The Review of Politics 86 (2024), 390–393.
© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of University of Notre Dame. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Seeing Again: On Erin Pineda's *Seeing Like an Activist*

Lawrie Balfour

University of Virginia

Charlottesville, Virginia, USA

doi:10.1017/S003467052400007X

Seeing Like an Activist is a profound—and profoundly political—book. Skillfully distilling complex historical evidence into a vivid narrative *and* advancing a compelling theoretical argument, Pineda unsettles conventional accounts of the civil rights movement to ask what we can learn about the nature and limits of civil disobedience "by reconsidering the example we already think we know so well" (3). One of the book's key contributions is its analysis of political practices that constituted the "short civil rights movement"—the decade of southern protest bookended by the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955–56 and the Selma March in 1965. "The civil rights movement (and its multitude of activists)," Pineda observes, "operates between the lines of theory as an object lesson—a ready-made example that proves the moral purchase of the theory, rather than a live source of novel theoretical insights and political claims" (48). As object lesson, the movement is often recruited to police or criticize forms of protest that are said to fall short of the disciplined nonviolence of the past. This view of history, Pineda contends, enables theorists of civil disobedience like John Rawls to use the example of civil rights activism to affirm the liberal constitutional order. Offering incisive critiques of Rawls, Michael Walzer, and Hugo Bedau, Pineda exposes the unearned ease with which political theories that do not take racial injustice as a central concern or focus on Black theoretical practices have conscripted the civil rights movement in service of their arguments.

Yet Pineda goes beyond criticizing theoretical opportunism and exposing the blindnesses of white theory by calling attention to the radical theoretical work of civil rights activists in a period that is primarily remembered for the fall of legal segregation. These years come alive in a way that allows them to be seen anew. One of the accomplishments of this book is its bifocal orientation. Where chapters 1 and 5 emphasize white repertoires for not seeing or misreading the profound political challenge of civil rights activism, chapters 2–4 foreground the activists' vision of events as they unfolded; crucially, however,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467052400007X

every chapter moves back and forth between these ways of seeing. Through the creative use of archival materials, Pineda's argument enacts Sheldon Wolin's contention that "political philosophy constitutes a form of 'seeing' political phenomena and that the way in which the phenomena will be visualized depends in large measure on where the viewer 'stands.'"[1]

For many Americans—including many prominent political theorists—the civil rights movement is viewed through a lens that filters out the foundational entanglement of US legal and political institutions with racialized violence, exploitation, and domination. This is what Pineda, building on James Scott, calls "seeing like a white state." Theorists who discern the legitimacy of protest in its "fidelity to the law"[2] efface both the racism embedded in the law and the profound critique that those protests embody. While theory is supposed to offer the luxury of slow and detached reflection, Pineda lays bare the proximity between the considered views of prominent liberal thinkers and the opportunistic "techniques of disavowal" enacted by politicians who insisted that "black citizens were not actually the primary agents in the fight for their own freedom" (185).

What did the activists see? For one thing, they saw the ways that their cause exceeded the borders of the United States. Rather than accepting arguments that the Cold War effectively stifled transnational Black politics, Pineda de-domesticates civil disobedience and traces the networks of exchange through which civil rights activists framed their defiance of white supremacy by drawing lessons from India, Ghana, South Africa, and elsewhere. They also saw how the carceral power of southern towns and cities could be turned against itself. Chapter 3's reading of "incarceration as liberation" demonstrates how "jail, no bail" emerged as a strategy in which protesters achieved a kind of "comparative freedom" by willingly submitting themselves to imprisonment (91–26). Pineda's analysis undercuts conventional readings of civil disobedience by showing how the refusal of bail contests, rather than reinforces, the legitimacy of the legal order and transforms the meaning of the prison from a site of shame or disgrace to a place of self-emancipation. When Pineda turns to the Birmingham campaign in 1963 and plans for a "stall-in" at the World's Fair in New York in 1964, the book's attunement to the ways that participants experienced chaos, violence or threatened violence, and setbacks exposes the gap between liberal accounts of civil disobedience as expressive and noncoercive, on the one hand, and the impotence of persuasive techniques in the face of white Americans' unwillingness to acknowledge Black claims to substantive equality, on the other.[3]

[1]Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 17.

[2]The formula belongs to Rawls. For a critique that dovetails with Pineda's, see Alexander Livingston, "Fidelity to Truth: Gandhi and the Genealogy of Civil Disobedience," *Political Theory* 46, no. 4 (2018): 511–36.

