The Black Power Movement and American Social Work by Joyce M. Bell
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a euphemism for budget cuts, and that the concern for baby boomers is rhetoric to downplay the closure of traditional senior centers, which harms the poor and working class. At other points, Weil dismisses modernization as rebranding against the “bingo and cards” stereotype of senior centers. All of these points may be correct, but underlying them are issues of funding and service quality, and The New Neighborhood Senior Center could have made that argument more clearly. Many senior centers were established in the years just after the passage of the 1965 Older Americans Act (OAA), and they would benefit greatly from being reimagined and updated. But unstable funding undermines such efforts. The OAA is the key federal legislation responsible for the funding, organization, and delivery of care in senior centers, and it expired in 2011 and has not been reauthorized. Foundations and grant agencies also offer contingent funding opportunities, but the chronic uncertainty is a huge burden on what exists of the senior services infrastructure.

Weil is certainly aware of this, and one of the action steps she advocates is the diversification of funding streams, including corporate sponsorship, to compensate for unreliable public funding. This does not go nearly far enough. Services for older adults have been neglected for decades (David Mechanic, The Truth about Health Care: Why Reform Is Not Working [Rutgers University Press, 2008]) and need a foundation of sustainable funding to meet the challenges of caring for a new generation of older adults, while not forgetting about the one million people who currently use the nation’s 11,000 senior centers every day. Ultimately, this is the takeaway point of The New Senior Center—that in planning for the future, senior centers must also meet the needs of the people currently relying on these services for food and community.

This book taught me a lot about senior centers. It is accessibly written and suitable for undergraduate classes, while scholars interested in gerontology, aging and the life course, and public health will find this book a useful contribution to our understanding of senior centers in a community context.


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Popular imagination and scholarship have long rendered black power the problematic contrast to a disciplined and dignified civil rights struggle; the “crazy uncle” of the freedom movement family, to borrow an apt
metaphor (Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, back cover material). Joyce M. Bell defies this simple framing in *The Black Power Movement and American Social Work*, examining how black professionals strategically imported black power ideology and tactics to intraorganizational struggles, leaving an institutional and political imprint that remains today. Bell’s analysis powerfully reframes scholarship on black power, the black liberation struggle, and social movements literature more broadly. Beyond these manifest contributions, however, in an increasingly turbulent and militaristic racial landscape Bell’s work achieves a timely contemporary significance, one likely to inspire today’s professional activists.

Utilizing extensive archival research and oral history interviews, Bell tackles three overarching goals: challenge the state-centered focus dominating analyses of movement outcomes; address an empirical gap surrounding widespread institutionalization of the black liberation movement; and broaden our vision on the long-term impact of black power. Though analyses commonly imply black power emerged with a radicalism that effectively led to the demise of the Civil Rights movement, Bell scrutinizes this periodization, demonstrating the phase regarded as the movement’s downswing—the late 1960s—was actually marked by the explosion of black professional organizations. Delving into the intraorganizational social movements (IOSMs) that effectively built modern black professional association life, Bell lays out expansive evidence that black professionals of the era mobilized around a black power blueprint—not civil rights. Diverse professionals, from psychologists to lawyers, librarians, sociologists, anthropologists, elected officials, and more, worked to translate the goals of “closing ranks,” institution building, and putting “black faces in higher places” to their respective professions.

Bell’s analysis spotlights black social workers’ role in this “radical march” through institutions (p. 29). As in other fields, the access secured by civil rights significantly expanded the ranks of black social workers. In addition, social work was positioned in a highly salient relationship to the broader black community during a period where policy makers and social science researchers appeared relentlessly focused on the “pathologies” of black families and the urban poor. Surfacing the long-standing historical tension between service and activism in the field, Bell argues that in a context of ongoing urban unrest, black social workers were moved toward dissent by colleagues’ equivocation on whether the field should align with liberation activism. Bell contrasts the divergent intraorganizational mobilization of the National Federation of Settlements (NFS) and the National Conference on Social Welfare (NCSW). While black activists in the NFS retained positions within the organization, making demands through an internal Black Caucus of Settlement Workers (later the Techni-Culture Movement), those in the NCSW adopted a separatist strategy, forming the
National Association of Black Social Workers, a difference Bell attributes to unique organizational identities, leadership, and key decision-making moments.

