10

RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN SOUTHERN HISTORY: FORCES THAT UNITE, FORCES THAT DIVIDE

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Many years ago, at a meeting of the Southern Historical Association in Dallas, I had the opportunity to comment on a session dealing with various women's movements that had grown out of southern soil. Presenting papers that day were Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and Sara Evans. The gist of the dialogue that ensued was how important it was to complicate our analysis of gender by considering how gender intersected with and was shaped by issues of race and class. That was the first occasion on which I recall such a discussion. Since then, of course, these issues have been at the center of the work of many scholars and have helped to transform our understanding of the past.

Over the past few decades, the words *race, class,* and *gender* have become a mantra of sorts. They are invoked in liturgical fashion to alert an audience that it is in the presence of people who are "politically correct," scholars who, by sharing certain code words, demonstrate their joint participation in a venture dedicated to reforming the canon, be it literary or historical. This modern-day reformation is driven, initially at least, by the unity it derives from being in a heretical mode. The "old" history, once venerated and orthodox, is now viewed with derision, suffering from the twin liabilities of being out of style and dogmatically flawed. Like all participants in a quasi-religious reformation, those of us who attend the church of the "new social history" derive our primary self-esteem from being the "other" to our antagonists. Simply by virtue of being "not-they," we are superior. When the pretensions that accompany being a deconstructionist or literary theorist are added to this fun-

damental premise of superiority, we reformers become almost unbearable—from the heaviness, not the lightness of our being.

But at some point it becomes necessary to locate our source of self-worth in the positive contribution we make to scholarship—not just in our disdain for those who write the meta-narrative of white men. What is it that makes invoking the mantra of race, class, and gender helpful to understanding the past? What insights develop as a result of using these three concepts as variable tools of analysis? Where do they take us? And for what ends?

The first thing to realize, I think, is that focusing on race, class, and gender is a way of relating to, but also departing from, the dominant discourse of American culture—a discourse that has revolved around the concepts of individualism and equal opportunity. Whatever else we may think of the "old" history, it was a craft that presumed some kind of agency on the part of individual historical actors. That agency, in turn, assumed that in America any individual could aspire to and could become an important figure in history. In short, there was an inextricable connection between the attention of historians to individual heroes and heroines and the belief that America was a society where access to such roles was free and open.

Among other things, redirecting attention to race, class, and gender—whether these are viewed as social and cultural constructs or as substantive categories—flowed from a rejection of the idea that America was either a society of individuals or one of equal opportunity. Rather, the premise—supported by overwhelming evidence—was that America was a deeply unequal society, and that its inequality was tied directly to the extent that group identification—not individual identity—shaped and determined life possibilities. In retrospect, it seems hard to imagine that proposition was ever in question. Obviously, people who were of African descent—however light the color of their skin due to forced sexual interaction with white masters—were systematically excluded from all individual rights of citizenship from 1619 until 1964, with only a few exceptions. The same biological fact deprived African Americans of any chance to join the free economic competition that allegedly animated the success story of America.

Similarly, women—by virtue of their sex—were denied the same citizenship rights, as well as opportunities to compete to become members of the business, legal, or political elite of the country. Although in no way similar to African Americans in the degree of physical and material oppression they suffered, women too were the victims of legal, physical, economic, and psychological oppression—stereotyped, prevented from pursuing individual de-

sires and talents, forced to play roles and profess subservience, no matter how incompetent were the men they had to satisfy.

The only category of the three that was not tied to a physical characteristic was that of class. Although dress, bearing, accent, and living condition conveyed visible reminders of what class meant, there were not the same kind of ready-made symbols that could immediately identify someone as poor as there were for identifying women or African Americans. Still, class operated in much the same way as a vehicle for excluding whole groups of Americans from participating in the "American dream." Education was for the most part not available. Child labor was pervasive. Inadequate healthcare and lodging kept the poor from ever being able to get "a leg up" or even pull even; and the prevalence of ethnic prejudice against Italians, Irish, Poles, or Jews carried over to white ethnics the same kinds of racial disqualification that so impeded African Americans.

That left one other category of historical actors whose fate was also shaped by the variables of race, class, and gender—men who were rich and also white. As it turned out, they (or we, as the case may be) were the individuals who had thrived in the equal-opportunity story that was America. Whether through malice aforethought, conspiracy, or simple good fortune through accident of birth, such individuals could hardly fail, because everything in the society was structured to insure their success—whatever their individual talent or ability might be. And the fact that so many of the poor were also black and to an increasing degree female made it all the easier to know and to defend one's "place."

