

“The saddest part of this is that the response of the Times is simply to defend their project”

An interview with historian Clayborne Carson on the New York Times’ 1619 Project

By Tom Mackaman
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Clayborne Carson is Professor of History at Stanford University and director of its Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute. He is the author and editor of numerous books on King and the civil rights movement. Carson was chosen by Coretta Scott King to oversee the publication of The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., seven of fourteen planned volumes have been published under his direction.

Q. Could you start by telling us something about your background? Because as I understand it, you’re not only a leading scholar of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement, but are yourself a veteran of that movement?

A. Yes, I was at the March on Washington, and I knew Stokely Carmichael for most of his adult life. I was much more closely connected to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) than to King. My first book was on SNCC. So, I kind of come at this from the point of view of grassroots movements being the heart of the movement, rather than King being this charismatic leader at the top.

Q. I’d like to ask you something that we’ve been asking all the historians with whom we’ve been speaking. And that is whether or not you were approached by the authors of the 1619 Project as it was being prepared or prior to its publication?

A. No, no I wasn’t, which is strange because if you go to our web site, we have a lot of educational materials for schools. So, I wasn’t approached as a historian, but I’m also an educator engaged in on-line teaching, trying, as much as possible, to get free material in the hands of students. I would have loved to work with the *New York Times*, with all of their clout and resources, to make a change in terms of how American history is taught in the schools.

I just think that part of the problem of this whole project is that they did not really approach this as a collaborative activity involving historians, educators, and journalists. It seems quite obvious that the number of people involved in the actual process was quite limited.

Q. It also seems that it was written to a preconceived determination, and that historians who might have a somewhat different take were avoided. It’s also not clear to whom they did speak. The editor-in-chief, Jake Silverstein, in his reply to the five historians, said that they spoke to a group of African American scholars, but they didn’t say who was in that group.

A. Yes, and that was a little bit strange. You know if I were called in to have a meeting at the *New York Times* and they told me they’d like to do this project to make people more aware of the deep roots of African American history within American history and the importance of 1619, I would have said fine, that sounds wonderful, how can I help? I can understand, however, why some scholars would be reluctant because of

the work that should go into something like this. I was very much involved in *Eyes on the Prize*, for example.

Q. Right, you were the senior academic advisor for *Eyes on the Prize* ?

A. I was one of four. That was a three-year commitment. We met regularly for three years to produce that series. There was a lot of research, the selection of whom to interview. We had what we called “the school” and at every stage the filmmakers would come in with footage, and we would critique it: “Well, why didn’t you interview this person? Why didn’t you ask that question?” It was an interactive process for three years to get that on the air. On 1619, I’m just not sure on a lot of the factual background of this, and maybe you’re trying to figure that out, too.

Q. *Eyes on the Prize* is a real achievement and the immense amount of work that went into it is clear. With 1619, you think about the orientation of this project to school children, and its problems become all the more glaring. And that it didn’t talk to eminent historians might be more pardonable if it were not also claiming to be imposing an entirely new narrative on American history and a new curriculum in the schools. What you say about *Eyes on the Prize* is interesting. You get the impression that the 1619 Project was pulled together quickly.

A. Yeah, that’s what I would compare it to. Henry Hampton was the guiding force behind *Eyes on the Prize*. One of the things that happened was that the scholars got together before the filmmakers arrived. So, from the very beginning. That’s why we called it a school. The filmmakers came in, and we had a number of discussions right at the start of the process, before any filming was done.

One result of those early discussion was to answer the question, do you tell this as a story about King? Or do you tell it the way most of us wanted it told, that King was important, but he was the *result* of a movement, not the *cause* of the movement? The bus boycott in Montgomery would have happened, even if King had never been born. It was already a successful movement before he became the leader of it. Similarly, with the sit-ins, and the Freedom Rides, and the voting rights campaign. In all of these cases King was the beneficiary of movements he didn’t start. That’s not to deny the importance of Martin Luther King. I’ve spent the last 30 years researching him. But it does put his contribution in context.

Q. King’s 91st birthday is coming up. He was born a little more than a half-century after the Civil War, and it’s been a little more than a half-century since his assassination. You’ve explained that he was the product of a movement, not its creator, but I wanted to ask you more about what went into his formation as a leader. I don’t know if that question is better approached by considering King’s historical antecedents, or by assessing just what the civil rights movement was.

A. The course I've taught for many years at Stanford is not called "The Civil Rights Movement." I avoid that term. Because when did it begin, and when did it end? There's no date that you can give me that clarifies this. Was it the founding of the NAACP in 1909? Did it end in 1965 or 1968? What's going on with the suppression of the Voting Rights Act right now?

