

DEBATING THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1945–1968

Second Edition

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To paraphrase Julian Bond of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), American popular and academic culture has been permeated by a master narrative about the movement. The narrative goes something like this:

Traditionally, relationships between the races in the South were oppressive. In the 1954, the Supreme Court decided this was wrong. Inspired by the court, courageous Americans, Black and white, took protest to the street, in the form of sit-ins, bus boycotts, and freedom

rides. The protest movement, led by the brilliant and eloquent Dr. Martin Luther King, aided by a sympathetic federal government, most notably the Kennedy brothers and a born-again Lyndon Johnson, was able to make America understand racial discrimination as a moral issue. Once Americans understood that discrimination was wrong, they quickly moved to remove racial prejudice and discrimination from American life, as evidenced by the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. Dr. King was tragically slain in 1968. Fortunately, by that time the country had been changed, changed for the better in some fundamental ways. The movement was a remarkable victory for all Americans. By the 1970s, southern states where Blacks could not have voted ten years earlier were sending African Americans to Congress. Inexplicably, just as the civil rights victories were piling up, many Black Americans, under the banner of Black Power, turned their backs on American society.

In its concentration on national institutions and leaders, on discrimination as a moral issue, on the period between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s, in its restriction of leadership roles to elite men, on interracial cooperation, in its treatment of the movement as a great victory and of radicalism as irrational, the narrative reflects the typical assumptions of what might be called the naive, top-down, normative perspective on movement history. More recently, scholars have been calling for a reconsideration of the traditional narrative. They have raised a number of points:

1. Placing so much emphasis on national leadership and national institutions minimizes the importance of local struggle and makes it difficult to appreciate the role "ordinary" people played in changing the country and the enormous personal costs that sometimes entailed for them. It implicitly creates the impression that historical dynamism resides among elites—usually white, usually male, usually educated—and that nonelites lack historical agency. The gender bias of traditional history is especially inappropriate in this case in that we know that at the local level, women provided a disproportionate share of the leadership in the early 1960s.
2. Normative social analysis is analysis that emphasizes the primacy of norms and values in shaping the behaviors of individuals or

groups. In the master narrative, it shows up in the emphasis on the morality of national leadership, on the church, legal institutions, and interracialism. The movement gets reduced to a "protest" movement. African-American activism is sometimes equated with the church, the most normative of institutions. The danger is that this emphasis may oversimplify the motives of actors, understating the salience of disruption, of economic and political pressure. The emphasis on the normative character of the civil rights movement is in considerable contrast to the way other movements are portrayed. When we think about the labor movement, for example, we are a good deal less likely to invoke normative explanations. We see that as a struggle over privilege, although each side tried to wrap its cause in the mantle of higher morality.

3. A top-down perspective can lose any sense of the complexity of the African-American community—its class, gender, cultural, regional, and ideological divisions—and how that complexity shaped responses to oppression. One gets a few well-defined leaders and then the undifferentiated masses.
4. Concentration on the period between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s—the Montgomery to Memphis framework—underplays the salience of earlier periods of struggle. All apart from their significance for understanding the modern civil rights movement, those earlier periods of struggle are important in their own right as one of the keys to understanding the evolving self-consciousness of African Americans and the shifting constraints that confronted them.
5. A top-down perspective presumes that the most appropriate historical markers have to do with legislative/policy changes. This position makes it very difficult to understand the movement as a transforming experience for individuals or as an evolving culture, which in turn makes it very difficult to understand the radicalization of the movement.
6. A top-down perspective typically implies that the movement can be understood solely through large-scale, dramatic events, thus obscuring the actual social infrastructure that sustained the movement on a day-to-day basis.

It is not an either/or choice. Scholars advocating a more bottom-up approach are not denying the critical importance of national institutions, but they are contending that traditional top-down scholarship has tended to focus on them so exclusively as to make it impossible to understand just how complex the movement really was and how varied the sources of its dynamism were. To understand that, we need more sophisticated work from a variety of perspectives.