These then were the fundamental departure points from which practitioners of the "new history" started to rewrite the story of our past in the l960s, '70s, '80s, and '90s. In some ways the task seemed very easy. The villains were clear. So too were the victims.

Yet as soon as scholars set to work to explore and elaborate what the race, class, and gender mantra meant, it all became much more complicated. What about the role of gender among the poor as well as the rich, the black as well as the white? Did black women face the same obstructions relating to black men as white women to white men? How did differences of class—or color, the two often being correlated—lead to divergent experiences for people otherwise unified by their common identity as African Americans? Was there a priority among oppressions? Did gender represent the original source of inequality, as argued by Gerda Lerner? Was it class, as many Marxists contended? Or was race the central oppression, especially in America?

And how did race, class, and gender intersect? The word "intersection" became its own code word, symbolizing the degree to which all these experiences of inequality were interactive. But which was the dependent, which the independent variable? Some scholars resorted to imaginative metaphors to deepen and enrich our understanding of the problem of intersection. Elsa Barkley Brown used the image of a jazz combo, interweaving, sometimes in harmony, other times in dissonance, a whole series of riffs contributed by one or another of the themes of race, class, and gender, culminating in a coherent musical experience where the listener had simply to be attentive to the instrument playing at any one time. Nancy Hewitt, in turn, talked about the intersection as akin to a chemical formula, different ingredients coming together—sometimes dissolving into each other, at other times separate and undissolved—but providing a laboratory for historians to dissect and analyze in an effort to determine how in a given situation race, class, and gender have interacted.

Whatever the metaphor, it was clear that the new focus on gender, race, and class was going to produce as many questions as it did answers, and that the resulting work would be worthwhile precisely to the extent that it was multitextured and multicolored rather than monochromatic. In partial pursuit of such results, what I would like to do in this essay is to share three case studies of how race, class, and gender have been important in understanding different moments of southern history. My point of departure is the thesis that just as race, class, and gender have been primary instruments of oppression in southern history, they have also been primary sources around which resistance has organized. Hence, the same force that works to suppress and contain can also be turned around and used as a force that rebels and breaks out. Yet even as that process unfolds, these case studies suggest that ultimate freedom and success is impeded by the continuing degree to which divisions over race, class, and gender persist in crippling the drive for change. Thus, although gender, race, and class are forces that unite, they are also forces that divide. In that paradox lies at least part of the explanation of where the South—and the nation—has been and where it is going.

The first case study grows out of the work of my colleague Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. In a prizewinning book that built on the scholarship of Anne Firor Scott and has since been expanded through new research by Jacqueline Rouse and Deborah Gray White, among others, Hall traced the origins and development of a campaign by southern women against lynching. With southern reformer and feminist Jessie Daniel Ames as her protagonist, Hall narrated a complicated tale of interracial cooperation and conflict between black and white women.

The period of cooperation began in the early 1920s as an experiment in interracial communication based on the premise that "a bond of common womanhood" would permit middle-class white and black women to unite around concerns grounded in their shared gender. Carrie Parks Johnson, director of the Women's Committee of the Commission on Inter-racial Cooperation, attended a meeting at Tuskegee Institute of the National Association of Colored Women. There, led by Lugenia Burns Hope and Charlotte Hawkins Brown—two prominent black women educators and organizers—the black women spoke candidly of the divisions separating black and white women and the need for respect and partnership to guide any ventures they engaged in together. At Tuskegee, and in a subsequent meeting in Memphis, women of both races were inspired by a shared evangelical sense of being part of a new alliance.

That alliance in turn built upon having participated in institutions that were woman-centered. Although the black and white women encountered these institutions separately, since the institutions were segregated, the experience of being involved in women's missionary societies, the YWCA, and settlement house activities—all defined by their being exclusively women's groups devoted to "women's" concerns—appeared to provide enough of a shared foundation to launch this new experiment in interracialism. Together, these white and black women would address problems of the treatment of domestic servants, problems of public transportation, education, and the need to end the horror of lynching. Shared bonds of womanhood would provide the basis for building a new and more just society.

As we shall see, that hope proved illusory. Nevertheless, these early departures by the Women's Committee of the CIC provided the core organizing concept for Jessie Daniel Ames when in 1930 she set out to build the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. Building on the CIC's efforts, Ames convened a group of women from various southern states to address the degree to which women acting in solidarity with each other could puncture the myth that lynching black men was a means of protecting white womanhood. Led by demagogues like South Carolina's Cole Blease, white male southerners insisted that blacks were lynched because they had violated the sexual purity of white women through the act of rape. The ravishing of white womanhood called for immediate and extreme reprisal, Blease and others argued.