Bell’s book provides a welcome empirical corrective to minimizing portrayals that highlight the cultural significance of black power but, at best, grant broader structural relevance to the movement’s indirect influence on civil rights efforts. While black power radicalism did exert a positive flank effect on more moderate demands, Bell’s analysis makes clear these trivializing portrayals eclipse how professionals’ strategic use of black power tenets, tactics, and demands ensured civil rights gains would not simply mean more “black faces” in (otherwise culturally white) “higher places.” Indeed, Bell rightly asserts most organizations were entirely unprepared or, worse, uncommitted to fully incorporating the “bodies” and “ideas” of newly integrated black colleagues (p. 158). As such, black power–based IOSMs were vital to furthering liberation movement goals once civil rights legislation brought black professionals into the civil sphere, an influence largely ignored until now. To be sure, exposing how central the black power movement was in institutionalizing broader black liberation goals reveals the shortsightedness of state-privileging analyses and the corresponding need for a broader range of analytical concepts to study social movement outcomes, a matter to which Bell well attends. From translating movement interests to particular organizational domains and developing associated tactical repertoires to maintaining issue visibility and framing control, Bell clarifies functions IOSMs perform that are vital to advancing civil institutionalization.

Though it is not a central claim of her critique, the oversights identified by Bell highlight the serious empirical and theoretical consequences of using white-centered logics to develop social science analyses, particularly when applied to explicitly race-focused phenomena. Glenn Bracey has recently articulated the particular troubles of social movement research: despite regularly drawing on the Civil Rights movement for theory development and testing, most movement theories stifle analyses with implicit white biases that centralize the state as the only meaningful target of black mobilization and assimilation as the ultimate movement goal (“Black Movements Need Black Theorizing,” Sociological Focus 49 [forthcoming 2016]). These predispositions—and their failures—come into sharp relief through Bell’s unique race critical analysis.

Drawing on black power ideology and tactics, numerous black professionals went beyond assimilating as “outsiders within” their institutions, strategically centering black concerns—theirs and those of the broader black community—instead. Turning a “black power gaze” on their respective fields, they mobilized to challenge white supremacy shrouded in “neutral” standards, organizational norms, and everyday practices (p. 63).
Beyond recognizing the indelible imprint of these origins on black organizational life and the diversity-focused professional landscape encountered today, Bell’s work offers an urgent practical currency as well. Police brutality, militarized repression, and unyielding institutional racism have reignited widespread civil unrest and collective action. While it is not yet clear whether emergent movements will be sustained, radically minded professionals may already be wondering how, in the context of their positions, they will avoid “irrelevance” to the liberation struggles that remain (p. 135). For those committed to the project of racial liberation, Bell’s book, indeed, opens “the space of possibility” (p. 178).


Josh Pacewicz
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Debbie Becher’s Private Property and Public Power tells a heartening tale of good governance in the most unlikely of contexts: Philadelphia’s use of eminent domain to seize the homes of poor, minority residents. The stakes here are high, because eminent domain was a key—if not the key—stumbling block that ultimately toppled America’s faith in interventionist public policy. Consider iconic images of minorities protesting bulldozers as agents of “Negro removal” or trenchant critiques of urban renewal by the likes of Jane Jacobs and Herbert Gans. These protests were ultimately less about the federal government’s willingness to pay for urban development projects than local authorities’ brazen willingness to expropriate private property and remake the urban landscape without consulting those who already inhabited it. Yet I suspect that in the public imagination, racist and unfeeling bureaucracies, interventionist statecraft, and eminent domain are fused. Perhaps the best proof is the furor that followed the Supreme Court’s 2005 Kelo v. City of New London decision. Becher begins the book with this case, which resuscitated arguments from the 1960s and 1970s: a libertarian argument that paints eminent domain as the worst form of public despotism and a leftist one that presents it as greedy capitalists’ use of the state to expropriate property from poor minorities.

Against this ideological backdrop, Becher conducted an archival and multisited ethnographic study of Philadelphia’s use of eminent domain in the 1990s and 2000s. The study design is exhaustive. Becher begins by reviewing all uses of eminent domain over 15 years, then conducts case