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Title: Taking the Wrong Side: Massive Resistance and the Moral Universe of History

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Liberty's Austerity: National Panic and the Liberalization of the Antebellum U.S. Public Sphere

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Narrating Debt: Market, Myth and the Global Financial City Miriam Meissner (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands - m.m.meissner@uva.nl)

Perspectival Shifts in the Social Change Thought of Dussel and Graeber Kelvin Calhoun Black (City University of New York, Hunter College (NY) - kelvin.black@gmail.com)

[Oral notes: this project, in its very initial stages, emerges out of twinned concerns: revisiting the shadows and margins of the CRM (justice as a mighty stream – historiographically, we are ready to explore some of its tributaries and eddies) *and* out of my perennial teaching the survey and other 20th-century courses and encountering staggering ignorance about what happened only 1 generation ago – and from experiences in helping students understand the basic concept that history is constructed, not received-transmitted – which then highlights the methods (and power politics) of memory and storytelling]

Introduction

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice,” he wasn’t talking about historical interpretation. Nonetheless, in popular parlance history is often constructed as a binary coin with “right” and “wrong” sides, and one which inevitably, eventually, lands on the right side more than it does on the wrong one. And this assumes

we agree on which side is heads and which is tails. To take just one recent, but commonplace, example: after Fox network derided President Obama's mentioning the Stonewall Riot in his second inaugural address, Comedy Central's Jon Stewart sarcastically announced that Pat Robertson was "reporting from the losing side of history." It is true that written historical scholarship often does have directionality, moral grounding, or even openly partisan shading, yet typically when the "right side" and "wrong side" of history are invoked in public discourse, it is usually to denominate the *events themselves* and not merely the historical narratives about them. This is an intriguing and under-theorized concept that deserves further exploration.

In this paper, which is part of my initial exploration of the concept of the "sidedness" of the past, I'd like to consider a case study that my own students find particularly hard to talk about in any other way but in stark moral right/wrong terms, and that is: the way the so-called "massive resistance" movement to school desegregation unfolded in the South in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and I'll be using Virginia's Prince Edward county and the City of Norfolk as points of departure. In both places, local officials closed all public schooling rather than integrate, under the provisions of the Virginia General Assembly's Stanley Plan in 1959. Most white children attended private schools with little interruption in their education, but both black and poor white children largely went uneducated until courts mandated the re-opening in both places. However, once legal integration was established this began, rather than ended, a long process of seeking equality in Virginia's desegregated public schools.

Perhaps one place to start is by considering the term "massive resistance" itself. Opposition to integration was "massive" in at least two senses: the extent of its impact upon the citizenry involved, and the scale of mobilization of state and federal resources and authority over a long period of time—first in support of state segregation laws, and then in opposition to enforcement of

the *Brown* decision, and then in the power of the federal court system to overrule the county and the state on behalf of African American children. The politics and social dimensions of Virginia’s large-scale, officially sanctioned collective dissent, conducted as it was within the wider context of a climate of dissent and grassroots action emerging across the South in these years are important not only of themselves, but also for how they invite deeper reflection on the ethics of historical “sides” and presumed directionality in historical memory.

Brief Retelling: Norfolk & Prince Edward

Both the booming coastal city of Norfolk and predominantly rural Prince Edward County had populations that were between thirty and forty percent black in the 1950s. And both had well-entrenched local white elites who saw themselves—in the Virginia tradition—as benevolent guarantors of black rights, in supposed contrast to the unsavory open racism, violence, and vigilantism in other parts of the South. In both locations, however, schools closed rather than integrate, with lasting consequences for people on all sides of the conflict. The two cases unfolded quite differently, and with different timetables for localized protest and federal court remedies. So first, some brief background.