[3]For an account of the degree to which white Americans saw the aims of the civil rights movement as "improvement," rather than equality, see Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon, 2010 [1967]).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467052400007X

Two threads might be extended further. The first is Pineda's account of "decolonizing praxis." She uses this phrase throughout the book to link the civil rights movement to anticolonial activism beyond the United States and to approach civil disobedience as a "practice of self-liberation" (16), rather than affirmation of the constitutional order or a strategy for inclusion. I wonder whether there is more to say about what the activists Pineda studies reveal about the coloniality of American democracy. Beyond the "imaginative transit" that joins them to critics of colonial rule elsewhere, how do their practices and reflections challenge what Barnor Hesse calls "a Western narrative of freedom that incorporates the imperatives of the colonizers and exorcises the predicaments of the colonized"?[4] In the epilogue, Pineda takes up Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton's *Black Power* and the contention that African Americans constitute an "internal colony."[5] If the metaphor has limitations as a description of the status of Black citizens, it also captures something elided in arguments that begin from an account of slavery as "America's original sin" and thereby separate its legacies from the erasure of Indigenous claims to the land, the brutal policing of internal and external borders, and the violent exploitation of nonwhite workers. King moves in this direction in *Where Do We Go from Here*. There is an opportunity to extend the investigation into those elements of civil rights activism that aim to decolonize the United States.

The second thread emerges in Pineda's treatment of time in the final section "The Past in the Present." Her discussion rightly warns against interpretations that reduce present-day racial violence or disregard to an endless pattern of repetition. One of the dangers of this approach, Pineda notes, is that it constrains contemporary activists, condemning them to participate in the reenactment of (or failure to reenact) older strategies of protest that have been deemed legitimate. This move both ossifies the examples it extols and undermines creative refashioning of past strategies to meet new circumstances. Although I am persuaded that "the structure of today's racial regime is the product of the past, not a frozen replica of it" (201), I wonder whether there is another way to figure that temporal relation: recursivity. The story Pineda tells and its lessons for analyzing the present resonate with two different senses of this term. One is what Ann Laura Stoler calls "history as recursion." "This sort of history," she explains, "is marked by the uneven, unsettled, contingent quality of histories that *fold back on themselves* and, in that refolding, reveal new surfaces and new planes."[6] For

[4]Barnor Hesse, "Escaping Liberty, White Hegemony, Black Fugitivity," *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 295.

[5]Kwame Ture [Stokely Carmichael] and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992 [1967]).

[6]Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 26–27 (emphasis original). For Robert Nichols, "recursivity" names a relationship between theft and property in which Indigenous lands become

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467052400007X

Stoler, a focus on "colonial presence" offers an alternative to both the presumption that there can be a clear break with a violent past and the view that colonial practices simply continue, largely unchanged across time.

The second sense not only describes the processes through which relations of subjugation and dispossession are reenacted in new ways; it also identifies ways that the subjugated and dispossessed have interpreted their condition and created fresh responses in defiance of it. Activist or political recursion might be a way to describe repertoires of drawing from and embroidering on past examples in a manner similar to what Karla Holloway calls "the literary and linguistic act of recursion."[7] Holloway is interested in artistic practices and techniques that have been critical to African American music and letters and that blur the lines between synchrony and diachrony associated with Western historical time. Literary recursion reflects the coexistence of multiple temporalities in the lives of individuals and communities. James Snead emphasizes the role of the "cut" in Black music, a form of improvisation-through-repetition that "sets up expectations and disturbs them at irregular intervals" by returning to the beginning.[8] Something like this approach might be discerned in the ways that contemporary activists honor key historical figures and events while cultivating possibilities that would have been unimaginable to previous generations. Thinking of this work as a practice of recursion, taking place within a history that is itself recursive, might be one way to advance the project that Pineda summarizes so elegantly in her final sentence: "to orient us toward activists as political theorists, engaged in the creative work of analyzing and acting within the present on its own terms—working in transit and in solidarity with activists across the boundaries of our existing political categories, and devising forms of action that promise to build a new world out of the wreckage of this one" (202).

property retrospectively at the moment that title is taken by settlers. Robert Nichols, "Theft is Property! The Recursive Logic of Dispossession," *Political Theory* 46 (February 2018): 3–28.

[7]Karla F. C. Holloway, *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 20.

[8]James Snead, "On Repetition in Black Culture," *Black American Literature Forum* 15 (Winter 1981): 151.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467052400007X