Humanities Scholars Collaborative, Wed 7 April 2010
"Majority Rule: the dynamic tension between majority and minority"

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Talk title: "On the Wrong Side of History? Taking Sides in School Desegregation, 1954-1976."
Reading: Steinbeck *Travels With Charley* chapter about New Orleans school desegregation

Media links:

http://www.bobdylan.com/#/songs/the-times-they-are-a-changin

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/resources/vid/21_video_boston_ra.html (2:27)

[1] Title Slide

What do we mean when we say someone was on the wrong side of history?

What does it mean to say someone has history on their side?

Does history have a "side"?

We will explore this question through several case studies from the era of school desegregation in the United States, from the early 1950s through the mid 1970s. I am especially interested in the way we tell that story, particularly via iconic images from that struggle.

This was an issue with both national and intensely local dimensions. One about which there were usually uneven numbers split between the majority and the minority, and clear sides to be taken, and situations – circumstances – events where the middle ground disappeared leaving no place for neutrals to stand.

As I teach the civil rights movement I find that the stories perplex many of my students. The moral issues seem to clear-cut to us in retrospect. Often the majority seem to have taken the "wrong stance" and persisted with it for too long. The "right and wrong" sides of history seem patently obvious. We often put a face on the side we agree with, and make the other side a faceless, senseless mob.

[2] Consider this 1920 painting by Dada artist Paul Klee, titled in Latin: "New Angel."[1]

In 1939, philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin used this image to explain his conception of history.

[3] "A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." (Walter Benjamin, #9 in "Theses on the Philosophy of History")

"Benjamin described history as an angel being blown backwards into the future. In his view, the angel of history is always and forever looking backwards trying to pick up and arrange the pieces of what has already happened. This conception of history has been deeply influential for postmodern thinkers, for whom this notion is expressive of the constructed (or artificial) nature of history itself; this postmodern view of history stands in contrast to the view of those modern thinkers (and artists) who imagine history as an inevitable progression of ever-more-enlightened ideas and actions leading to a supreme (and glorious) "end."(Mullin 2008)

In contrast, take this quote from Martin Luther King, Jr: "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." – a quote I love as a human being and find deeply inspirational, but which as a historian I have to distrust the assumptions that it makes.

Part of what interests me in studying the battle over school integration is just the issue raised by King's quotation: that proponents of integration—who spoke for the politically weak and disenfranchised minority even when that was a numerical majority—represented themselves in the historical record as being on history's right side—on the side of truth and the arc of the moral universe.

[1] http://neobar.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/ruhr-shadowtime-angelus-novus11.jpg

Integrationists defied long-standing custom, faced tough legal fights to overturn segregation law and then painstaking on-the-ground confrontations over who can attend which schools.

Henry David Thoreau, in his 1845 essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" wrote,

"After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? — in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward."

"Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight."

Similarly, King's 1963 Letter from Birmingham Jail distinguished between just laws one should follow and unjust laws which ought to be resisted and challenged. "Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal. Let me give another explanation. A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law."

[4] This photograph was taken in 1954 during a stormy few days in Baltimore as protesters opposed the entrance of black students into a public high school. It shows a minister and a schoolteacher driving African-American students home from school. The tension on everyone's face is evident.

Where is the viewer (the eye of the camera) in this image? Close enough to touch the car. Separated from the crowd. Able to see the facial expressions both of crowd and of car. Imagine yourself in this

photograph: where are you? Crowd? Driver? Passenger? Policeman? Where in this image would you choose to go?

[5] There were two kinds of racial segregation in public education: by law (de jure), legalized from 1896 to 1954, and by custom or residential pattern (de facto). Legal school segregation ended with a bundle of cases that was decided as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, but de facto segregation proved harder to combat using the court system. Earl Warren's decision read in part that "we conclude that in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Integration at first did not mean equal numbers of white and black students, nor large-scale redistribution of students or resources to create racial equity. Often integration began with a tiny handful of black students joining a formerly all-white school. A difficult walk through a narrow entrance. Few did it alone or without taunting; threats necessitated the use of force, the representatives of the power of the nation to compel the states.

[6] The nine students who integrated Little Rock's public HS in 1957 required escort by the National Guard, called out by President Eisenhower over the refusal of the Arkansas governor to enforce the desegregation order or to protect black students under it.

[7] Following integration – or even, as here, anticipating it – across the South, private whites-only schools opened, sometimes explicitly advertising themselves as Christian academies, to provide a segregated education for white students as an alternative to forced integration of public schools. Note the language used in the ad on the left, labeling supporters of integration "race-mixers."

