Introduction

Our Country opens wide the door of opportunity to the youth of the world but slams it shut in the faces of its Negro citizenry. The great masses of Negro youth are offered only one-fifteenth the educational opportunity of the average American child. The great masses of Negro workers are depressed and unprotected in the lowest levels of agriculture and domestic service while the black workers in industry are generally barred from the unions and grossly discriminated against. Their housing and living conditions are sordid and unhealthy; they live in constant terror of the lynch mob, shorn of their constitutionally guaranteed right of suffrage, and humiliated by the denial of civil liberties.

—Mary McLeod Bethune, letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1937

Youth-based activism has been central to black political historiography in the past century. The Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), though vastly understudied, emerged as a preeminent social movement organization in the 1930s and 1940s. In addition to mobilizing young blacks in support of civil rights and racial desegregation campaigns, the SNYC implemented economic justice initiatives for black workers in the South. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed two decades after the SNYC’s formation. SNCC quickened the pace of the civil rights movement, advanced a participatory democratic framework of community organizing, and challenged racial terrorism in southern jurisdictions. The rebellious impulse of black youth after World War II was further exemplified in the Student Organization for Black Unity (SOBU). Situated in Greensboro, North Carolina, SOBU developed racial and economic justice programs as well as Pan-African, solidarity initiatives.
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By the mid-1970s the militant phase of the civil rights, black power, and New Left movements was virtually over and transformational movements—high-risk, geographically diffuse movements—declined toward the end of the twentieth century. The demobilization of these movements was due to political repression, movement fatigue, party realignment, and the triumph of the conservative agenda in the last three decades of the century. Institutional leveraging also contributed to the weakening of transformational movements. Institutional leveraging occurs when the energy and resources of movement infrastructures—the organizational processes and networks of activists that cultivate movement-building activities and supply activist groups with resources and legitimacy—are channeled into established bureaucratic and political institutions. It represents both a strategic and cultural shift in the evolution of movement politics that privileges elite mobilization strategies and tactics such as electioneering, negotiation, interest group lobbying, and specialized advocacy.

This book examines social movement activism among activists of the post–civil rights generation or the generation of activists (students, youth, and young adults) who came of age after the civil rights, black power, and New Left movements. The title of the book, After the Rebellion: Black Youth, Social Movement Activism, and the Post–Civil Rights Generation, underscores the argument that the political terrains and constraints on popular mobilization in the post–civil rights era made it particularly difficult for young activists to jump-start and sustain transformational movements. While this book is highly critical of the political and social contexts that circumscribe movement activism among the post–civil rights generation, I recognize that young activists maintain the desire to effect social change. As George Crane points out, “A movement is not necessarily a slave to context.” With assistance from the leaders of youth-based organizations or what I call movement bridge-builders, youth-based movements can transcend the constraints of institutional leveraging.

Movement bridge-builders frequently use an ensemble of creative organizing strategies to elevate the social and political status of black youth such that they become vehicles for contentious politics. Creative organizing strategies such as framing, the appropriation of indigenous resources, and positionality are used by movement bridge-builders to
propel youth-based movements. These strategies discussed at great length in this book can have a multivaried impact on policy implementation, political institutions, intergenerational collaboration initiatives, and other movement-building initiatives.

The organizations and infrastructures examined in this book offer unique insight into youth-based activism in the post–civil rights era. The Free South Africa Movement and the New Haven youth movement of the 1980s, the Black Student Leadership Network (BSLN) in the 1990s, the juvenile justice reform movement (JJRM) initiatives, and the labor-backed Union Summer campaign of the 1990s and 2000s help to explain the challenges associated with institutional leveraging and creative organizing. I also situate these youth-based movements within a historical context and give attention to black student and youth activism dating back to the 1930s.

My interests in youth activism are both personal and political. For four summers, as an undergraduate and graduate student, I participated in the BSLN’s Summer Freedom School program in Oakland, California. Our cadre of several dozen activists set up three freedom schools that were affiliated with the Children’s Defense Fund and coordinated by the Oakland-based Urban Strategies Council. Although we were formally called “summer interns,” we were required to participate in an intensive, two-week training, much of which was rooted in community organizing and direct action theories. After 1993, the approximately two hundred interns or organizers working annually in freedom schools across the country were sent to the Alex Haley Farm in eastern Tennessee for the training session. For activists working in the San Francisco Bay Area, especially in the summers of 1993 and 1994, our political education was bolstered by workshops facilitated by local grassroots activists as well as former members of SNCC and the Black Panther Party. The origins, national and local organizing activities, and strengths and weaknesses of the BSLN are documented later in this book.

