From Fusionists to Moral Mondays: 
The Populist Tradition in North Carolina Politics

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The 2012 North Carolina elections brought into office a conservative Republican legislature and governor, who proceeded to pass a number of controversial measures, including significant cuts to education, restricting access to abortion, and repealing the Racial Justice Act. In response to these measures, during the summer of 2013, a coalition of liberal groups staged a series of protests outside and within the North Carolina Legislative Building called “Moral Mondays”. Led by North Carolina NAACP President Rev. William Barber II, the Moral Monday movement generated crowds numbering in the thousands, some 900 of whom were arrested for trespassing. This essay explores the ideological origins and predecessors of the Moral Monday movement. Although many of the participants see themselves as the inheritors of the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement (and to a lesser extent the Occupy movement), they also have much in common with the agrarian reform movement of the 1880s and 1890s that eventually became the Populist Party. By placing the Moral Monday movement within a “Long Populist Movement,” this essay seeks to understand the deep roots of liberal populism within North Carolina politics.

The 2012 elections brought Republican control to both houses of the North Carolina legislature and the governor’s mansion for the first time in over a century. With many of the new legislators identifying as Tea Party conservatives, the new Republican government wasted no time in enacting their conservative agenda. Although these actions were not dissimilar to legislation passed in other states with Republican controlled legislatures, like Mississippi or Texas, it was striking in North Carolina, a state known for its long tradition of political moderation compared to many of its Southern neighbors and a state that went for Barack Obama in 2008 and almost did so again in 2012. In response to these measures, during the summer of 2013, a coalition of liberal groups staged a series of protests outside and within the North Carolina Legislative Building called “Moral Mondays”. Led by North Carolina NAACP President Rev. William Barber II, the Moral Monday movement generated crowds numbering in the thousands, some 900 of whom were arrested for trespassing.

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essay seeks to understand the deep roots of liberal populism within North Carolina politics. It argues that the coalition structure of the Moral Monday movement has much in common with the Fusion alliance of Populists and Republicans in the 1890s. Indeed, Rev. William Barber regularly evokes the history “fusion politics” in North Carolina as an antecedent for the Moral Monday movement. At the same time, however, the Moral Monday movement has suffered from none of the fissures over race that ultimately crippled the Fusionists.

The Moral Monday movement protested the dramatic legislative program enacted by North Carolina’s Republic legislature. During the six month legislative session, they made sweeping cuts in education spending, including ending tenure for public school teachers, stopping supplemental pay for advanced degrees, and eliminating thousands of teachers and teacher’s assistants. They placed significant restrictions on women’s access to abortion by requiring abortion clinics to upgrade to hospital level facilities, a measure that threatened to close almost all abortion clinics in the state. They significantly cut taxes on the rich, while at the same time cut access to unemployment benefits. They refused to participate in the Affordable Care Act or accept funding from the federal government to expand Medicaid. They repealed the Racial Justice Act, a 2009 measure designed to mitigate the disproportionate execution of African Americans. They enacted the most significant restrictions on voting rights since Jim Crow, what one historian has referred to as “the nation’s most extensive effort at voter suppression” in recent history. Passed swiftly in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s decision in Shelby County v. Holder, which ruled key provisions of the Voting Rights Act unconstitutional, these restrictions effectively place barriers to voting for traditional Democratic constituencies, especially African Americans and students. The restrictions included eliminating same-day registration, reducing early voting, requiring specific government issued IDs to vote, removing straight ticket voting, expanding the ability of poll watchers to challenge voters’ eligibility, and penalizing college students if they vote where they go to school rather than where their parents live. The Republican legislature also passed measures banning Sharia law and allowing handgun permit holders to take their weapons into all manner of public places, including restaurants, parks, playgrounds, and the parking lots of public schools.