Ames and the thousands of women who eventually signed the petitions of the ASWPL disagreed. Not only was rape not even mentioned in the case of most lynchings, they argued. More important, southern womanhood could

be honored only by eliminating barbarity, upholding civilization, and making sure that law and order prevailed in all criminal situations. This was a woman's issue, Ames insisted, because those who committed the crime of lynching insulted womanhood by using the pretext of protecting women as the basis for their horrific behavior. Hence, women must stand up and commit themselves—as women—to the maintenance of law and order. Women's higher mission, based on their gender and their commitment to the values of Christian charity, must be to civilize humanity.

In the end, Ames's campaign to unite southern women to fight against lynching proved powerful and effective. By focusing on gender as a force that could unite women in opposition to barbarism, she forged an effective educational and political instrument for fighting one of the worst scourges of southern racism. In those counties where the ASWPL was most active and visible, it turned out, there was a significant decline in the number of blacks seized from law enforcement officials, and a comparable increase in the commitment of sheriffs to create a climate of opinion that would discourage lynchers.

Yet, in the end, this was an effort that included white women only and that self-consciously and calculatedly decided to exclude black women—even though black women had been the ones who had pioneered the anti-lynching crusade long before the CIC or the ASWPL came into existence. The failure of "bonds of common womanhood" to overcome barriers based on race went back to the early efforts of the CIC, and its fundamental inability to deliver on the promise of creating a partnership based on mutual respect and shared decision-making. Notwithstanding the evangelical spirit that infused the Tuskegee and Memphis meetings, the white women quickly abandoned their black coworkers when it came to rendering in public the program they had agreed to. Hence, the CIC's Carrie Johnson deleted from her written summation of those meetings an agreed-upon preamble affirming that black women deserved "all the privileges and rights granted to American womanhood." Even worse, she added to Lugenia Hope's denunciation of lynching a statement rejecting "any act on the part of Negro men which excites the mob spirit," thereby appearing to embrace the myth that black men incited lynching by sexually assaulting white women. Implicitly addressing what all this meant for the notion that a bond of common womanhood was at work, Lugenia Hope observed, "it is difficult for me to understand why my white sisters so strenuously object. . . .This is the Negro woman's viewpoint, and that is what you asked for. . . ." So much for "frank and open" communication.

Nothing confirmed the dimensions of the problem more than the way noted black educator Charlotte Hawkins Brown was introduced to a CIC meeting in North Carolina by Mrs. T. W. Bickett, chair of the woman's committee and wife of North Carolina's governor. "[It was] my old Negro mammy," she said, "[who] endeared [me to black people] . . . I cannot say anymore, Mrs. Brown, for your race today than . . . that you are as fine as was my Negro mammy." The heavy layers of history and of cultural and social racism made it difficult to eliminate such condescension. No matter how much Carrie Parks Johnson or other CIC white women *said* they wanted to share "frank and open" communications based on mutual respect, the presumptions that existed in a racist culture, and the cues that activated those presumptions, were almost impossible to overcome without a total and self-conscious commitment.

Although Jessie Daniel Ames may have had more capacity for such a commitment than most, she too failed the test of true interracialism. The women she gathered together in the ASWPL certainly shared the same kind of experience in YWCA's and Women's Missionary Societies that the CIC women had. This was a group shaped by a sense of gender solidarity. But that solidarity ended at the boundary of the color line. Despite black women's leadership in the anti-lynching campaign, they were not included or cited in the ASWPL's efforts. Rather, as Jacquelyn Hall shows so well, most ASWPL members were unable to transcend their own racial preconceptions. They too often assumed that black men *did* initiate sexual assaults on white women and that it was up to the black community to control those men. And in their demands for law and order, they frequently fell into the trap of suggesting that, in Hall's words, "blacks could be kept in their place more efficiently . . . by a legal system firmly under the control of whites than by extralegal lynchings." Under such interpretations, the antilynching campaign became less a commitment to racial justice and more an effort to make control of blacks more efficient.

The ultimate consequence of not heeding the black side of the antilynching agenda was that, in critical circumstances, the ASWPL operated to undermine black women's objectives. Thus, Ames's opposition to a federal antilynching law put her in direct opposition to the NAACP, leading black women's organizations, and even white allies like Eleanor Roosevelt. In the most embarrassing example of how subversive such attitudes could be, Texas Senator Tom Connally was able to use a letter from Ames to proclaim that the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching actually opposed the federal bill—hence, there could not possibly be any merit in it.

