***2.* At The Edge of Truth: A Partial History of the King Years. A review of Taylor Branch’s *At Canaan’s Edge.* by Mike Miller. Published in *Social Policy.***

*At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68* completes Taylor Branch’s trilogy on the years of Martin Luther King’s life and leadership (1955-1968). For 24 years, Branch devoted himself to gathering an immense amount of information, sifting through it and putting it together in a well-told, sometimes passionate, and often deeply moving story. Anyone concerned with contemporary U.S. history, particularly with the relationship of African-Americans to broader American society, should read all three of these volumes—and indeed a great many people have and will.

Branch's book is likely to be *the* major popular chronicle of the period and a definitive reference book for scholars. For this reason, it needs to be critically reviewed from many angles.

I was deeply involved in this period—as a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and as a community organizer for Saul Alinsky. As I read, a nagging voice kept saying, “wait a minute, that's not right,” or “there's something missing here,” or “there's a hidden bias in this account.” As I spoke with civil rights movement friends and colleagues from that period, I found similar misgivings. Branch’s passion for the period, his admiration for King and much of the story he tells elicit respect. But there are problems. Here are some examples of these concerns, and questions that require further investigation and point to a different interpretation of the period’s events.

Historian’s Bias

Two major kinds of bias appear in historic works, some denied by their authors, others readily admitted: The claim of “objectivity” is now rarely made. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., one of the deans of American history, recently wrote in the *New York Review of Books*,

*All historians are prisoners of their own experience and servitors to their own prepossessions. We are all entrapped in the egocentric predicament. We bring to history the preconceptions of our personality and the preoccupations of our age. We cannot seize on ultimate and absolute truths…So the historian is committed to a doomed enterprise—the quest for an unattainable objectivity…” But Schlesinger isn’t convinced of the deconstructionist view that “All history is…the continuation of ideology by other means, as the projection and manipulation of relationships of domination and oppression…*

There is a difference, says Schlesinger, between history and fiction.

Writing about *Canaan’s Edge* in the *New York Times*, Anthony Lewis says, “Every factual statement is backed up by 200 pages of endnotes…He has an incredible command of it all, bringing history to life with a few sentences here, extended chapters there on something like the march from Selma to Montgomery.” And in *The New York Review of Books*, Garry Wills tells us, “Branch aspires to know this large transaction [the years of King’s life] in all its parts, and to convey that knowledge to us, in great detail.” This book, Wills tells us, “…is so far the best look at that entire subject. It is an essential tool for understanding what happened to and in America across that dizzying span of years.” Essential, yes; complete, no. Indeed, complete is impossible. Facts are always selected—some discarded, others used. Similarly, the exclusion of one set of sources can lead a writer to conclude something to be true when, in fact, it might at best be only a partial truth. Branch’s detailed account of the Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march provides a good example.

Selma-To-Montgomery March

There was a great deal of controversy surrounding Martin Luther King’s decision to turn the Selma-Montgomery marchers around rather than continue on their trek. King didn’t want to break an injunction issued by Federal District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson who was sympathetic to civil rights. Given that King’s strategy was to force the Federal government to take a stand against Dixiecrat segregation, the decision may well have been the correct one. With the benefit of hindsight, I think so. At the time, SNCC field secretaries didn’t. Many still don’t. They feared that without further pressure “from below” the march might not take place. Students at Tuskegee, the close-by Black college campus, who were affiliated with SNCC, felt the same way. Branch’s presentation assumes that King was going to march, the only question being when.

Here is what Gwen Patton, then Direct Action Chair of the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League (TIAL) and President of the Student Government Association, wrote to Branch: “I wish you had read my *Insurgent Memories*, which is on the web. It recounts accurately…the events of ‘The March That Didn’t Turn Around’ in Montgomery, led by Tuskegee Institute Advancement League (TIAL) students…[T]here is a school of thought…that if the students had not marched in Montgomery, there possibly would not have been a march from Selma to Montgomery, that perhaps a quiet deal would be hatched that would steal the strength and fervor of the people who for decades had been organizing and clamoring for the right to vote…” Branch footnotes an interview with Patton, but evidently didn’t ask her about this. (*At Canaan’s Edge,* page 796, Note 85.) "I don't recall Taylor interviewing me,” says Patton, “Though we have seen each other on a least two occasions before his book was published." (Taylor Branch wrote to me, " Gwen is correct in the sense that I did no full-fledged interview with her about her work in the movement...However, I did talk with Gwen less formally.”)

Branch deals with the question of if/when/whether to march. But there was another dimension to the discussion—how the decision was made—that deserves serious attention. At least some SNCC people were angry that there was no discussion with the marchers, or at least with a representative body from their number, as to whether the march should continue despite the injunction. SNCC called this “top down” versus “bottom up” decision-making. Clarity about this difference and the ambiguities in it—things are never quite as clear as bottom-up versus top-down would suggest—and exploration of its meaning would have enriched Branch’s discussion of the Selma-Montgomery events. This debate was central to the major participants.