[8] Integration sometimes happened with one single student, as was the case with 6-year old Ruby Bridges, the first African-American child to attend an all-white elementary school in the South, and accompanied to school for months by her mother and by a squad of US marshals.

Here is a description of Ruby's first day at William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, in her own words:

"All day long, white parents rushed into the office. They were upset. They were arguing and pointing at us. When they took their children to school that morning, the parents hadn't been sure whether William Frantz would be integrated that day or not. After my mother and I arrived, they ran

into classrooms and dragged their children out of school. From behind the windows in the office, all I saw was confusion. I told myself that this must be the way it is in a big school.

“That whole first day, my mother and I just sat and waited. We didn't talk to anybody. I remember watching a big, round clock on the wall. When it was 3:00 and time to go home, I was glad.

“When we left school that first day, the crowd outside was even bigger and louder than it had been in the morning. There were reporters everywhere. I guess the police couldn't keep them behind the barricades. It seemed to take us along time to get to the marshals' car.

Later on I learned there had been protestors in front of the two integrated schools the whole day. They wanted to be sure white parents would boycott the school and not let their children attend. Groups of high school boys, joining the protestors… Many of the boys carried signs and said awful things, but most of all I remember seeing a black doll in a coffin, which frightened me more than anything else.”

“On the second day, my mother and I drove to school with the marshals. The crowd outside the building was ready. Racists spat at us and shouted … One woman screamed at me, "I'm going to poison you. I'll find a way." She made the same threat every morning. I tried not to pay attention.

Writer John Steinbeck, passing through on his cross-country trip in the fall of 1960, decided to see this for himself and joined the crowd that he knew gathered along Ruby’s daily walk.

How did he prepare?

What did he see and hear?

What did he feel?

How did he respond afterward?

Where did he put himself in the setting?

Did this experience change his views?

[9] Ruby described what happened inside the classroom, when she arrived on the second day: "When we finally got into the building, my new teacher was there to meet us. Her name was Mrs. Henry. Mrs. Henry took us into a classroom and said to have a seat. When I looked around, the room was empty. There were rows of desks, but no children. I thought we were too early, but Mrs. Henry said we were right on time. My mother sat down at the back of the room. I took a seat up front, and Mrs. Henry began to teach. I spent the whole first day with Mrs. Henry in the classroom. I wasn't allowed to have lunch in the cafeteria or go outside for recess, so we just stayed in our room. The marshals sat outside. If I had to go to the bathroom, the marshals walked me down the hall."(Hall)

Ruby's experience inspired this painting by Norman Rockwell, titled "The Problem We All Live With" depicting an unafraid, pure white-clad child marching across our field of vision.

[10] This past January, one blogger noted similarities between Rockwell's painting and photographs of young Sasha Obama being guarded on her first walk into a new school after her father's inauguration—with one key difference: the reason for the guards.

[11] The pro-segregation majority took drastic action against the imposition of integration in some locales. The most notable is Prince Edward County, Virginia.[2]

It began, actually, with a strike –a walkout – by HS students at the Robert Russa Moton HS in Farmville, led by a 16-year old Barbara Johns. She was the niece of a fiery preacher who was the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama – when he retired, Martin Luther King Jr took his old job. Moton was the first HS for black students in PE County. It was built in 1939 to accommodate 180 students; the school had none of the amenities enjoyed by the white HS – it had no gymnasium, no cafeteria, no science labs, and no athletic field. Plywood and tarpaper freestanding buildings had been added, because the student population was over 400. Those buildings had no plumbing and were heated by woodstoves. The objective of the walkout was a new school building. On April 23, they called a student assembly (without the principal's knowledge), and then walked out, picketing the school with signs that read "we want a new school or none at

[2] Photo of monument, http://www.billemory.com/blogimg03/k736c5-capitol-Moton-statua.jpg . Photo of the school: http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/registers/Counties/PrinceEdward/RobertRussaMotonHighSchool_photo.htm, Kennedy and others leaving the school: http://library.vsu.edu/brown/photos/pages/22scan0021_jpg.htm

all." On the next day, the students walked to the PE County courthouse to meet with the school superintendent, who told them he would not negotiate unless they returned to classes. They refused until May 7.