Even as gender served as a rallying point to unite certain women activists at a critical moment in southern history, therefore, it also failed miserably to be inclusive enough to overcome the divisive forces of race prejudice. Just as many potential black supporters of the contemporary feminist movement have felt that white supporters of women's liberation were talking past them and ignoring their presence, so too in the 1930s, all the ennobling rhetoric of sisterhood implicit in the phrase "the bonds of common womanhood" could not disguise or overcome the powerful dividing line of race. Yet again, the potential of a social movement rooted in the organizing power of one of the triad of the gender, class, race combination failed to come to fruition because of its failure to address the other two parts.

The second case study I would like to discuss is from the lynching capital of the South—the state of Mississippi, where more than six hundred black people were lynched in the years 1880 to 1940 with not a single white person convicted for the crime. Nearly 100,000 black Mississippians had served in the U.S. armed forces during World War II. Yet Senator James Eastland had this to say of black soldiers: "The Negro was an utter and dismal failure in combat in Europe." Accusing blacks of being lazy and irresponsible and of raping white women, Eastland told his fellow senators in June 1945: "I am proud that the purest of white blood flows through my veins. I know that the white race is a superior race. . . . It has given us civilization. It is responsible for all the progress on earth."

The white race was also one that evidently could not tolerate independence on the part of black people. One year earlier, in the spring of 1944, a white man wanted to buy a plot of land from Rev. Isaac Simmons because the land had oil on it. When Simmons refused and dared to go to a white lawyer to protect his investment, the prospective white buyer took Rev. Simmons in his car, cut out his tongue, and killed him with three shots in the back—all in front of Rev. Simmons's son. This was a state that Allard Lowenstein, a 1960s activist who had encountered brutality in many places in the world, called "as bad as—maybe worse than—South Africa."

Yet if race was a razor-sharp instrument of oppression for black people in Mississippi, it also represented the unifying principle around which African American citizens in that state rallied to resist and to demand their freedom. John Dittmer has written a vivid testimonial to these freedom fighters and the struggle they waged in his book, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. It is a story of those who refused to be intimidated by the terror that killed Isaac Simmons, Emmett Till, Mack Parker, and countless others. These local heroes were legion in number, among them World War II vet-

erans such as Medgar Evers, Amzie Moore, and Vernando Collier who demanded their citizenship rights after coming back to Mississippi, who would not give up no matter what the pressures, and who talked about taking up arms to defend themselves if white people kept attacking them. These were the people who joined the NAACP, even though to do so put their lives at risk, or the Regional Council of Negro Leadership; and who continued to fight, notwithstanding the fact that the White Citizens' Council, organized in 1955, arranged for their mortgages to be called in, their automobile insurance cancelled, and their taxes audited. At a time when most Americans thought black Mississippians were quaking in submissiveness, ten thousand of these local people gathered in Mound Bayou in 1955 to demand the right to vote.

Although there were traditional leaders like doctors and ministers in this freedom struggle, it was the grassroots organizers who lie at the heart of Dittmer's story. Student activists with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came to Mississippi in the early 1960s to stimulate protest on behalf of racial justice, but most of the "local people" John Dittmer writes about were ordinary people—farmers, sharecroppers, small property owners. People like Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray, Hazel Palmer, C. C. Bryant, Hartman Turnbow, and Amzie Moore. And although these people were ordinary in their background, they were far from ordinary in the courage they displayed. For these were the men and women who provided the backbone of the movement that in the 1960s would help to transform both Mississippi and America.

It was a movement that used the institutions and loyalties of race as a vehicle for overcoming racism. Sometimes the institution was the black church; at other times the black school, whether it be a segregated high school in McComb or a college campus like Tougaloo. When white authorities frustrated voter registration efforts by consistently beating and imprisoning those who sought to claim their citizenship rights—all the while claiming that blacks did not really want to vote—civil rights groups conceived the idea of holding a "Freedom Vote" in November 1963 to prove that if given the chance to cast ballots, black Mississippians would respond with enthusiasm. Using institutions in the black community like lodge halls, churches, and clubs, the movement held its own election, with more than eighty thousand African Americans casting their votes for candidates of their choice. It was a pivotal moment of community-building and solidarity that helped to provide both an incentive to the decision to bring up to a thousand volunteers to Mississippi the next summer, and a model for organizing

the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, an organization that would seek to represent all the people of Mississippi in the national Democratic Party as well as in the state.