The term I prefer is the modern African American freedom struggle. Then you can say that that struggle has been going on since the beginning of the African presence in America and is still going on today. But we can choose to look at a certain period when it was possible to build a mass movement and when there were major civil rights reforms. That doesn't mean that the movement started then. It just means that for a very brief period of time it was successful. It was able to get major changes and end the Jim Crow legal system in the 1960s. And that was an enormous achievement.

Q. And we're speaking of a mass movement, are we not, when we're talking about the 1960s?

A. It becomes mass in certain places at that time, particularly in the South. That's the difference between then and now. There was a mass movement that was directed against legalized segregation in the South. And after that there was this recognition that a lot of these problems were not limited to the South. You had a massive movement in Chicago, in New York, in Los Angeles, where I was. So, if we see this in terms of continuity, rather than saying "back in Civil Rights Days," it just gives you a more honest picture.

It's just like saying the antislavery movement had certain periods where it achieved major victories. But the antislavery movement was going on from the Stono Rebellion of the early 18th century. The anti-slavery movement was going on from the time there were enough slaves here to mobilize a movement. So, you have rebellion, and you have freedom struggles. If your focus is on when and how do freedom struggles occur throughout history, then that's an important topic to take up. What are the circumstances that led to them?

That kind of gets back to the 1619 Project. A lot of their focus seems to be the founding of the United States as a nation. The way I would look at that, is that at that time, for a variety of reasons, you have a predominant group, white men, beginning to articulate a human rights ideal. We can study why that happened when it happened. It had to do with the Enlightenment, the spread of literacy, the rise of working class movements. All of these factors led people to start talking in terms of human rights. It was both an intellectual movement from the top down and a freedom struggle from the bottom up. People begin to speak in terms of rights: that, I, we, have rights that other people should respect. The emergence of that is important.

And it does affect African Americans. We know that from Benjamin Banneker and lot of other black people who realized that white people were talking about rights and said, 'well we have rights too.' That's an important development in history, and an approach to history that doesn't say we should privilege only the rights talk of white people. There's always a dialogue between that and oppressed people. You have to tell the story from the top down, that intellectuals began to articulate the notion of rights. But simultaneously, non-elites are doing that—working class people, black people, colonized people.

There were three nations that came out of the spread of literacy and Enlightenment ideals. Usually the focus is on the United States and France. But Haiti came out of that as well. That often gets overlooked.

Q. I agree with you. I think one of the things that is missing in the lead essay by Nikole Hannah-Jones is any appreciation of the power of the contradiction that was introduced in 1776 with the proclamation of human equality, and also the impact of the Revolution itself. I thought in our interview with Gordon Wood he took that question up very effectively, pointing out that slavery became very conspicuous as a result of the

Revolution. Also disregarded is the Afro-Caribbean historian Eric Williams, who analyzed the impact of the American Revolution on the demise of slavery. Instead the Revolution is presented as a conspiracy to perpetuate slavery.

A. Yes, and it's wonderful to concentrate on that contradiction because that to me explains Frederick Douglass, it explains King. What all of these people were united on was to expose that contradiction—and we should always keep exposing it—the contradiction between the self-image of the United States as a free and democratic country and the reality that it's not. If you are a black leader, your job is to expose that contradiction. If you go through a list of all the great orations in African American history, nearly all of them focus on that. They want to expose that and use that contradiction.

Q. I'm glad you mentioned Douglass and King. Richard Carwardine, in our interview with him, said that he was struck by the absence of Douglass, whose name does not appear in the lead essay or anywhere else. The same is true of King, whose name appears only once in a photo caption. The Civil Rights movement is barely mentioned. Black Power and Malcolm X are absent. The list of what's left out is astonishing—no A. Phillip Randolph, no Harlem Renaissance. But I wanted to ask you about the absence of King, and any significant attention to the civil rights movement, and what you make of that.

A. I think that's the saddest part of this, that the response of the *New York Times* is simply to defend their project. Rather than to say, we welcome the critique, let's work with you to see what we can do. Obviously, this would have been better done a year ago, two years ago, but it's never too late. And particularly if the purpose of this is to have an impact on the way young people are educated. I'm very concerned about that.

I call our education program The Liberation Curriculum. I see it as a way of encouraging people to see themselves as rights bearers and right declarers. One way of looking at the founding of this country is to understand the audacity of a few hundred white male elites getting together and declaring a country—and declaring it a country based on the notion of human rights.

