The Struggle for Black Civil Rights

The existence of racism, inequality, and discrimination against black Americans touches a raw nerve in us all. It stands as a sharp rebuke to our belief in democracy and the American dream. For this reason, few issues cause more anguish for Americans of all races and ethnicities.

The stark realities—that slavery is an unalterable fact of our past; that many blacks today have yet to achieve full educational, economic, and social equality; and that the sting of racism persists—clash sharply with our shared vision of the promise of America. If we are to grasp the present situation of African Americans and their prospects for full and meaningful equality, we must come to a historically accurate and truthful understanding of slavery, racism, discrimination, and the political and social movements that are working to combat them.

Pioneering Scholarship

Path-breaking studies by nearly seventy Center Fellows have illuminated these complex issues, and help us understand their causes and consequences. Fellows have written about slavery, the American Civil War and its aftermath, the struggle for equality during the first half of the twentieth century, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the role and status of African Americans in our society today.

Slavery

The institution of slavery has been the subject of many important works by Center Fellows. One is the classic study by historian Eugene Genovese (Fellow 1982-83), *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. In his award-winning book, Genovese presents a riveting account of slave life in the American South.

Another landmark is a study of the Underground Railroad by Johns Hopkins historian Michael P. Johnson (Fellow 1999-2000). Johnson finds that the Underground Railroad, which supposedly transported thousands of slaves to the free states before the Civil War, simply could not have operated as conventional wisdom claims. From his investigation of all extant primary and secondary accounts of this migration, he concludes: “The Underground Railroad never left the station.” Johnson’s research shows that the size of the exodus was much smaller than is usually claimed—closer to 5,000 or 10,000 instead of the widely-cited figure of 70,000-100,000. Johnson also finds that most successful fugitives received little help from agents of the Underground Railroad. Overall, it is likely that at least as many black Americans were born slaves in the North and sold to the South when the institution of slavery in the North slowly began to be outlawed or were freeborn in the North but kidnapped—often as children—and sold as slaves in the South.

Johnson’s research demands that we rethink the meaning and geography of freedom in the first three generations of nationhood and brings into focus the reality of the United States as a slave society before 1863 and the provisional character of American freedom, especially for African Americans.
The Civil War
Of the dozen or more books written by Center Fellows about the American Civil War, perhaps the best known is James McPherson's (Fellow 1982-83) Pulitzer Prize–winning bestseller, *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Virginia historian Edward Ayers (Fellow 1999-2000) completed substantial portions of his Web-based project, the Valley of the Shadow (http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/), while at the Center. A book, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, and accompanying CD-ROM contain the results of his exhaustive survey of the coming, fighting, and aftermath of the American Civil War as it was experienced by two communities, one on each side of the Mason-Dixon Line.

The Continuing Fight for Freedom
Center Fellows have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the African American freedom struggle of the twentieth century. While in residence, scholars have written biographies of many central figures in the movement, including Paul Robeson, W.E.B. DuBois, Malcolm X, and Whitney Young. Martin Luther King Jr. has been the subject of much scholarship by Center Fellows, including Stanford historian Clay Carson, who was chosen by the King family to edit the King papers. Carson spent his 1993-94 Center year deeply engaged in this work.

Other works have focused on civil rights organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Negro Youth Congress. Still others have analyzed major events or campaigns in the struggle for civil rights. Current Center director Doug McAdam (Fellow 1991-92 and 1997-98), in his book *Freedom Summer*, captures the drama of the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project and systematically documents the catalytic effect the project had on those who took part and on the broader trajectory of '60s activism in the United States.

As we know, the struggle for black equality did not end with the civil rights movement of the '60s. At least 30 Fellows have spent their time at the Center analyzing aspects of contemporary black experience. Political scientists Michael Dawson (Fellow 1996-97), Katherine Tate (Fellow 1995-96), and Carol Swain (Fellow 1997-98) studied the role of blacks in contemporary American politics. Psychologist Claude Steele (Fellow 1994-95) used his year at the Center to extend his studies of the impact of negative stereotypes on self-conception and self-esteem. Educational disadvantage was the focus of the work of scholars James Comer (Fellow 1976-77 and 1994-95), Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (Fellow 1983-84), and Linda Darling-Hammond (Fellow 1997-98). The distinguished sociologist William Julius Wilson used his year at the Center (1981-82) to begin work on his landmark study of urban poverty, *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

We cite only a few of the many books in this area that were conceived, written, or completed by Fellows while they were in residence at the Center; a complete list follows. We are proud to have contributed to furthering knowledge and understanding of these issues, and we remain deeply committed to supporting similar work in the future.