With the onset of Freedom Summer, the movement in Mississippi achieved its greatest successes. Despite the brutal lynching of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney at the beginning of the summer and the burning of scores of black churches used as movement centers during the summer, the movement would not subside or be defeated. Joined by the mostly white student volunteers from the North, the "local people" John Dittmer writes about set out to reclaim and rebuild their state. They started Freedom Schools where young children could learn about black history and the heroes and heroines who could serve as role models for their lives. In some places health clinics were opened where for the first time there was a chance for black citizens to secure rudimentary healthcare. Other organizers worked to create day care and nursery programs that would eventuate later in the Child Development Group of Mississippi, one of the first and most successful programs of Operation Headstart. And the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) gathered support and documentary evidence for challenging the exclusionary practices of the white Mississippi Democratic Party, with the hope of using that material to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation at the 1964 Democratic convention in Atlantic City. In the midst of that summer, the U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, finally achieving one hundred years after emancipation the right of blacks to compete for jobs without discrimination on the basis of race, and to have access to such public accommodations as hotels, restaurants, and theatres. Arguably, none of this could have happened without the struggle organized by local black people in Mississippi, based on the strengths and loyalties of their own institutions.

And yet the story John Dittmer tells is also one of failure. The potential for still greater victories fell by the wayside as forces of division—based on race, gender, and class—overcame the forces of unity. The divisions of race surfaced in the summer of 1964 and became dominant by the spring of 1966. They initially had to do with tensions between white volunteers from the north and indigenous black workers in the movement. With no malice or intention to wound, some white students brought with them to Mississippi a presumption of expertise and authority based on their education and experience that then caused them to act in ways that seemed condescending and racist to black movement activists. In the cultural miscommunication that ensued, it was sometimes difficult to break through the barriers that racism had erected over time.

But the pivotal source of racial division grew out of the experience of the MFDP at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in August 1964. Armed with affidavits and vivid testimony, the MFDP delegates had come to the credentials committee with high hopes. They had gathered all the legal evidence they were told was necessary to make their case. They had followed the rules. Most observers believed there were enough votes on the credentials committee to send the challenge to the floor of the convention, where it was believed the MFDP would prevail. With Fannie Lou Hamer leading off the hearings with dramatic tales of how she was beaten by jailers for even talking about voter registration, it seemed the MFDP was on the road to victory.

But then Lyndon Johnson intervened. He did not wish any group to disrupt "his" convention. Mobilizing Hubert Humphrey and Walter Reuther, he set out to derail the MFDP challenge. One woman delegate was told her husband would not be given a federal judgeship if she supported the MFDP; another male delegate was warned he would lose his job. Soon the core of MFDP support on the credentials committee dissolved, In its place came a compromise proposal. The MFDP would get two seats—not the twenty or forty they had believed likely—and four years hence all delegates would be chosen without regard to race.

Furious, the MFDP delegation rejected the compromise. "We didn't come all this way for no two votes," Fannie Lou Hamer declared. They had played by the rules. They had done what they were supposed to do. And now they felt they had been sold out—by white liberals who had told them to show due regard to established procedures, and then had ignored those procedures themselves. It was a bitter lesson. Alienation between white liberals and black activists became harder to overcome. Suspicions rankled that whites would welcome blacks to biracial coalitions only if whites could control events. Within a year and a half, Black Power became the dominant slogan of the movement, and national conflict over civil rights strategies replaced unity.

Divisions over gender grew out of, and reflected these divisions over race. If white women volunteers in Mississippi shared some of the same cultural blinders as their male compatriots, they also experienced the differential power imbalance that accompanied growing up female in a male world. In some instances, at least, complications of interracial sex sharpened a sense of difference and of division—both between women and men and between white women and black women. It is impossible to imagine two cultural concepts more freighted with volatile messages than race and sex. In the chem-

istry of the civil rights struggle in the summer of 1964, therefore, it is not surprising that divisions over gender followed the explosion of divisions over race—or that the emergence of Black Power as a movement was followed soon thereafter by the emergence of the women's liberation movement among some white women veterans of the civil rights struggle.

Nor were divisions of class absent from the denouement of the Mississippi movement. As John Dittmer shows so well, there had always been tensions within the Mississippi movement. The national NAACP bitterly protested any group that threatened its domination of civil rights politics, and on numerous occasions, made life nearly impossible for Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers by the conservatism of its posture and its refusal to cooperate with other civil rights groups. But the NAACP conflicts were not just turf wars among civil rights activists. They also reflected a class conflict between a black bourgeoisie led by ministers, businesspeople, and professionals, and more ordinary people who had less to lose and more to gain by challenging existing hierarchies.