The Norfolk school system had been sued by the NAACP on behalf of Leola Pearl Beckett and a group of other students in 1956, after the city had implemented a half-hearted equalization campaign in school buildings and teacher salaries but had failed to desegregate its schools in accordance with the *Brown* ruling. The US District Court ordered the city in its *Beckett* case decision to integrate its schools at the start of the 1958-1959 school year. Seventeen black students sought enrollment at the district’s six white high schools.¹ However, in accordance with the new Virginia

¹ 151 had applied and participated in the district’s complicated testing process, but most were rejected for various reasons, which led to further legal challenge.

law giving the state executive power to close any white public school scheduled for integration, Governor Lindsay Almand approved shuttering all six of the Norfolk white high schools at the end of the summer, leaving the Norfolk 17 – and more than 10,000 white students – nowhere to go on the first day of school. The standoff continued until late January 1959, when the Virginia Court of Appeals ruled the school closings unconstitutional, and simultaneously the Norfolk federal district court reached a ruling in a case brought against the governor by white parents, who argued that *their* children's Fourteenth Amendment rights were violated by the school closures. So the nation's largest school closing crisis ended with the Norfolk 17 joining the previously all-white high schools in February of that year, but with the district also imposing stringent testing regimens upon any black students seeking transfers from their assigned schools, making it hard for the legal victory to have much meaning there at first.²

Facing additional legal challenges by the NAACP and local black attorneys on behalf of frustrated families whose children attended clearly inferior schools, in 1963 Norfolk adopted a school choice plan based on geographical zones; students who lived in zones with more than one school in them could choose which to attend (but not receive free transportation to their choice). When paired with a tuition grant program that primarily benefited white students desiring to attend private nonsectarian schools or schools outside their assigned district, the new plan “intended to provide an outlet for those students who sought to avoid racial mixing in the public schools” – at taxpayer expense.³ By 1968 it seemed little had been achieved; fully 61 of Norfolk's 73 schools were still at least 90% single-race.⁴ Allowing “free choice” within the system had delivered results not too

² Jeffrey L. Littlejohn, “The Brown Decision and Massive Resistance in Norfolk,” <http://www.littlejohnexplorers.com/jeff/brown/resistance.htm> ; Littlejohn and Ford, *Elusive Equality* Chapter 3.

³ Jeffrey L. Littlejohn and Charles H. Ford, *Elusive Equality: Desegregation and Resegregation in Norfolk's Public Schools* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 135–136.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

different from those under legally-mandated segregation, but of course absolved the district of the full measure of blame for those results.⁵ Litigation from the Norfolk cases bogged down in the district courts through 1970 and conditions were still not fully resolved by several years of court-mandated busing in the 1970s.

Progress moved even more slowly in Prince Edward County, southwest of Richmond. Prince Edward was one of the districts sued in the original *Brown* case, although its struggle over schooling had begun far earlier with a walkout and strike by students at the all-black R. R. Moton High School in 1951. Rather than desegregate, as in Norfolk, Prince Edward's all-white school board closed the public schools entirely from 1959 to 1964, and used state and local tuition grants (not yet then called "vouchers") to open a private all-white academy. During those years black (and poor white) students were left to shift for themselves by boarding with relatives out-of-state or utilizing unaccredited, cobbled-together programs, some run by local religious groups and others by national organizations like the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC).

Once committed to their lawsuit over the closures, Prince Edward County blacks had to wait for it to proceed. Unwilling to drop the case or weaken it by opening black private schools, the result was a drawn-out, disheartening stalemate marked by occasional protests, picketing, and even one Sunday kneel-in at the local white churches, during 1963's summer of discontent. As one of the case's strongest advocates, Reverend L. Francis Griffin, put it then: "Let our children grow up in ignorance so that the laws might speak."⁶ However no one anticipated that it would go on so long; or that blacks would be able to apply so little leverage on the school board while the case was pending. Eventually the Kennedy administration provided a modest federalized Free Schools

⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶ Christopher Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate: Five Years without Public Education in Prince Edward County, Virginia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 214.

