wonderful. Wasn't it wonderful they got involved? The Women's Emergency Committee in Little Rock which was trying to open schools again. Wasn't it wonderful that they were working for desegregation?

But, as you start to unpick it, they're not really working for desegregation. They refuse to confront the issue of integration. They refuse to confront the moral imperatives of racial injustice and instead they just want to keep the peace.

There's a wonderful phrase from one woman where she says 'Women are the shock absorbers'.

The more you start to look at the issue of integration/segregation in schools, the more I personally have started to question whether absorbing the shock was a good thing. In many cases it allowed for very limited engagement in civil rights. It allowed very limited 'let's work to keep the schools open, but let's only let one or two african american children in. Let's try and maintain our community as we always have and not really engage with what this activist movement is about'.

My research is looking to think about civil rights in a different way. It's looking to think about what did communities do? What did white women who considered themselves community leaders do when their communities were faced with this huge challenge?

At the stage I'm at in my research, I'm really looking at how they moderated the impact of the civil rights movement. How they allowed their communities perhaps to escape the worst of the civil rights movement. How they contributed perhaps to avoiding a bloodbath, maybe, and avoiding a lot of violence that might have happened, but they also allowed their communities to avoid proper integration and to avoid dealing with the issues of segregation and integration.

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