The links between the Moral Monday movement and the Civil Rights movement were evident to all the participants. The structure and methodology of the protests often consciously mirrored those of the 1960s. Protesters gathered hours beforehand, usually at a nearby black Baptist church to be instructed in nonviolent protests and how to respond to the police and the media, before marching to the North Carolina Legislative Building. After a series of speeches and songs (including many drawn from the Civil Rights songbook, such as “We Shall Overcome,”) those protesters who had decided to allow themselves to be arrested
proceeded into the Legislative Building, where after a few more speeches, they were handcuffed by Capitol Police. Rev. Barber often evoked the memory of the Civil Rights struggle, with references to Martin Luther King a regular feature in his speeches. Some of the older protesters were veterans of the Civil Rights movement, including 83 year old Robert Plummer, a black Korean War veteran from Carthage, North Carolina, who was arrested with Dr. King at Pettis Bridge in 1963 and in Raleigh fifty years later, and 92 year old Rosanell Eaton, who also marched with Dr. King and was one of the first African Americans in North Carolina to register to vote during the Civil Rights Era and who has recently filed suit to put a hold on the recent restrictions on access to the ballot box.2 “It’s really like the old days,” said one former member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. “We’ve been waiting for a renewal of the civil rights movement and this is it.”

Republicans have largely ignored the Moral Mondays protests, except to mock them. Republican Senator Thom Goolsby referred to the protests as “Moron Monday.” He claimed that “The circus came to the State Capitol this week, complete with clowns, a carnival Barker and a sideshow.” Goolsby described the protesters as “mostly white, angry, aged former hippies” who were engaging in “liberal theater.”4 Governor Pat McCrory argued that the protests were “outsiders” who were “coming in and they’re going to try to do to us what they did to Scott Walker in Wisconsin.” Several other Republicans echoed McCrory’s comment that the protesters were “outside agitators,” to use a loaded term from the Civil Rights era. Of those arrested during the protests, however, only two percent lived outside of North Carolina.5 Indeed, at least one protester referred to the governor as “George Wallace McCrory,” in reference to the Alabama segregationist governor who blamed Civil Rights protests on “outsider agitators.”6 Governor McCrory also refused to meet with the protesters, claiming they were a drain on public resources. He did however deliver a plate of chocolate-chip cookies to the protesters, which was promptly returned uneaten, accompanied by a note which read “We want women’s health care, not cookies.”7

One of the usual elements of the Moral Monday protests is how unusually historically reflective they are. Two of the most visible protesters were former presidents of the Organization of American Historians: Bill Chafe and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. Teaching at rivals Duke University and the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill respectively, Chafe and Hall have both built long and distinguished careers studying questions of race and class in the American South.8 In a joint editorial published in the Raleigh News & Observer, Chafe and Hall placed the Moral Monday movement within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, comparing the protests to the sit-in movements that began at a Greensboro Woolworth’s in 1960. The praised the moderation of McCrory’s predecessors of both parties dating back to the 1960s, claiming that “this political juggernaut runs totally contrary to what North Carolina has stood for during the last half century.”
They ended their editorial with a plea to preserve the progressive gains accomplished in North Carolina since the 1960 Greensboro sit-ins: “Let us hold on to the history we have won.”

Although the links between the Moral Monday movement and the Civil Rights movement is evident, the movement also draws upon an older Populist tradition in North Carolina, one that dates to the 1890s. Between 1892 and 1898, the Populist movement in North Carolina led a dramatic revolt against Democratic dominance in the state. Although led primarily by white former-Democrats such as Leonidas Polk and Marion Butler, the Populist movement in North Carolina was very much a coalition, drawing its participants from not only disaffected Democrats, but the white and black Farmers’ Alliances, the Knights of Labor, and Republicans. This “Fusion” party, as it was sometimes known, managed to capture the state legislature, the governor’s mansion, and the state’s congressional delegation, marking the only time in North Carolina’s history between Redemption and the Civil Rights era in which the state’s politics were not dominated by white supremacist Democrats. During their brief period in power, the Fusionists managed to expanding voting rights for African Americans and dramatically increase education spending, both issues that are at the heart of the Moral Mondays movement.

The similarities between the Moral Monday movement and the Fusionists extend beyond the political issues they championed. Both movements had deep structural similarities. The Moral Mondays movement, like the Fusionists before them, is a coalition movement. Although the most prominent Moral Monday spokesman, Rev. William Barber, is also the chapter president of the NAACP, the movement draws from a wide variety of activist groups on the left, including labour unions, feminist, abortion-rights, anti-poverty, LGBT, environmental, and education organizations. The demographic profile of those attending the rallies included representatives from all segments of the population, reflecting the state’s growing racial, ethnic, and economic diversity.

