

[Abdullah on Dunstan, 'Race, Rights and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to the Cold War'](#)

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Sarah C. Dunstan. *Race, Rights and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 320 pp. \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-108-48697-2.

Reviewed by Dhakir Abdullah (Indiana University, Bloomington) **Published on** H-Diplo (January, 2022) **Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

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Intellectually stimulating as well as illuminating, Sarah Dunstan's *Race, Rights and Reform* is a profound piece that expands the historical literature by marrying discussions of citizenship, rights, and colonialism as they pertain to Black rearticulations of the concept of modernity. Specifically, she explores said dynamics by interrogating social movements from across the African diaspora, including in France, the United States, the French Caribbean, and even the French African colonies. The conventional approach of scholars of the French Empire have heretofore pointed to the tensions between the promises of French republicanism and the realities of colonialism, noting that anticolonial activists in both the interwar and postwar periods frequently leveraged these contradictions when attempting to acquire citizenship rights, while across the Atlantic, Black activists in the United States mobilized the rhetoric of the American Revolution of 1776 to lay claim to their full citizenship rights. However, across this period, Dunstan's monograph traverses the idea that mere comparisons between the political machinations of the two republics were frequent by arguing that Black thinkers from the French Empire played a great but obfuscated role in shaping African American thought and activism and vice versa. According to the author, France became a symbol of so-called colorblind republicanism that African Americans utilized to bolster their criticisms of the United States. Similarly, Black francophone activists capitalized off demonstrations of racism in the United States to lobby for reform in France. Thus, Dunstan meticulously teases out the cultural hybridity that many Black intellectuals embraced while flouting any notions of cultural essentialism.

Methodologically, Dunstan's work bridges historical analysis, social history, and intersectional theory and thereby disregards the orthodox conceit that a unidisciplinary approach can be a proper lens through which to explore the multidimensional reality of the human experience. The book spans the period between 1919 and 1963, highlighting Black activist engagement during the aftermath of World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, and the first few decades of decolonization in Africa. Epistemologically grounding her work in the frog's perspective, the writer foregoes the great-man narrative of history by writing from below to uncover voices of the people on the ground, as her sources attest to them.

In chapter 1, the author lays the foundation for the text by examining the ways in which key Black

intellectuals from the United States and the French Empire sought to configure relationships between racial and national belonging and political access to citizenship affordances during the aftermath of World War 1. Following World War 1, the cataclysmic political, social, and economic shifts led to international change. Hence a “New World Order” took root after US president Woodrow Wilson, speaking to Congress on February 11, 1918, offered a vision of a new world order organized around nation-states and predicated upon the right to self-determination. Dunstan is quick to differentiate this from the contemporaneous self-determinist initiative proffered by Soviet revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik regime. Deemed the “Wilsonian moment,” Wilson’s notion of self-determination was interpreted to mean the “consensual foundation by civilized (implicitly white) men of a political unit governed by democratic principles.... [T]he implications of this principle were that geopolitical boundaries should be formed along the lines of nationality—an identity often conflated at this time with understandings of race” (pp. 169-170.) According to the Wilsonian concept of self-determination, “it was the retention of ‘majority’ control in the face of such a large ‘minority’ population that was desirable” (p. 170). Although an imperial framework, Black men and women from the United States and the French Third Republic would engage and employ these ideas in their struggles against racism and imperialism.

Expanding upon the literature on the Great Depression, which tends to focus on the actions of governments or the internal workings of communist and fascist groups, chapter 4 focuses on the ways that African Americans and Black francophone intellectuals responded to the so-called crisis of modernity: the Great Depression of the 1930s. By no means homogenous in their approach, many Black activists explored communist alternatives in the United States, to the chagrin of more reformist activists. And thinkers such as those behind the publications *Legitime Defense* and *L’Etudiant Noir* in France drew heavily on the work of African American poets such as Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes to fashion their own poetic interventions and representations into the contemporary political arena.

In the final chapter, the reader notices the ways in which the thread of philosophical, political, and activist imbrications between Black francophone speakers and African American agitation for citizenship and its attendant rights continues; this is demonstrated in the context of the Cold War and international anti-imperialist activism, however. Notwithstanding the foregoing, “even by the 1950’s with the formation of independent states in formerly colonial territories, visions of what might comprise a de-colonized world varied from national independence to full citizenship rights within existing state polities” (p. 238). It is in this last chapter that we are brought to the 1960s, when activists who participated in the long fight for full citizenship, rights, and anti-imperialist efforts begin to move into the political arena and take up roles in national administration, according to Dunstan.

Other historical works, such as Mary Dudziak’s *Cold War Civil Rights* (2011) and Carol Anderson’s *Eyes on the Prize* (2003), have demonstrated how American activists embraced the rhetoric of human rights in the aftermath of World War II. But whereas the activists in these works narrowed the frame of their activism to civil rights, Dunstan adds a new dimension to this literature by highlighting how these postwar trends were the continuation of earlier, interwar anticolonial and antiracist discourses focused on civic citizenship.

Exhaustively researched, Dunstan’s book offers a vast array of primary sources to substantiate her

argument. The author utilizes archival material such as legislative records, court cases, and governmental publications. Moreover, the book's archival documentation spans three continents; for example, she accesses archives such as the UNESCO Archives in Paris, the Russian State Archive of Sociopolitical History, and the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library in the United States. Beyond this, however, Dunstan makes a conscious effort to highlight the agency of the activists who participated in the struggle(s) by employing, *inter alia*, their personal journals and correspondence as countercultural discursive formations, which allows her to avoid the intellectually myopic practice of top-down historiography

A particular strength of her monograph is the author's deliberate attempt to bring women activist/intellectuals to the fore, such as Paulette and Jane Nardal, Suzzane Cesaire, Jane Vialle, and others. Apropos of the foregoing, this writer wishes that Dunstan had gone further in differentiating the Wilsonian concept of self-determination from that of Bolshevik self-determinism; the edict of self-determination looked very different in terms of its execution in the Comintern in comparison to the ways in which African Americans entrenched in the Communist Party of the United States interrogated, enacted, and challenged the Bolsheviks' notion of self-determination and its approach to the "Negro Question" within the Black Belt of the South.[1] A great discussion of the foregoing can be found in Robin Kelly's *Freedom Dreams* (2002). The present writer feels this is particularly pertinent as Dunstan cites said text in the work under discussion. Nonetheless, *Race, Rights and Reform* is recommended for any scholar who wishes to explore an informative work on Black activism in the French Empire and the United States along with the diasporic tentacles of mutual influence through international Black discourse, conferences, artistic movements, and so on and how all of this shaped the conception of Western modernity. Astoundingly, the author is able to provide a truly comprehensive treatment of said dynamics in just over three hundred pages.

Dhakhir Abdullah is a PhD candidate in the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University Bloomington, where his scholarship centers on the intersection of the activist and administrative work of Dr. Herman C. Hudson with that of student activists in the Black studies movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s at Indiana University Bloomington.

Note

[1]. See chapter 2 of Robin Kelly, *Freedom Dreams* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 36-60.

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