Lowndes County

SNCC’s Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) marched. He told me the march was an opportunity to meet people in Lowndes County, which was more than 80% African-American without a single registered Black voter. White racism in the county was super-virulent—in a region in which racism was generally virulent. SNCC’s work in Lowndes County built a powerful grassroots organization there—the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (an independent, county-wide, third party whose symbol was a black panther). It epitomized what SNCC tried to be about: building grassroots power. Branch tells the story of SNCC breaking the voter registration barrier in Lowndes, but his framework fails to help people understand how different the work there was from King’s SCLC work. SNCC people spoke of a difference between “organizing” (which they did) and “mobilizing” (which SCLC did.)

That difference isn’t captured in Branch’s otherwise vivid depiction of the courage of SNCC people in Lowndes. SNCC was about organizing, though its practice often fell short of its theoretical understanding of the necessary connection between organization and the power to address both racism and poverty in the South.

Chicago

Perhaps nothing better illustrates his blinder to that distinction than Branch’s account of King’s challenge to segregation in Chicago. The main themes of the story are well known: King went; he led demonstrations in white segregated neighborhoods; the resistance was violent; the city quickly polarized. Not much came of it.

According to Branch, in heavily Catholic Chicago, Archbishop John Cardinal Cody played a positive role: Cody “had presided over the integration of parochial schools in New Orleans.” Branch continues,

“His actions would remain cautious but friendly to the Chicago movement.” And, “Cody called for a moratorium on demonstrations to prevent loss of life. His edict exonerated the marchers—‘They have not been guilty of violence and lawlessness, others have’—[He] repeated his seminal blessing for their ‘Open City’ principles, and went so far as to confess a contravention of moral order. ‘It is truly sad, indeed deplorable, that the citizens should ever have to be asked to suspend the exercise of their rights because of the evil doing of others…’

In a summit meeting with Mayor Daley on racial integration, Cody “rose for the first time to say that the Roman Catholic association of Rogers Park already had resolved to accept Negro residents, and that priests in all 454 parishes would pursue [the same goal.] ‘We are like a little United Nations, and we will commit our moral, financial, and religious resources to the fulfillment of this agreement.’”

Can you make Branch’s picture of Cody fit with the following?: “[T]he new, autocratic John Cardinal Cody, ending a long tradition of progressive leadership in the archdiocese, had abolished [Msgr. Jack] Egan’s office of urban affairs and banished the popular monsignor to Presentation parish in the old 24th Ward…” (Sanford Horwitt; *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky—His Life and Legacy.*) Or: “Cardinal John Cody was not fond of priests who spoke their minds. Those who did were often exiled to particularly difficult parishes where they would be too busy and too burdened to make much trouble…And Cody did his best to exile Egan. It didn't matter. Jack Egan was never silenced.” (Carol Marin; *Chicago Tribune*; October 29, 2003). Or:

“When Cardinal John Cody became archbishop of Chicago in 1965, replacing…one of the progressive leaders at the Second Vatican Council, Msgr. Egan found himself suddenly in a less congenial ecclesiastical environment. It was a situation shared by many of his fellow Chicago priests. It became increasingly clear that the new cardinal and Jack Egan did not see eye to eye on whether the church should become involved in community organizing for social justice and human rights. Jack was removed as director of the Office of Urban Affairs.” (Fr. Richard P. McBrian, Professor of Theology; Notre Dame University.)

Egan left Chicago and was in exile at the University of Notre Dame until Cardinal Bernardin brought him back to the Windy City.

The two pictures don’t coincide. In this cognitive dissonance lies a clue to Branch’s bias: he doesn’t understand power and organizing. He does understand integration, and moral witness, and mobilizing on their behalf. The former is ever-conscious of the realities of the world the way it is as it seeks to move it toward the world as it ought to be. The latter “speaks truth to power.” Msgr. Egan was a moral man; he was a radical; he was also deeply appreciative of the realities of power in Mayor Richard Daley’s Chicago. Perhaps more than anyone in the post-1950s, it was Jack Egan who pushed a racial justice agenda in the Catholic Church, and involved his friend and organizing mentor Saul Alinsky in pursuing it.

The organizing conducted by Egan, Alinsky and others before and after Martin Luther King, Jr. and SCLC’s Chicago work is apparently beyond the scope of Branch’s biography. His account omits a major part of the story because his focus on King, on the spectrum of militant-to-moderate tactics, and on nonviolence omits the more radical organizing perspective that underlies serious community organizing. Indeed, organizing is sometimes more moderate in its tactics, and less confrontational in its approach to bring about fundamental change.