Significantly, these divisions of class overlapped with divisions over race in the years after 1964, centering especially on Democratic politics in the state of Mississippi and on the issue of who would control the local antipoverty movement. The MFDP came back to Mississippi from Atlantic City with the hope initially of carrying forward its plan to transform Democratic Party politics in the state by throwing out the existing Democratic machine. Moderate white Democrats in the state, on the other hand, saw the handwriting on the wall and, especially in light of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, recognized the need to coalesce with black leaders who would agree to work with them. NAACP leaders such as Aaron Henry were willing to join such a moderate coalition. Poorer and more radical blacks, on the other hand, sought to pursue their own agenda.

The ultimate site of their political war with each other was control over the antipoverty program in Mississippi, in particular the Headstart program. The Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) represented the community-based, grassroots organizing hopes of the original MFDP. With heavy involvement of volunteers and "ordinary" people, it sought to use Operation Headstart as the vanguard of a social and educational movement that would remake the state. More established politicians, allied with Senators James Eastland and John Stennis, recognized the CDGM for what it was—a political as well as educational threat. In an eventual alliance with the moderate Democratic coalition of Hodding Carter and Aaron Henry, these powerful officials persuaded the Johnson administration to withdraw funding

from the CDGM and give it instead to Mississippians Against Poverty (MAP), a group that was economically and politically allied with the more moderate, established segments of the state's power structure. In this way, class as well as race alliances undermined and defeated the original goals of the movement in Mississippi.

The story is by no means simple, nor does virtue rest on one side only. Yet in ways that testify to the full complexity of the intersection of gender, class, and race, what happened in Mississippi seems to speak as powerfully as any one example can to the ways that division can prevail over unity in the struggle to unite people for social change.

The final example pertinent to this discussion begins with an effort to use class as the organizing basis around which black men and women, with some white participation, sought to remake their lives. Winston-Salem, North Carolina, provided the location for this struggle, tobacco workers for R. J. Reynolds the immediate focus of the organizing effort. The year was 1942—the stakes the opportunity to create the first interracial union in the south, committed to a program of not only economic dignity and self-determination but also political and social reform. In writing the history of Local 22 and its brief but dramatic ascendancy, Robert Korstad has offered an intriguing insight into what happens when the least visible and most elusive of our three concepts—social class—becomes a force for uniting people to demand justice.

More than ten thousand people were employed at the R. J. Reynolds factory in the late spring of 1943. Wartime production demands had stretched the workforce to the limits. The company could barely meet the existing market for its product, and a shortage of labor due to the draft and a full employment economy meant that the seasonal labor force that usually came on board in the early summer months would not be available. Still, R. J. Reynolds had done little to reward the workers already there. The labor force was primarily black and predominantly female. In the tobacco factories, as in textile mills, the best jobs were reserved for whites, while blacks held down the dirtiest and most arduous assignments. Most blacks were paid the minimum wage of forty cents an hour, with only a small percentage earning as much as fifty cents.

Such were the circumstances when events leading to the emergence of Local 22 unfolded in June 1943. As the heat in the factory grew alongside the increased pressures of production, workers had become ever more conscious of their working conditions. Representatives of the United Cannery Agricultural Packinghouse and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) had been in

the community for a few months recruiting support for a union organizing effort, but no action had yet been taken to request an NLRB election to certify the union as the workers' bargaining agent.

On June 17, a particularly hot day, a woman worker on the fifth floor complained of being ill. Her foreman responded by saying she could leave if she wished, but her departure would be permanent. Other women on the floor then decided to engage in a work stoppage. A black man who had also complained of being sick that week decided to support them. Shortly thereafter, he keeled over and died from a heart attack. Earlier, the nurse had said he was not sick enough to go home. More than two hundred women on the fifth floor then joined the work stoppage, soon to be joined by women workers on the other floors. When a management representative appeared to urge them to go back to work, Theodosia Simpson spoke up and challenged him about the state of work conditions in the factory. A woman leader generated further support for the stoppage from women workers. Some men joined as well, and a workers council was elected to represent the laborers in negotiations with management. The second and third shifts learned of what had happened and decided to join in.