alternative during the 1963-1964 year only because the community's unwillingness to educate its own students was so egregious. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy said at the time, "We may observe with much sadness and irony that, outside of Africa, south of the Sahara, where education is still a difficult challenge, the only places on earth known not to provide free public education are Communist China, North Vietnam, Sarawak, Singapore, British Honduras—and Prince Edward County, Virginia." Yet Christopher Bonastia writes of the bind black residents found themselves in: "the only tangible possibility of an earlier reopening was to drop the desegregation lawsuit. It is a testament to the courage and perseverance of black Prince Edwardians that they did not do so, despite enormous personal costs to themselves and their children."⁷ In May 1964 the Supreme Court ordered Prince Edward County to levy taxes for public education and re-open its schools, which it did with paltry appropriations – while at the same time distributing generous tuition grants almost exclusively to white families for their children's private schooling in a "midnight raid" on the treasury.⁸ Were federally mandated but under-resourced, overcrowded and low-achieving public schools better than none at all? By 1968-1969 black hopes for school improvement, exemplified by student walk-outs and sit-ins in that year, took place in the context of the rise of black power; Prince Edward white leaders now professed confusion over whether blacks even still shared the goal of peaceful integration.⁹ Any meaningful changes since then (and there have indeed been many) have happened only because of greater black political power, more racial diversity on the school board, and the establishment of state minimum funding standards, along with sustained political engagement to combat "tokenism" in school resources.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 235–239.

Emerging Scholarly Consensus, Hot off the Presses

For my students, such events took place in a galaxy long ago and far away. I routinely receive glib responses in class and on exams asserting that the civil rights movement achieved equality (hence: is done) and which express continuing (and often naïve) faith in the American dream of social mobility. But Virginia's massive resistance movement and the need for continued vigilance even after the imposition of legal remedy were not so long ago, and not so far away, especially from this venue. It provokes my own introspection in part because I grew up in northern Virginia, and the more I learn about my home state in the 1960s and 1970s it baffles and enrages me that there was utter, complete silence on this in my own educational upbringing and that it's a new story even to me, despite having happened on my turf and nearly in my lifetime. So I can understand why uninterrogated "happy ending syndrome" dominates among my students (with the exception of the occasional Howard Zinn groupie).

Scholarship on these episodes is really just emerging now, in a recently-published cluster of monographs retelling these stories and putting them to use. I want to next provide some meta-commentary on the initial scholarly consensus about Virginia's notorious massive resistance communities – a consensus that points up the delicate task of working within and around and sometimes against the powerful master civil rights narrative of black struggle, white intransigence and racism, and inexorable, if not always even, progress toward the greater good. One thing that unites the efforts of these scholars is their determination to enlarge the boundaries of the standard civil rights movement storyline. All represent powerful acts of recovery and documentation and local history detective work to counteract the marginalization, especially, of African American agency and archival sources.

In the case of Norfolk, Jeffrey L. Littlejohn and Charles H. Ford watched that city's civic establishment celebrate and co-opt these events on the 50th anniversary of school closure with a narrative of heroic progressivism about the city's nonviolent school integration, followed by backslapping and declaration of closure, a "mission accomplished" moment. Their book, *Elusive Equality*, takes issue with that attitude, as well as with the local black narratives that focus only on the Norfolk 17 themselves. By telling this story with all its complexities and contradictions, their self-described "thorough, sober look at where we have been" aims to clarify the constraints on and possibilities for activism and "informed and egalitarian policy decisions in the future."¹⁰ They hope that by demonstrating that there never was a golden age of equality or uniform public education excellence in Norfolk, this will "generate an outrage" capable of getting "leaders and parents to once again challenge a still unequal system in court."¹¹ Their work evinces both deep disillusionment with local political solutions *and* faith in the legal system to compel remedies, even now.