In the meantime, the NAACP chapter's lawyers visited Farmville and called a mass meeting on April 26, informing parents that the NAACP was willing to take on a legal case not just to gain equal facilities under the law, but to attack the legal basis of separate schooling itself—a much more ambitious and risky goal. Eventually Johns' case was bundled in with half dozen others into the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka KS* case, decided in May 1954, representing children from a variety of states and school systems who had been relegated by law to patently inferior schools because of their race.

In 1953, Moton HS was replaced with an equally appointed all-black HS. But the county school officials and white citizens took a strategy of "massive resistance" to implementation of the *Brown* decision. This was part of a broader state plan resisting desegregation known as the "Stanley Plan", named for the VA governor Thomas B. Stanley, which granted the governor power to close any school facing a federal desegregation order.

Although Brown enjoined the named school districts (and by implication, all others throughout the land) to integrate their schools "with all deliberate speed," Prince Edward county supervisors in 1956 resolved that they would not operate integrated public schools and so did not levy taxes for public schools in 1959, the year that the state was ordered by the Federal District Court to begin admitting black students to all-white schools because it had dragged its feet in implementing *Brown.* Rather than integrate them, the county closed all its public schools in 1959. They stayed closed for five years. They were the only school system the nation to close its schools for an extended period of time rather than accept any desegregation at all.

White citizens formed the Prince Edward School Foundation to operate private white schools, and rather than accept an offer of private colored schools, blacks in PE County decided instead to persist in the legal battle for desegregated public schools. "colored children were without formal education from 1959 to 1963 when federal, state and county authorities cooperated to have classes conducted for Negroes and whites in school buildings owned by the county." (Funding for that came from the Kennedy Administration and from private funds). Some students were relocated by the Quaker-

affiliated American Friends Service Committee to attend schools elsewhere, but most children could not move or were too young to board elsewhere, and most black teachers lost their jobs and left the community.

In 1960 the county created "tuition grants" – essentially a school voucher program, giving $125 per student who wanted to attend a private school. Some localities created additional tuition grant money. In 1960-1961, children attending these Prince Edward School Foundation Schools were receiving up to $250 of public money to attend private white-only academies.

In March 1963, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, giving a speech at an event celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, said:

"the only places on earth not to provide free public education are Communist China, North Vietnam, Sarawak, Singapore, British Honduras, and Prince Edward County VA. Something must be done about PE County." (Bonastia 2009; Black 1964)

A Supreme Court decision (Griffin v. School Board of Prince Edward County) in 1964 which did force their schools to re-open, summed up the case:

"The present case could not be clearer that PE's public schools were closed and private school operated in their place with state and county assistance, for one reason, and one reason only: to ensure, through measures taken by the county and the State, that white and colored children in PE County would not, under any circumstances, go to the same school."

[12] The Moton School is now a civil rights museum, opened in 2001 on the 50th anniversary of the school strike. In June 2003, the country held a symbolic graduation ceremony for the "lost generation" of students denied education from 1959 to 1964. This memorial in the VA capital, Richmond, was dedicated in 2008.

[13] Bob Dylan's powerful anthem, "The Times They Are A-Changin'" clearly suggests that unless the old order consciously gets on board (or gets out of the way), they risk becoming irrelevant or casualties on the wrong side of an inevitability rapidly bearing down on the nation.

But even though times were a-changing, some refused to accommodate to, or continued to resist those changes, taking the opposite side with both fervor and patriotism. One example is the violent opposition of majority white neighborhoods in Boston to court-ordered bussing of students to overcome de facto racially segregated schools.

Film clip: shows the results.

[14] One memorable news photograph from that era, taken at an anti-busing rally in City Hall Plaza, Boston. It shows a teenager wielding the American flag as a weapon against an African-American passersby who has just staggered to his feet after being attacked and beaten. The image won the Pulitzer Prize in 1977.

[15] "Before the busing protestors poured out onto the plaza, they had gathered in city council chambers, where they were greeted warmly by Louise Day Hicks, the city council president and a leading opponent of busing. She served the students hot chocolate and then led them in reciting the pledge of allegiance. Joseph Rakes, a South Boston teen, had grabbed the family flag before heading out to the rally that morning. He stands, hand-over-heart, with his classmates and friends. The students were angry because their parents were angry—because their neighborhood felt under assault, and because for nearly two years, ever since the federal judge had ordered busing, life had not been the same: classes disrupted, police at the schools, national media in the streets. That anger would soon be directed at Theodore Landsmark, a lawyer hurrying to a meeting at City Hall on behalf of the Contractor's Association for which he worked. Spotting Landsmark, one protester yelled a racial epithet. Suddenly a student stepped forward and punched him. Another hit him as well. He was kicked, and he fell to the ground. As he rose, Rakes came at him with the flag. The entire incident lasted 15 or 20 seconds.