Obviously, they were being hypocritical, but it's also audacious. And that's what rights are all about. It is the history of people saying, "I declare that I have the right to determine my destiny, and we collectively have the right to determine our destiny." That's the history of every movement, every freedom movement in the history of the world. At some point you have to get to that point where you have to say that, publicly, and fight for it. At various points women have done that. Just in our lifetime gay people have done that and raised what would have been astounding to people 50 years ago or 100 years ago.

So, the question is how do you move someone from acquiescence in their own oppression to that audacious statement of, we have the right to determine our own future? We have the right to participate in the decisions that affect our lives? In a way, if they can do that, that simple declaration is a statement of freedom. Of course, backing it up with something other than a declaration is kind of necessary! To have the power to *make* someone listen.

Q. The American Revolution was a revolution that drew on masses of people, ultimately, and so too the Civil War, which going all the way back to the Progressive historians has been called "The Second American Revolution." And in terms of mass movements, the freedom struggle, as you call it, is certainly among the most important in American history. You raise an important point, the decisive question of why some things happen *when* they happen. So, 100 years after the Civil War this mass movement of very oppressed people takes place in the American South and then, as you said, it also grips the big cities. Why does it happen when it happens? Why in the 1960s?

A. I would argue that freedom struggles are always going on. All you

have to do is look for them carefully and you will see that at the grassroots level they are always going on. But the question is when can they develop power? Well a lot of that is changes that, by nature, are gradual.

Among the most important changes leading to the articulation of rights was the spread of literacy. As people became more literate it became harder to dominate them. Literacy in the African American tradition, from Frederick Douglass learning to read to Malcolm X being in jail and learning to read the dictionary—literacy is itself a freedom. One of the commonalities of oppressed people is that they get all of their information through people who dominate them.

For most of human history people never got more than 20 miles from where they were born. They knew very little of the world. There was no way of overcoming that until you could get to the point where you could read. That was often purposeful. Dominant people wanted to control information. You don't want people working for you to know that they can walk 20 miles and find better conditions. Of course, you can also mystify them by religion and say, there's this sacred book. You can't read it, but I can interpret it for you, and tell you what your role in society is. So, literacy is huge.

So is mobility. Just think of the impact on the whole notion of labor when workers in Europe began to move from place to place building the cathedrals. They learned by moving to a new place that conditions could be better. That's why there was a huge movement to put up gates at the outskirts of Paris and other cities, because they knew that once you got in the city you could negotiate with whoever wants your labor. So, literacy, mobility. But the commonality of it is just being able to not be enslaved by ignorance.

I remember doing an interview with one of the young people who launched the sit-ins, I think it was David Richmond [TM: Richmond, 1941-1990 was one of the "Greensboro Four," who staged a sit-in at Woolworth's "Whites Only" lunch counter in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960.] And he said to me one of the important experiences were just visiting the North. He came back to the South and asked himself, why am I putting up with this? The whole world is not like this. So, mobility, literacy, being able to expand your frame of reference.

Q. Those are important points. I suppose it's not accidental that the civil rights movement—and you've problematized that term for me, so I should say in its 1950s and 1960s iteration—emerges in cities in the South, in Birmingham and Montgomery.

A. Exactly. And it emerges among college students. That is another important factor. Of course, there's no commonality in education itself. It can be education to continue slavery, or it can be education to liberate yourself. That's why I call our material a liberation curriculum. That is, how do you educate people to imagine that a better world is possible than the one you are a part of? And once you've done that for enough people, you have a lot of discontent that can be mobilized.

One of the things that strikes me is that so much of any oppressive world is built on mystification. Just think of how many people assume that corporations are something that was not invented. Haven't we always had them? So, you have this entire legal structure that maintains wealth, and not only just maintains it, but mystifies it. We can't know how this happened that—what is it now, 100 people? Or 500 people?—Have \$6 trillion worth of wealth? How is that even conceivable? That level of concentration didn't even exist in the Gilded Age.

Q. Let me ask you a little bit more about King, and what went into his formation. I suppose the common knowledge, so to speak, is that it's Baptism and Gandhi.

A. Both Gandhi and King were Enlightenment figures in the same way Toussaint Louverture was. They are seeing the possibilities in this movement, that in their time, is dominated by white males. What they did in their most profound speeches and writings—for Gandhi it's in his writings and for King it's more in his speeches—is to say, why should it be

limited to that? If there is this notion, this ideal, that every human being has certain rights that other human beings should respect, and if a couple hundred white men can go into a room in Philadelphia and create a nation, why can't we declare we want another kind of nation? That we want a different kind of society? And the only thing that's really stopping that is our own imagination.