Likewise, Christopher Bonastia, author of *Southern Stalemate* on the Prince Edward County closings, argues that episode is a birthplace of modern conservative rhetoric and a case study in the importance of litigation as a social movement strategy because, put simply, collective economic action doesn't work in the case of public education.¹² He places Prince Edward County in broader context within not the "exceptional South" of "singular racial cruelty," but rather a long continuum of struggle across America for desegregated, fair, and decent public schooling. In making sense of historical variation, local context is crucial. Virginia whites, especially in Prince Edward County, saw themselves as paternalistic protectors of "their" black residents; carrying a kind of "white burden" sensibility with a premium on orderly gentility.¹³ They practiced what they called "managed race

¹⁰ Littlejohn and Ford, *Elusive Equality*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 242-243.

¹² Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate*, 8-9.

¹³ *Ibid*, 14.

relations” which were “generally nonviolent and friendly on the surface, but contingent upon blacks ‘knowing their place’ and accepting white timetables for greater access to quality education and other services.”¹⁴ One evidence of this sensibility is how white leaders deflected school closings as race-irrelevant, instead “portray[ing] this position as grounded in long-established, nonracial, legal principles... designed to align with bedrock American values such as local self-control, taxpayers’ rights, and individual choice;” this is an ideology which Bonastia notes “later spread to a wide array of contexts. This ‘colorblind’ defense of segregation can be understood as a second wave of resistance that followed earlier tactics of direct repression.”¹⁵

Farmville, Virginia opened a civil rights museum in the shell of the old Moton School in 2001; the state unveiled a monument to the original school marchers in 2008 in its capitol; and there have been reparations efforts in Virginia like staged delayed graduation ceremonies, scholarship funds, and state-level official statements of “profound regret.” Yet there is considerable tension between commemoration and “moving on” as in Governor Timothy Kaine’s dedicatory remarks that alluded to “the tragic but triumphant history of this wonderful commonwealth.” A plaque at the Light of Reconciliation memorial installed at the Prince Edward County courthouse reads, in part: “dedicated to these Virginians and countless others who courageously fought for the principles upon which the nation and this Commonwealth were founded.”¹⁶ The irony is, this is what BOTH sides claimed they *were* doing then.

Nevertheless, all sides lost and no one can claim to have won a clear victory in the case of the Prince Edward County school closings. Thousands, of course, irretrievably missed close to five years of education. But the losses go beyond even that. Bonastia writes: “it is heartbreaking to grasp

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 186.

¹⁶ In Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate*, 252.

the great concern that white segregationists had for the county, and the formidable cooperation and sacrifice that went into creating the [private academy], only to realize that this community spirit stopped abruptly at the color line.”¹⁷

His assessment is echoed by Jill O’gline Titus, who in *Brown’s Battleground* describes Prince Edward County elites who by “prioritizing the maintenance of white supremacy over educating young people to engage with the world, ... [thereby] destroyed the institution that has been termed ‘the cornerstone of American democracy’ – the public school.” And, on the other hand, “in aggressively pursuing civil rights reform in hopes of creating a better future for their children, African Americans lost even the substandard [school] system that had stood at the heart of the black community for decades.”¹⁸ Though the system is far from perfect today, Farmville in the mid-1990s was judged the only one of the original *Brown* case school districts apparently escaping the fate of “white flight, resegregation, failing school systems and racial hostility.”¹⁹ For Titus, the lesson is clear: “no substitute for a publicly funded, publicly operated school system has ever proven itself able to provide consistent quality education for all children.”²⁰

What this new round of scholarship on the struggles over school desegregation in Virginia suggests is that two sides are not enough to tell this story. The metaphor is not a coin (heads/tails, win/lose) but something more like D&D dice. All parties to these disputes convincingly constructed thoroughly principled American arguments, bequeathing to us now a complex tangle rather than a simplistic set of heroes and villains. And though it seems that in these particular Virginia communities the racial spectrum is still primarily biaxial along a white-black continuum, that is not the case everywhere in 21st century America, and in our skin-rainbow, polyglot world with densely

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 261.