The political status of youth of color, particularly African Americans, is another area of interest. As exhibited in Mary McLeod Bethune’s letter to President Roosevelt at the outset of this chapter, the political status of black youth is not isolated from political discourse. Bethune was perhaps the most respected champion of black youth and women in the first half of the twentieth century. She created the National Council
of Negro Women in 1935 and a year later began working in Roosevelt’s National Youth Administration, where she became the director of the Division of Negro Affairs.

Bethune sent the letter a year after convening the “National Conference on the Problems of the Negro and Negro Youth” from January 6 to January 8, 1936. The letter summarized the problems affecting black youth such as racial segregation, severe patterns of economic deprivation and exclusion, and civil rights abuses. She insisted that these problems reflected the systemic marginalization of the black working class. Finally, the letter outlined a series of recommendations adopted by the more than one hundred delegates attending the national conference, and urged the federal government to take the lead in abolishing racial segregation.

Although this conference convened decades ago, young blacks are as pivotal to contemporary social movements and political discourse as they were in the 1930s. In some respects, the post–civil rights generation has been cannon fodder for political and economic elites seeking to retrench antipoverty and civil rights programs. Cathy Cohen, Jennifer Tilton, and Lester Spence all describe how representations of youth of color are central to neoliberal debates about the role of government. Public figures advancing neoliberal agendas—bootstrap individualism, market-oriented policies, self-help programs, and the retrenchment of social welfare programs as alternatives to government interventionism—often point to (or exploit) the so-called moral failings of black youth to make their case. They frequently argue that social expenditures privilege the black poor, lazy youth, and others who fall under the umbrella of the so-called undeserving.

These neoliberal agendas were partially advanced by political observers who claimed that Barack Obama’s presidential victory in 2008 ushered in a new era of postracialism. Postracialism rested on the belief that racial and class hierarchies had all but disappeared or were inconsequential to the life circumstances of young blacks. Yet Apollon’s study of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds found that young blacks have mostly rejected this notion of postracialism. Many believe that racial hierarchy and other inequities continue to have a dynamic influence on their lives despite the election of the nation’s first black president.

Even the Occupy Wall Street movement, one of the most authoritative resistance movements to the power of large financial institutions
and deregulation in the past decade, was criticized for advancing a left-oriented version of postracialism. Rinku Sen of the Applied Research Center, a leading racial justice think tank, points out that blacks and Latinos challenged this predisposition by organizing to “make space for people of color to join the [Occupy] movement.” Groups such as Occupy the Hood and Occupy Harlem emerged as a counterweight to the Occupy movement. These groups and other activists advanced an intersectional approach to movement building that addressed the twin evils of racial and economic injustices.

The main point is that political debates and movement-building initiatives are often affixed to competing representations of black youth. These representations may create openings or allow for acute criticisms of systemic inequalities as demonstrated with Bethune’s letter to Roosevelt. They can be used to expand the boundaries of inclusion within social movements as exemplified with the struggles inside the Occupy movement. Or black youth (and representations of black youth) can be exploited by political and economic elites to advance political agendas.

Case Study Selection and Methodology

This book weaves together several case studies of youth-based social movement activism. I offer a historical account of movement activism during the protest cycles of the 1930s to 1940s and the 1950s to 1970s, and examine youth-based movements in the post–civil rights era. Included in this book are case studies of SNYC, SNCC, SOBU, the student divestment movement of the 1980s, the New Haven youth movement, BSLN, the AFL-CIO’s Union Summer program, and youth-based activism in JJRMs.

I used five strategies for selecting the case studies for this book. First, I assessed youth-based activism through the prism of social movement organizations and advocacy groups. Youth-based activism has been typically coordinated or facilitated by three types of groups: youth-led organizations, multigenerational (or intergenerational) organizations, and network-affiliated groups or advocacy coalitions that support youth activities. All the activists in this book (youth, college-age students, young adults, adult allies, and movement bridge-builders) articulated their grievances through social movement organizations and advocacy
groups delineated by this three-part typology. These groups were embedded in a larger network or movement infrastructure of activists. I therefore analyze youth-based activism and intergenerational politics by focusing on social movement organizations, advocacy groups, and movement infrastructures as the units of analyses.

The politics of race and racial inequities is central to this investigation of youth-based movements. The movement formations in this book attempted to remedy structural inequities that harm marginalized blacks and poor people or immersed black students, youth, and young adults in popular mobilization campaigns. While blacks compose much of the cast of movement actors in this book, in a few cases, such as the movements to reform juvenile justice systems and the Union Summer campaign, the initiatives were coordinated by multiracial, network-affiliated groups or coalitions.

