

# The racial mosaic of modern America: California and the history of the civil rights movement

Jul 26 2012

*In **The Color of America Has Changed**, Mark Brilliant examines California's history to illustrate how the civil rights era was a truly nationwide and multiracial phenomenon – one that was shaped and complicated by the presence of not only blacks and whites, but also Mexican Americans, Japanese Americans, and Chinese Americans, among others. **Jonathan Bell** applauds the author's deep engagement with an important topic.*



**The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Has Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California. Mark Brilliant. Oxford University Press. December 2010**

California recently became the first minority-majority State in the United States, and as the largest State in the nation it has much to tell us about the complex interactions of race, political economy, and social change over the course of the last century. The Golden State's natural wealth in agriculture, gold mining, and industrial development since its accession to the Union in 1850 attracted several migratory waves from the Far East, Latin America, and the rest of the US, and placed it at the heart of protracted and often bitter battles over how to manage the racial mosaic of modern America.

Many historians have documented the deep-seated racial prejudice and workplace struggles affecting the different groups involved, including Japanese, Mexican, and African American migrants, and we know much about the often grim underbelly of the land of opportunity seemingly represented by California over the last century. [Mark Brilliant](#) takes this familiar story beyond World War Two to use California as a vital case study of the dynamics of civil rights politics between the end of Japanese-American internment and the judicial sanctioning of racial quotas in the late 1970s. He seeks to move civil rights scholarship beyond a simple black-white binary and to view the rights revolution of the second half of the twentieth century as a story of parallel and often



competing agendas for social justice specific to different racial groups. In so doing, he provides a deeply researched and detailed portrait of a racially-diverse state and nation that undermines any attempt to track some sort of teleological advance of colour-blind racial justice in the civil rights era.

The book takes a chronological approach and interweaves the civil rights stories of three principal racial groups: Japanese Americans, Latinos (some citizens and many non-citizens, often migrant laborers from Mexico), and African Americans. Despite a façade of unity on questions of racial justice in areas of property rights, employment, and other matters, organisations representing each group had quite different legislative and legal priorities. Japanese Americans struggled to overturn the Alien Land Law that prevented Japanese non-citizens from owning land in California, and also fought to regain the rights and privileges so unceremoniously snatched from them during internment in World War Two.

Residents of Mexican heritage in the 1940s had to contend with segregated schools as a result of the political decision to assert that they were not proficient enough in English to attend the same schools as their white counterparts. The problem of what Carey McWilliams termed 'the social outcast' status of farm workers, often imported from Mexico to work for a pittance as part of the bracero programme, was also a problem particular to Latinos.

African Americans, by contrast, faced discrimination in housing, employment, and in access to goods and services, making the task of the west coast branch of the NAACP a familiar one to those used to the civil rights struggles of the Deep South. The question of legal citizenship and the rights conferred by it – such as access to welfare benefits – was of burning relevance to Latinos in a way it was not for African Americans.

Until the late 1960s all of these campaigns ran in parallel, sometimes in concert, sometimes not, and Brilliant ably charts the legal and political battles and the attempts by civil rights leaders to pull them all together into an organised assault on prejudice and discrimination in the Golden State. In the late 1960s, Governor Ronald Reagan began actively to exploit the tensions between social justice movements, promoting bilingual education so attractive to many Latinos and Asian Americans at the same time as he opposed the forced integration of schools central to the African American civil rights movement. The crisis of liberalism of the mid-1960s, Brilliant argues, represented in large part a fracturing of a racial coalition essential to the viability of liberal politics in a setting as multiracial as California and, by extension, the United States.

The book asserts as its main conceptual framework the existence of "different axes of discrimination, different avenues of redress" that suggest the existence of a "wide" civil rights movement "in terms of the range of 'race problems' and responses to them." (p. 14). This story is told effectively and with careful attention to detail and nuance of interpretation. Yet the subject matter raises a number of questions that would repay further investigation, thinking about the

interaction of race and political economy in the United States. Many of the battles recounted in the book are about access to capital, and how racial discrimination is bound up with economic questions of property values, the rights of labour, and cost-benefit calculations between labour costs and commodity prices. Many Californians were turned off the anti-Prop 14 forces in 1964 because they did not consider themselves southern bigots but were worried about property values and neighbourhood identity, issues that inform the path-breaking work of Tom Sugrue and Matthew Lassiter and which would repay greater analysis.

In addition, I would like to know more about the strategic decision-making of the various civil rights organisations discussed and the success or otherwise of their mobilisation strategies. Latinos were discriminated against in housing sales and yet the issue did not really motivate their leaders in the same way as African Americans, and more discussion of the ramifications of this would be interesting. Is the bottom line that American capitalism is simply racist by design and by outcome, and that this unites our understanding of different racial struggles in modern California? This book stimulated these questions in my mind, the result of Mark Brilliant's deep engagement with an important topic.

---

**Jonathan Bell** is a Senior Lecturer in History at the [University of Reading](#). His main area of specialization is the political history of the United States since the Great Depression, and in particular the relationship between political ideas and social change. He works mainly on the politics of the post-1945 era, looking at ways in which the theory and practice of liberalism and conservatism changed in the three decades after 1929. [Read more reviews by Jonathan.](#)

Related posts:

1. [Book Review: The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Civil Wars, by John Tirman \(11.9\)](#)
2. [Book Review: Youth Policy, Civil Society and the Modern Irish state by Fred Powell et al. \(10.2\)](#)
3. [Book Review: The International Migration of Health Workers: Ethics, Rights and Justice. Edited by Rebecca S. Shah \(7.4\)](#)
4. [Book Review: A Chance to Make History: What Works and What Doesn't in Providing an Excellent Education for All, by Wendy Kopp \(7\)](#)
5. [Out-of-place Obama: an intellectual history of a misunderstood president \(6.8\)](#)

This entry was posted in [Jonathan Bell](#), [Oxford University Press](#), [Politics and International Relations](#), [USA and Canada](#) and tagged [African Americans](#), [California](#), [capitalism](#), [civil rights](#), [immigration](#), [Japan](#), [Japanese Americans](#), [Latinos](#), [Mexico](#), [migration](#), [population](#), [prejudice](#), [race](#), [society](#), [USA](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). [Edit](#)