¹⁸ Titus, *Brown’s Battleground*, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 217.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 221.

overlapping identity politics and a not-too-distant future of “majority minority,” we can and must think differently.

Conclusions

As 50th (and even 60th) anniversaries in the civil rights movement come and go – the *Brown* case itself in 1994, the “summer of discontent” and the March on Washington this year, and next year for example the court decision that re-opened the Prince Edward County schools – the politics of public memory remain fraught. *How* and *when* and *in what contexts* we choose to re-tell these and other stories of the past matters deeply. With respect to the civil rights movement, perhaps a large part of the problem lies with the “triumphalist narrative” itself, which establishes a false sense of security in the system to right imbalances within itself. Some of the lessons of Virginia’s massive resistance are, according to Titus, “the ease with which rights can be denied to the less powerful members of society, the pattern of hiding opportunism behind the respectable rhetoric of constitutionalism, and the disconnect between plaintiff suffering and the impersonal delays of the judicial system.”²¹

Civil rights include those explicitly defined within the Constitution (voting, free speech, assembly, and so on) but also those that have been penumbra’d in later, like privacy and sexual identity. And around these orbit, with varying parabolic shapes, a constellation of contested civil rights whose exercise defines – and also strains – the “civility” of civil society itself in the

²¹ Titus, *Brown’s Battleground*, 220.

contemporary United States – rights like education, housing, health care, employment, fair treatment by retailers, and access to opportunity broadly defined.

During recent events in Washington in October of this year, which came to be called (somewhat jarringly) a “partial government shutdown,” civility and nuance were in short supply. The disgusted shorthand version was summed up most succinctly for me in a single tweet by Alex Wild (in sentiments similar to many others, of course): “So if I understand this correctly, the Tea Party would rather tank the global economy than see poor Americans get health care?”²² and in the satirical headline posted online at the *New Yorker*, “[Ted] Cruz: ‘The Dream of Keeping Poor People from Seeing a Doctor Must Never Die.’”²³ Telling complex stories about such events eludes our grasp maybe for a long, long time.

Today we see a widespread “fee for service” mentality in public life, characterized by (typically white and/or privileged) assertions that disadvantaged people of color suffer from ghetto mentality and refuse to help themselves. This mentality privileges consumer-oriented “choices” over even basic services and infrastructural improvements, as for example in ostensibly public schooling.²⁴ It casts the struggles of the civil rights movement in a kind of rosy glow for their straightforward goals, the kind that could conceivably be resolved in court under federal law. Many of us on the front lines in education at every level eye with some dread the call of Libertarian New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson in 2000 for an “entrepreneurial explosion” in K-12 education as well as the vaunted impending “disruptive technological revolution” typified by gilded-spoon MOOCs in higher ed. We may get both of those, and more, but I fear they will come at the cost of access and diversity in educational settings and with results that can’t be easily tackled with the civil

²² <https://twitter.com/Myrmecos/status/390296523147206656>

²³ <https://twitter.com/willcooperstown/status/390802765191983105>

²⁴ Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate*, 256-258.

rights strategies of earlier eras. Hailing corporate charters peopled with contingent faculty as the silver bullet for failing K-12 schools mirrors the disappearance of tenure-track faculty in higher education and the runaway growth of for-profit colleges. I'm not exactly sure what "massive resistance" to such trends might look like. But clearly the meritocracy of "ability to pay" has not resulted in greater social justice yet – nor are corporate values to be trusted to social engineer education equitably, if history is any guide.

Back to my original posit: thinking of history as merely "two-sided" is powerfully simple but possesses insufficient explanatory power. It also, worryingly, fails to empower the current and next generations of activists and policymakers. To that end, how can careful attention to framing the not-so-distant past help? Can it generate the needed collective will and social capital to bolster flagging commitments to the public good? Can it reduce polarization in public discourse and the tendency to reduce every problem to just winners and losers? Can recognizing the contingencies, complexities, and polymorphism of the past allow us to imagine more than just two outcomes in any situation, including our own?

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