The driving force behind the Moral Monday coalition was the common enemy of these various groups, the Republican legislature. Rev. Barber observed that the most unifying element in the movement is their common opposition. “So why are we not together? Why are we in silos? The same people who are anti LGBT are anti voting rights, almost identically. The same people who are anti immigration are also anti public education.” While this coalition has been one of the strengths of the Moral Monday movement, it has also been one of its weaknesses. Addressing so many diverse issues, the movement has had difficulty at times articulating its priorities. Many observers have noted that the panoply of protest signs at the rallies create a cacophony of liberal issues without a clear focus. “It’s hard to know exactly from week to week what it is they’re upset about,” noted one critic of the movement. "One week it’s about Voter ID. One week it’s abortion. One week it’s about union
rights. They are basically a coalition of the aggrieved.” Although tensions within the component parts of the movement were generally downplayed during the rallies, significant disagreements existed among them, particularly concerning gay marriage and abortion. The big tent approach to the Moral Monday movement also encouraged fringe political positions to add their voices to the chorus. Alongside protest signs demanding higher education funding, abortion, and voting rights, some radical protesters also demanded universal single payer healthcare, prohibitions on GMOs, and marijuana legalization, all fringe issues within the context of North Carolina politics.

The coalition that became the North Carolina Fusion movement had similar struggles. United by their common adversary, the mainstream Democratic Party, the Fusionists in North Carolina had a hard time articulating a coherent political platform. The Republicans and the Populists, who formed the heart of the Fusion movement, disagreed on some major issues. While the Populists supported expanding the currency, either through coining silver, using paper money, or the sub-treasury plan, Republicans upheld the gold standard. Populists were generally anti-railroad, with some advocating its nationalization; Republicans supported only modest railroad regulation and government funding of additional railroad construction. Populists opposed the tariff, while Republicans supported it. Lasting bitterness from the Civil War and Reconstruction also poisoned the well, as many Populists, such as Leonidas Polk, were Confederate veterans, while North Carolina Republicans included many African Americans, so-called carpetbaggers, and mountain Unionists. The most significant and eventually fatal fissure between North Carolina Populists and Republicans was their commitment to racial civic equality. For most North Carolina Republicans, maintaining the gains in political equality achieved since emancipation stood at the heart of their political ideology, while white Populists’ commitment to the issue was lukewarm at best. Although the Fusionists were able to plaster over these differences during the political campaigns of 1894, they became a significant tension within the coalition when it came to governing. Without a coherent core political message, Fusionists also struggled to rein in their more radical members, including those who advocated women’s suffrage and the abolishing child labor, both issues unlikely to gain traction in 1890s North Carolina. In the end, the Fusion movement splintered with some of its white members, becoming white supremacists, rejecting their former alliance with black Republicans. While the Moral Monday movement is unlikely to suffer from the same kind of dissolution, it has already struggled to keep its coalition together. As Jacquelyn Hall recently observed in a panel on the Moral Monday movement, “coalitions are hard work and we know from the past that they are strongest when they are most inclusive.”

In addition to their ideological diversity, both the Moral Monday movement and the Fusionists of the 1890s share a wide diversity in the age of their participants.
and leadership. Here they are remarkably unlike the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which drew disproportionately from the younger generations, so much so that many young militant activists thought Martin Luther King, who was only 39 years old when he was assassinated, was too old to lead the movement. The Moral Mondays movement drew heavily upon both senior citizens and university students, creating not only a deep continuity with the past, but also a very forward-looking agenda. This demographic diversity was reflected in one of the more common chants used at the protests: “Forward Together, Not One Step Back,” a motto that reflected the Janus-faced nature of the movement. Similarly, the Fusionists drew upon both an older generation of political leadership and a younger population committed to substantive reform. The older generation was best represented by Leonidas Polk, a Confederate veteran who was wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg and was a front-runner for the Populist Party’s presidential nomination before his premature death in 1892, while the younger generation was best represented by Marion Butler, who was only weeks old when Polk was wounded at Gettysburg. While Polk and Butler agreed on many political questions, at least during the brief time they headed the agrarian movement in North Carolina together, their rhetoric reflected a subtle, but significant difference between them. While the elder Polk spoke longingly about the past, in a time when yeoman farmers were not crippled by debt, the younger Butler was more inclined to speak about a future in which they had been liberated from that debt. Black Fusionists manifested a similar dichotomy between its older, more moderate leaders, such as Rev. Walter Pattillo, who had been born well before the Civil War, and its younger leaders such as newspaper editor Alex Manley, born afterwards.