Soon, communitywide meetings were held at a local black church, whose minister worked in the factory and was a union supporter. When the company tried to recruit Robert Black, an African American worker of long experience in the factory who had great prestige in the community, to persuade the workers to go back to their jobs, he refused, insisting that the company recognize the workers' grievances and agree to negotiations about them. For three days the workers met in mass meetings. Federal conciliation representatives came to town at the request of the union, but management still refused to acknowledge the grievances the workers had brought. Finally, when it became clear that the workers would stand together without tolerating a break in their ranks, the company signed a statement saying it would sit down and talk about the workers' concerns if they returned to the workplace. Six months later UCAPAWA won the right to have an NLRB election, The results created Local 22 of UCAPAWA as the officially designated representative of the workers. A new contract was signed in April 1944. In the meantime, the union organized literacy campaigns in the community, registered thousands of people to vote, and set forth on a campaign to create a different kind of community, one where racial and economic injustices could be addressed, with a better cultural and civic life provided for all. Partly as a result of these efforts, in 1947 Winston-Salem elected the first black alderman to be chosen in the twentieth century in the South.

There were many distinctive aspects to the organizing efforts of Local 22. First, it was a movement led by black people. But it involved white workers as well. They served in the ranks of the union, but occupied only 15 percent or so of the leadership positions, approximately proportionate to their numbers in the labor force. Thus, the first integrated union in the South was also one where black strength and leadership were recognized. There was no condescension by white participants.

Second, this was a movement led by black women. They worked in partnership with black and white men, but they were the ones who initiated the work stoppage. Moreover, they comprised a significant percentage of the union's leadership. The role they played in making possible the union's formation, and the ease with which they exercised community leadership, helped to facilitate the process of uniting the community around its common interests. In short, two of the potential barriers to successful organization—disdain of men for women and of whites for blacks—did not exist in Winston-Salem in 1943 and 1944. Instead, the degree to which black women filled the ranks of the movement's vanguard helped assure that the potentially most divisive forces could be contained and that the union could move forward.

Nevertheless, this struggle too ended in failure. Management retained significant power in the community. In subsequent campaigns, R. J. Reynolds forged alliances with more conservative union forces from the AFL and the CIO to challenge UCAPAWA. Management also fomented festering racial tensions, seeking to set whites against blacks and to raise the specter of radical black activists taking over the community. Finally, it deployed its most powerful weapon, red-baiting Local 22 and claiming that support for the union meant support for communism. Anyone who wished to stick with the union thus took the risk of being defined as anti-American and pro-black. Ultimately, such weapons brought victory to R. J. Reynolds and in 1950, Local 22 was unable to prevail in an NLRB certification vote.

What remains most notable in retrospect, however, is how effectively the UCAPAWA movement was able to overcome the most formidable obstacles to create a biracial alliance along class lines, at least for half a decade. The forces of division may eventually have prevailed, but gender and race were not as powerful sources of division as they had proven to be with the anti-lynching campaign or the Mississippi Freedom Movement. Ironically, it required the charge that Local 22 was un-American and a voice for communism to bring down the union.

In no way, of course, are these three case studies necessarily representative of how gender, race, and class have functioned as forces of unity and forces of division in southern history. One could consider a dozen other examples, with a different chemistry or interaction likely to be found in each. Nevertheless, these three instances are illustrative of the issues historians need to be aware of in trying to answer some of the questions raised earlier about which of these variables is dependent or independent, and how they operate in political and cultural interaction with each other.

The first conclusion I would venture is that in any social circumstance where sex or race is a dominant consideration, and where women or blacks are in a minority position, the potential for divisiveness is very great. This is partly because of the layers of cultural baggage that surround race and sex as issues of group and individual identity. It is difficult to imagine more powerful cultural symbols than these. However much we may have the right to expect whites to be able to shed racist preconceptions rooted in centuries of history, it is virtually impossible to imagine that happening without transforming personal experiences that can burn away the attitudes we have inherited. So accustomed are whites to being in a superior position to blacks, and assuming, at best, the role of benign rescuer, that it is a huge task to break through such preconceptions or have them dissolved. White women of the CIC might temporarily transcend their racism in the fervor of an evangelical moment of sharing, but within the cold light of day, that racism almost inevitably reappeared, reflected in the conventional wisdom that whites surely knew best what was good for blacks, that Negro men of course wanted to ravish white women, and that the key issue was the gentility of the forms of social control, not their existence.