King does this in his most famous speeches, starting with Montgomery. You have this movement that is a bus boycott. We want to sit wherever we want on a bus. So that's a very concrete right, and Rosa Parks asserted that. Then they organize a boycott. And King is asked to be the leader of it. He gives his first speech, and what does he do? He says, you may think what you're doing is fighting for a seat at the front of the bus, but I'm here to tell you that you're fighting for human rights, you're fighting for the Declaration of Independence, the Sermon on the Mount. In his first speech he lays it all out: This is not about a seat at the front of the bus. It's about much more than that. Use your imagination.

He was very good at doing that. When I saw him at the March on Washington it was the same thing. Most of us were there for the Kennedy Civil Rights bill. We hadn't seen it and didn't even know what it was. And what he does in that speech is he doesn't even mention the pending legislation. He goes back to human rights, to that ideal expressed in the Declaration of Independence, back to those kinds of things, just like Frederick Douglass would have done. It's about your own liberation. It's not about the right to sit at the lunch counter. And that's what becomes inspiring.

Because, quite frankly, those are people for whom the *immediate* goal is not worth the sacrifice. Just think of all those people walking through the rain in Montgomery trying to get to their jobs for 381 days. It's about something more than that. It's about our own liberation.

Q. Why was it that the historian C. Vann Woodward's *Strange Career of Jim Crow* was considered a "bible" of the movement? I believe that King paraphrased from it extensively at the end of the Selma to Montgomery march. King said in a portion of that speech, "And as the noted historian, C. Vann Woodward... clearly points out, the segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land."

A. My understanding is that one of the reasons why Woodward called it *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* is the point that segregation is something artificially imposed rather than the natural course of Southern history. He was saying that segregation was not seen as an essential part of white domination in the South. The slaves weren't segregated from the master—they were dominated. But it's precisely when slavery ended that you needed this public manifestation of the separation of the races.

There was a generalization, which had some truth to it before the civil rights reforms, that in the South white people don't care how close black people get as long as they don't get too high; but in the North, people don't care how high black people get as long as they don't get too close. We associate the Jim Crow system with the overall system of white domination, but it was simply one expression of it that became more and more common in the late 19th century, in response to challenges to white political domination.

Q. King was by the standards of African American leaders today, very left in this politics, opposing the Vietnam War and launching his interracial Poor People's Campaign in the final years before his assassination. Is it correct that he understood himself as a social democrat?

A. Well, I edited a book called *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King*. You might look at that. It's not like a secret. On their first date King told Coretta he was a socialist.

Coretta was at the Progressive Party Convention in 1948. She was an acquaintance of Paul Robeson. One of the things I'm writing about is her

relationship to King. When they are dating back in 1952, she sends him a copy of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and King writes her about how impressed he is by Bellamy's ideas. So, King says something along the lines of, that's what he's going to base his ministry on and that he looks forward to the day when there will be a nationalization of industry. This is 1952.

Q. Right at the height of the McCarthyite Red Scare.

A. Exactly.

Q. And you knew Coretta Scott King? Because I think, in general, the media portrayal of her is a grieving widow, but an intellectual non-entity.

A. Have you ever heard of Women's International Strike for Peace? In 1962 she goes to a peace conference in Geneva, and this is followed by the first major women's march in Washington, which she participates in. By the time the Vietnam War becomes more intense, she's already taken a stand, and long before Martin did. I think that she's way underestimated, in terms of her impact. She has her own F.B.I. file by the way. She was investigated by the F.B.I. from the 1950s on. They were very worried about Women's International Strike for Peace because most of the women around the world who supported it were socialists, communists.

Q. And King's opposition to the Vietnam War, which seems relevant given the US war drive against Iran?

A. Next week we plan to play a recording, a new recording, of his Riverside Speech. We were able to find a recording that was better than that which was available. It was at Riverside Church but for some reason it wasn't the one circulated. It was recorded from his microphone, so it doesn't have any of the background noise. It's very interesting to listen to it today.

TM: King delivered his "Riverside Speech," also called "Beyond Vietnam," on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York. King referred to the war as "madness," that created "a hell for the poor," and called the American forces "strange liberators." Three days later the New York Times issued an editorial condemning King ("Dr. King's Error" April 7, 1967) for "slander" against US military practices in the brutal neo-colonial war and for broaching the connection between the cost of the war and the depletion of social reform programs.

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