Whether the movement activities were facilitated by black or multiracial networks, the distinguishing characteristic in the case study selection process is that black youth form the principal variable in this book. The movements relied on young blacks as foot soldiers and bridge-builders, or, as exemplified in the juvenile justice initiatives, network-affiliated organizations mobilized opposition to public policies that were disproportionately injurious to young blacks. This means that nonblacks (whites and other people of color) are also critical to this examination as long as they participated in movement formations that were directly connected to the politics of young blacks. For example, the voting rights struggle in the 1960s is intrinsically linked to racial justice; was propelled by civil rights and black indigenous groups; engaged young people in movement activism through SNCC, the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); and received active support from white allies and students. An assessment of youth-based participation in this movement may thus warrant a discussion of blacks as well as nonblacks.

The third criterion for case study selection is the “diverse method” that allows for inferences to be made from the cross-case analyses between movements. This approach offers a better appreciation of the leadership styles and creative organizing strategies of movement bridge-builders, as well as the political contexts that affect movement infrastructures. Cross-case analyses further allow for temporal-based
comparisons between youth-based movements. Comparing youth-based groups, for example the SNYC in the 1930s and the Union Summer campaign in the 1990s, gives us some understanding of the varying political contexts that shaped youth activism in their respective periods.

In addition, the diverse method permits comparisons between activists within a given movement, but based on when they join movements. There is some indication that activists emerging in the early stages of insurgent campaigns are more likely to benefit from the movement’s successes than those whose maturation comes later in the protest cycle. Early risers can expose the vulnerability of those in power, create leverage positions, and garner valuable resources for themselves. Because of shifting contexts and diminishing resources, late risers (those joining a movement later in a protest cycle) may be forced to innovate with new strategies or tactics. This strategy of “elaboration” can help sustain an organization or movement in a changing political context. Later in this study I examine how this dynamic influenced SNCC’s development in the late 1960s.

In addition, I focus on extra-campus activism, or youth-based activism that transcends the walls of college campuses. This is somewhat challenging given that collective action tends to be structured based on where individuals work, live, and go to school. Yet, youth-based activism outside the campus environs offers greater insight into intergenerational collaborative initiatives and coalition work with indigenous activists. Even the student divestment movement, though targeting college campuses, was part of a nationwide campaign comprising civil rights activists, internationalists, college students, and trade unionists.

Last, federated student and youth groups or youth-based movements that had a geographically diffuse scope are included in the case selection. For example, the SNYC, SNCC, SOBU, BSLN, and Union Summer attempted to set up regional or national entities that immersed young people in local organizing campaigns. Although the New Haven youth movement discussed in chapter 4 was limited to a small locality, the movement was intrinsically linked to black students and youth who participated in Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaign in 1988 and assisted with the BSLN’s formation.

At first glance, the juvenile justice initiatives examined in the last chapter were local campaigns. Yet they were part of national movement to
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reform state or local juvenile justice systems. This movement was wedded by national conferences, philanthropic institutions, and advocacy groups such as the DataCenter, Human Rights Watch, the Justice Policy Institute, and the American Youth Policy Forum. An abundance of resources actually poured into juvenile justice initiatives in the late 1990s and early 2000s in order to blunt the explosion of zero-tolerance policies approved by state and local governments. I selected three movement campaigns in Louisiana, Maryland, and New York. These initiatives account for the regional diversity that shaped youth-based activism in juvenile justice initiatives.

Altogether, the cases selected in this book share the following characteristics:

a. They were propelled by youth-led, multigenerational, or network-affiliated organizations embedded in a movement infrastructure
b. African American youth, either as activists themselves or through policy issues that disproportionately impacted them, were fundamental to the movement campaigns
c. The movements allow for cross-case analyses, temporally or across time, as well as intermovement comparisons of strategies, leadership patterns, and the infrastructures
d. The movements immersed young people in extra-campus initiatives and policy issues
e. The movement groups were geographically diffuse and, in a few circumstances, attempted to develop national-level or federated organizations

Based on this methodological approach, the case studies constitute a representative sample of youth-based activism, thus reducing selection bias. Excluded from this book are case studies of environmental activism and environmental justice, the United States Student Association’s campaigns, and locally based youth development initiatives. Although useful for understanding youth activism, these activities do not allow for the in-depth, cross-case analyses as the case studies selected in this book.

Plan for the Book

This book offers a historical and empirical account of social movement activism among the post–civil rights generation. The book further
addresses the limitations and opportunities for popular mobilization among black youth and young adult activists since the passage of the major civil rights legislation of the 1960s. I rely on qualitative data to assess youth-based movements: archival sources, including rarely used and noncatalogued archives; interviews with eighty-one activists and advocates involved in youth-based movements; and participant observation. An extensive discussion of these data is in appendices A to C.

The first chapter offers a conceptual overview of youth-based activism. I focus on four theoretical concerns: the political status of black youth in the post–civil rights era, the significance of movement infrastructures that buttress youth-based activism, the impact of institutional leveraging on transformational movements, and how movement bridge-builders use creative organizing strategies (framing, indigenous resources, and positionality) to stimulate youth-based movements and expand the opportunity structure of youth activism. The remaining chapters help to illuminate these theoretical concerns.