Similarly, white powerbrokers had so often dictated terms of compromise to those petitioning for change that it is difficult to imagine Walter Reuther and Hubert Humphrey thinking they were doing anything unusual when they, in effect, told the MFDP what it was "best" for the black insurgent party to accept. How inconceivable that black petitioners for the MFDP, or black women in the CIC, should be treated with mutual respect as equal partners, especially in light of the history of presumptive power that whites had exercised. When the potent chemistry of race mixed with the equally powerful emotions associated with sex—as in the case of Freedom Summer volunteers in 1964—it became almost impossible to prevent painful and bitter divisiveness. Only in a circumstance where blacks and women comprised a majority—hence in a position to exercise control of the agenda—did it seem possible that the divisive potential of race and gender could be subsumed to the forces of unity.

A second conclusion based on these case studies is that class may provide the best focal point for organizing people across barriers of race and gender. The theoretical argument for this hypothesis goes back to Karl Marx. In an American context, precedents were mixed for whether it would be possible to transcend racial barriers in the interest of a common economic agenda. During the Populist period in the 1890s, tentative efforts were made to join the Colored Farmers Alliance and the Southern Farmers Alliance in a common campaign to secure freedom from the bondage of the crop lien system. That campaign proved so threatening to white rulers that they invoked the banner of race solidarity and succeeded in disenfranchising black voters and instituting the Jim Crow system. As Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein have shown, CIO unions were the next to attempt such a biracial class alliance. At least in the case of Local 22, they seem to have succeeded, although here, too, it is important to remember that the majority of the union members were black and female. Still, the Local 22 example seems promising as a model for social change, especially when merged with the kind of passion associated with the civil rights movement.

The advantage of focusing on class seems to be reinforced when we examine what has happened to blacks and women in the aftermath of victories achieved since 1964 in the civil rights and women's rights movements. To a significant extent, discrimination based solely on race or gender has been abolished in the laws of the land. As a result, enormous changes have occurred. The number of African Americans attending college leaped 500 percent from 1962 to 1976. The black middle class expanded rapidly, especially as African American college graduates found themselves earning the same salaries as their white counterparts and moving into high-level positions in corporations, educational institutions, and the government.

Similar changes occurred among women. The number of female members of the entering law-, business-, and medical-school classes at most universities multiplied more than tenfold in the 1970s and '80s. Women earned over 30 percent of the doctorates awarded by 1990, in contrast to 11 percent in 1970. The same corporations, law firms, and hospitals that welcomed blacks to their executive ranks welcomed women as well.

On closer examination, however, it became clear that these gains were limited to *individuals* who were sufficiently well prepared educationally and economically to take advantage of the new rights that had been gained. It might be true that lowering the legal barriers of race and sex discrimination could help those already on the edge of the middle class. But these gains were not accessible to those who lacked economic security and educational prepara-

tion. Hence, even as the ranks of the black middle class grew, so too did the ranks of the black poor. High school dropout rates accelerated at the same time college graduation rates grew. Teenage pregnancies and poverty among female-headed households went up even faster than did the numbers of the black middle class.

Among women, white or black, the story was the same. More women might be employed than ever before, but 80 percent of those women worked in just 5 percent of all jobs. More and more, these were dead-end jobs in the service sector of the economy, paying minimum wages and offering little chance for advancement. The growing number of women who were poor, moreover, heightened the paradox of women's liberation. The right to be free and independent of men might mean new autonomy and fulfillment for some, but it brought immiseration and hopelessness to others.

Even as barriers of race and gender discrimination dissolved for individuals, therefore, the barrier of class—intersecting with barriers of race and gender—still kept millions in bondage. *Individuals* could escape the stigma of race or sex, but poverty closed the door to those who sought freedom.

Understanding how much class has become a primary source of inequality, however, is different from generating strategies for replicating the success of Theodosia Simpson and the tobacco workers of Local 22. Nor should the progress that has occurred on issues of race and gender obscure the degree to which racism and sexism remain a powerful presence throughout American society, at the top even more than at the bottom. Still, there seems little question that economic inequality lies at the heart of the injustice that remains in American society.

Focusing on an economic agenda, therefore, seems one viable path to pursue in addressing the continued ability of gender, class, and race to deny equality of opportunity to American citizens. The issues engaged by the Freedom Summer volunteers are the same as those pursued by Local 22—to build schools, healthcare facilities, and workplaces that offer respect, as well as nurturance, to those who attend them. Institutions such as the MFDP and Local 22 will continue to emerge. But perhaps the time has come to make the force of unity that dominates them a focus on jobs and economic security first of all—believing and hoping that divisions of gender and race can be overcome in the process.