Branch’s omission leads him to make a major factual error in his characterization and understanding of Cardinal Cody. Chicago racism involved a vast network of complicity between the Daley Machine, financial institutions and insurance companies engaged in red-lining, “panic-peddling” realtors who persuaded whites to sell at low prices so they could quickly sell to Blacks at much higher prices and then convince more whites that “the neighborhood is turning.” This system could not be changed by moral witness, no matter how militant and nonviolent its tactics. Entrenched corporate and political power had to be challenged by organized people power.

Nonviolence

Branch suggests that King was an apostle of nonviolence, to which he remained true even after others in “The Movement” (as the southern civil rights movement was called) abandoned it as a method for struggle. Branch takes us through the logic that led King to oppose the war in Vietnam even at the cost of his tenuous relationship with President Johnson. At the time, the debate in The Movement over nonviolence was argued in two ways: philosophical versus tactical nonviolence and nonviolence versus self-defense. The issue is more complicated than this framing suggests.

If we take Gandhi as the standard for nonviolence, King fell short of the standard. For example, Gandhi didn’t want victory at the expense of an adversary. In contemporary terms, at least during some of the period of struggle in India, he sought “win-win” solutions. Gandhi-supported Dalit (Untouchable) marchers opened a road that had been closed to them because of their status in India’s caste system. They wanted their Brahman opposition (who didn’t want the Dalit to come close to a Brahmin temple) to agree that the change was a good thing. When the road was opened by government action, the Dalit marchers declined to use it. It was only after their Brahman adversaries said, “We cannot any longer resist the prayers that have been made to us, and we are ready to receive the untouchables,” that the Dalit claimed their victory. Commenting on their struggle the year before their victory, Gandhi wrote, “It behooves the organizers to set even the most orthodox and most bigoted at ease and to assure them that they do not seek to bring about the reform by coercion.” King taught that nonviolence was a way to open the heart of one’s adversaries. But when victory, in the usual sense of winners and losers, came his way by nonviolent coercion he didn’t turn his back on it.

What does it mean, then, for Branch to portray King as a proponent of nonviolent philosophy as opposed to nonviolent tactics? This was a tension between King and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. SNCC people agreed that you shouldn’t carry arms when you demonstrated or marched. But they didn’t ask Black people living in rural areas not to defend themselves in their homes. Some SNCC field secretaries carried guns in their cars as they drove on isolated roads in hostile plantations. The “debate” was in some ways a non-issue. With 40 years of discussion since the 1960s, Branch could have done a better job clarifying the issues around nonviolence. Instead, an unexamined view of nonviolence remains central to Branch’s admiration of King.

A Modest Proposal

The King years were a period of great anticipation and terrible disillusionment for many young activists. It is now hard to imagine that most Americans thought the future would be better for their children. Activists and organizers, as well as liberal, labor, civil rights and other community leaders, hoped for a new America. Some political strategists envisaged a realignment in which “Dixiecrats” would be pushed into the Republican Party. At the same time, they saw a new integrated Democratic Party that would revive the New Deal. But this new New Deal would be without the 1930s racist compromises made to get Dixiecrat votes in Congress. To many, it seemed that an appeal to conscience would be enough to bring deep change to the country by use of relatively traditional liberal politics.

1964 was a turning point. The SNCC-supported Mississippi Freedom Democrats failed to unseat the racist regulars at the Democratic Party’s Atlantic City convention. George Wallace surprised most with his presidential primary successes in white working-class precincts in the North. Other ominous signs soon presented themselves: escalation of the War in Vietnam; recalcitrant racism in the north; rebellious riots in dozens of American cities. Disillusionment and defeat replaced optimism and victories. The King years end with his assassination, with Lyndon Johnson’s refusal to run for re-election as President and with “tricky Dick” Richard Nixon’s election as President. Taylor Branch’s book is an indispensable aid to an overview of the events of these years. But more work needs to be done before the skeleton can be completed and the flesh put on the bones.

Historians like Charles Payne and John Dittmer, each of whom authored an important “bottom-up” version of civil rights movement history, and Alinsky biographers Sanford Horwitt and P. David Finks should convene a week-long symposium on Taylor Branch’s trilogy. Civil rights movement historians, reporters, organizers, leaders and activists should join with a whole new group of community organizers in the Alinsky/Fred Ross tradition, and academics who are writing about their activities, to dissect Taylor Branch’s volumes with great care, acknowledging the tremendous contribution made by his work. From such a gathering should come videos, monographs and at least one major book.

A new movement is emerging among recent immigrants to the U.S. Recognizing vast differences between its context and that of the civil rights movement, this movement has important similarities to the period of the King years. It needs to learn from, incorporate and move beyond the movement of the ‘60s. The power dimension missing from Branch’s version of those years needs to be added or this movement will suffer the same fate as the African-American community—important gains were made, but the surface of racism, poverty and militarism—King’s three concerns—has only barely been scratched. Branch’s political liberalism needs to be supplemented by an historical view and political practice that emphasizes people power and organization.

Until that happens, we are doomed to repeat the errors of the past as we confront the immoralities of the present.

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