Although most of the book follows a chronological time frame spanning from 1965 to 2006, included in part I is an examination of black youth radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s. Chapter 2 focuses mainly on the origins, development, and collapse of the SNYC, and its interaction with a diverse movement infrastructure composed of black progressive and white leftist groups. The SNYC was the most important black youth formation of the pre–Cold War era. It implemented grassroots initiatives that pushed for voting rights, desegregation, and economic justice for black workers. Its collapse was largely attributed to the anticommunist hysteria after World War II that moderated the political orientations of veteran activists within the progressive-left community.

The evolution of African Americans and youth-based movement activism from the 1960s to the 1980s is examined in the third chapter. This period covers SNCC’s organizing initiatives, SOBU activities from 1969 to 1975, and student activists who participated in the Free South Africa Movement in the 1980s. In this chapter, I examine how these groups experimented with creative organizing strategies as a response to the shift by prominent black groups toward institutional leveraging.

The last chapter of part I investigates the New Haven youth movement in the late 1980s. The youth movement, or Kiddie Korner as it was called, underscored the significance of black youth participation
in urban organizing campaigns. Fostered by a coalition of black college students and working-class youth, the New Haven youth movement coordinated an antiviolence/anticrime initiative designed to combat the burgeoning gun violence between rival street gangs, participated in a protest campaign for equitable public school funding, and mobilized black youth in support of two grassroots electoral organizing campaigns.

Part II (chapters 5–7) investigates the BSLN’s activities from 1991 to 1996. Chapter 5 describes the BSLN’s parent organizations, the Black Community Crusade for Children (BCCC) and the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF). It also looks at the BSLN’s leadership development and popular education programs. Through its Ella Baker Child Policy Training Institute and Advanced Service and Advocacy Workshops, the BSLN trained over six hundred black students and youth in direct action organizing, social movement building, voter education, child advocacy, and teaching methodology and developed freedom schools in dozens of urban and rural jurisdictions. Chapter 6 extends these discussions by assessing the BSLN’s organizing initiatives from 1993 to 1996: the Summer Freedom School program; its antiviolence campaign coordinated with the CDF and BCCC; and local organizing initiatives in New York City, North and South Carolina, and California.

Chapter 7 discusses the BSLN’s attempt to implement two large-scale projects: Citizenship 2000, a comprehensive civic and electoral organizing campaign, and the One Thousand by Two Thousand project that targeted an additional one thousand members for recruitment into the organization. These initiatives were initiated, in part, to counteract the institutional leveraging pressures of the BSLN’s parent organizations. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the intergroup tensions between the BSLN and its parent organizations, which contributed to underlying disputes within BSLN’s leadership nucleus. Both sources (intergroup and intragroup) of disagreement weakened the BSLN and contributed to its collapse in the summer of 1996. The BSLN’s collapse was further attributed to its inability to reconcile its relationship with the CDF and BCCC, the principal groups of its movement infrastructure. The tensions between the BSLN and its parent groups increased after the CDF jump-started the Stand for Children campaign in 1995. The campaign attempted to mobilize opposition to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (also
known as the Welfare Reform Bill) that was passed by Congress in 1996. Despite the good intentions of Stand for Children, the BSLN’s leadership nucleus feared that the campaign would neutralize its agenda and channel the group’s energies into supporting a political agenda that was predetermined by its parent organizations.

Part III of the book assesses post–civil rights activists in JJRM and the labor movement from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. As discussed in chapter 8, the JJRM campaigns in New York, Maryland, and Louisiana attempted to deinstitutionalize the juvenile justice system and combat disproportionate minority confinement. I also examine how the makeup of the JJRM’s movement infrastructures, combined with the regional and local political cultures that shaped the orientations of their key activists, influenced the trajectory of the campaigns.

Chapter 9 looks at whether the reform measures instituted by President John Sweeney of the AFL-CIO in the mid- to late 1990s created opportunities for young blacks to participate in the labor movement. Black youth participation in labor-backed initiatives was limited due to an outmoded set of organizing approaches used to mobilize black working-class communities. These approaches failed to address the concerns of black youth and young adults whose social and political orientations were radically shaped by a postindustrial economy.

The concluding chapter discusses the tribulations and triumphs of social movement activism among the post–civil rights generation. I argue that the constraints placed on movement activism, especially among young black activists, will likely remain as long as progressives and blacks have access to institutional channels to exercise political influence. While this may curtail transformational movement initiatives that use extra-systemic pressures, youth-based groups must routinely adjust and reconfigure ways to create opportunities for black youth to participate in social justice campaigns.