Though he was at City Hall on routine business that day, Landsmark, a graduate of Yale College and Yale Law School, was a veteran of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. He had marched from Selma to Montgomery and attended King's funeral."(Masur 2009)

[16] "Forman's photograph appeared on the front page of the *Herald-American*… [and] in newspapers across the country, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. But it almost didn't appear at all. The *Herald-American* editors vigorously debated whether publishing the photograph would further inflame an already explosive racial

situation that had made national headlines for nearly two years. They feared reprisals and increased violence. In the end, they published, believing the image was too important to suppress.”(Masur 2009)

[17] “In looking at Forman's photograph, viewers made connections to other images, but in particular to Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre. The visual parallels are striking. Both images depict enclosed spaces from which there is no escape. Both contain powerful horizontal lines—the flag, the rifles—that guide the eye. Indeed, the Landsmark incident occurred within shouting distance of the site of the Boston Massacre, which counted a black sailor named Crispus Attucks among its victims. It wasn't long before Landsmark was compared to Attucks, held up as a 20th-century victim of the struggle against oppression [including in an article for *Ebony* magazine]. Landsmark himself made the connection as well, saying to a reporter after the incident that the assault occurred not far from where "Crispus Attucks ... got his.”

“*The Soiling of Old Glory* was also compared to Joe Rosenthal's photograph of the flag-raising on Mount Suribachi. Often considered the finest spot-news photograph ever taken, and certainly the most widely reproduced, Rosenthal's photograph stood as a symbol of all that was glorious about the United States: six faceless men united in effort, their exertion a perfect ballet of balance and form. No less a figure than Sen. Ted Kennedy made the connection a few weeks after Forman's photograph appeared: "There are two pictures in which the American flag has appeared that have made the most powerful impact on me. The first was that of Iwo Jima in World War II. The second was that shown here in Massachusetts two weeks ago in which the American flag appeared to have been used in the attempted garroting of an individual solely on the basis of his color."(Masur 2009)

[18] Let’s go back and reconsider these 2 iconic images, both of which depict (or imply) violence against African-American individuals, who stand in for a larger whole.

What do you notice? Elements – colors – lines

Shallow stage-like quality – theatrical

Elimination of the crowd visual noise – even cutting off the faces of the marshals – but the effects of the crowd are seen in the graffiti and implied by the tomato.

A sense of quiet dignity and determination, coordination of work – her job/their job.

What has just happened.

[19] Color and line of movement: strong horizontal sense of forward momentum – note how she's past the center of the frame, asymmetrical composition.

[20] What do you notice?

[21] Strong diagonal lines of the building and the flag/ sense of movement – again, a stage-like quality. Rakes' body becomes like a big dark letter X. Picture captures what is ABOUT to happen.

Both images capture the intensity of emotion and the multiplicity of sides regarding questions of race in times of turbulent social change.

[22] To return to the original question:

Does history have a side? What do we owe to the past, especially in researching, representing and narrating episodes where a clear moral or ethical right/wrong can be determined?

Let me suggest that while in common usage, we talk as if "history" should reward justice and truth, that careful historians are about a fundamentally different task. While it might be satisfying to judge, reward or punish the past using our standards of outrage or approval, the angel of history cannot go back and fix things. Out of the pile of debris, historians do redemptive work, if you want to call it that, rather, by their meticulous reconstruction of an accurate representation of simply what happened. Not what we <u>wish</u> or <u>wanted</u> to happen or think <u>should have</u> happened, but what did happen. We owe people of the past—even those with whom we disagree—*especially* those with whom we disagree—just that much.

I acknowledge that this is extraordinarily difficult, puzzling and often frustrating, and yet: utterly necessary. A commitment to disciplined scrutiny, of exposing to light and scholarship even what might be disturbing or rotten from within that debris pile, is history's ongoing contribution to shared humanistic inquiry, and to our shared hopes for its future.

Additional Slide Notes:

Anti-crowd to accompany Dylan[3]

Photo in convertible[4]

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[3] http://quakeragitator.files.wordpress.com/2008/02/little_rock_anti-integration_protest.jpg

[4] Two school teachers & a local minister driving 3 black students home in a white convertible w. the top down, past cops passively controling a jeering crowd of white students after a day of anti-integration rioting at HS. **Photo: George Skadding./Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images** Oct 02, 1954.
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