The links between the Moral Monday movement and its Populist antecedents is not entirely lost upon its participants. Surprisingly, the connection is most frequently made, not by the historians in the movement, but by Rev. William Barber who regularly evokes the “fusion politics” of the North Carolina Populists as an antecedent for the Moral Mondays protests. He has said that the Moral Monday movement will become the basis for a “new form of fusion politics if we were going to really address the South.” This rhetoric is nothing new for Barber; years before the start of the Moral Monday protests, Barber spoke about the need to form a liberal coalition to counter Republican encroachments on social justice. In January 2008, he compared Republican efforts at redistricting to the Wilmington Riot of 1898, where “the enemies of Black-White fusion in Wilmington shot down scores of Black people in cold blood.” While his comparison between Republican gerrymandering and what some historians have called the only coup in American history may be overwrought, it demonstrated Barber’s early awareness of the “Long Populist” movement. In a January 2013 interview, several months before the first Moral Monday protest, Rev. Barber gave his most thorough reflection between the contemporary struggle in North Carolina and its nineteenth century antecedents.
“After the Civil War,” Barber claimed, “something phenomenal happened called Fusion politics” in which white and black Southerners worked together. Although Barber conflates North Carolina’s Reconstruction era Republican government of the late 1860s and early 1870s and its Fusion government of the 1890s, he powerfully argues that the enemies of such progressive coalitions always attacked the same five features: education, labour, criminal justice, fair taxes, and voting rights. The drama currently unfolding in North Carolina, Barber claims, can be seen as a third Reconstruction, reflecting deep continuities in the progressive struggle.

It is too early to evaluate the historical significance of the Moral Monday movement. The North Carolina Republican legislature adjourned for the year at the end of July 2013 and there is no evidence that the weekly protests had any influence on the pace or content of their reforms. Rev. Barber has pledged that the end of the legislative session would not mean the end of the movement and vowed to take the movement on the road to visit all thirteen of North Carolina’s Congressional districts. In the following weeks, Moral Monday rallies were held in Asheville, Charlotte, and Manteo, drawing sizeable crowds. In 2014, the Moral Monday movement was less visible outside the North Carolina legislative building than it had been in 2013, although fourteen protesters were arrested in May for holding a sit-in in North Carolina House Speaker (and Republican senatorial candidate) Thom Tillis’ office. The Moral Monday movement has, however, spread beyond North Carolina, with affiliated movements popping up in at least a dozen states, most of which were controlled by Republican legislatures intent on passing reforms similar to those enacted in North Carolina. Among the sites that had adopted the Moral Monday moniker in 2014 were protests of the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Missouri. In one such Moral Monday rally, at least fifty protesters were arrested, including Cornel West. According to the New York Times, the Moral Monday protests in Ferguson were “patterned after ‘Moral Monday’ demonstrations that began last year in North Carolina.” According to Rev. Barber, these Moral Monday movements across the nation were the product of “transformative fusion coalitions led by indigenous leadership” intent upon mobilizing a politically engaged liberal populism.

Despite the similarities between the contemporary Moral Monday movement and the Fusion coalition of the 1890s, it appears unlikely that it will replicate its nineteenth century predecessor, which was torn apart by a divisive racial campaign by its opponents. For a coalition movement, the Moral Monday protests have demonstrated an extraordinary amount of cooperation and coherent leadership, especially by Rev. Barber, who has managed to funnel the progressive energies of a diverse amalgamation of interest groups into a robust movement. Whatever the future holds for the Moral Monday movement, its vigor during the summer of 2013 indicates the continued vitality of liberal populism in North Carolina.
NOTES


North Carolina to be arrested for their participation in the Moral Mondays protests; Harry Watson, Bob Korstad, and Tim Tyson were also arrested.


To be sure, the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement also had a significant number of older leaders, including A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin. However, the degree to which the Moral Monday movement draws upon an older demographic is striking. Henry Louis Gates, “The Two Nations of Black America,” PBS Frontline, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/race/etc/gates.html


BIBLIOGRAPHY


