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RACIAL PREJUDICE AND SCHOLARLY PREJUDICE: NEW CONFRONTATIONS AT THE SELMA BRIDGE

*J. Mills Thornton III**

PROTEST AT SELMA: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965. By *David J. Garrow*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1978. Pp. xiii, 346. \$15.

It is peculiar to encounter a book about Selma which cites absolutely no Selma sources. It is odd to encounter a book about the civil rights movement which includes no interviews with the movement's participants. It is strange to encounter a book about the policies and actions of the government of Alabama which contains no references to the archives of that government. David J. Garrow, however, apparently believes that a careful reading of the pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and a look through the records of the Justice Department and the office of the President will tell the serious student all he really needs to know about the events which produced the American decision to eliminate literacy requirements for voters. At any rate we must assume, giving Mr. Garrow the benefit of the doubt, that he regarded his research as complete before he set about writing this thoroughly bad book. The real question is, how could he possibly have thought so?

The book contains no information on the contents of the Alabama voter-qualification test which was the cause of the Selma demonstrations. Mr. Garrow does not bother to tell us who composed the test or how it was administered and graded. Indeed, he seems only vaguely conversant with the registration machinery in Alabama, since at times he refers to a single county voting registrar, at other times (correctly) to a board of registrars, and, at one point (p. 31), actually refers to a board's having succeeded an individual as registrar. The point may be trivial, to be sure, but it reflects Mr. Garrow's general insouciance in the effort to understand his topic. In turning to the demonstrations themselves, Mr. Garrow chooses to ignore the highly praised, detailed reporting of the *Selma Times-Journal*. He wishes to understand Alabama politics, but he does not feel it necessary to read the

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Montgomery Advertiser or the *Birmingham News*. (Indeed, he refers [p. 62] to the *Alabama Journal* as Montgomery's leading newspaper—a view which, to say the least of it, would startle residents of that city.) He is puzzled by the role of Governor Wallace in the Selma episode (pp. 272-73), but not so puzzled that he explores the question beyond simply reading a memoir by Wallace's press secretary.

The failures of this book, moreover, go far beyond mere faulty research. Mr. Garrow from first to last assumes as self-evident the validity of the doctrine of universal suffrage, the doctrine which was in dispute in the controversy about which he has undertaken to write. He thus never confronts seriously the intellectual issues which the collision at Selma raises. And since he ignores the issues implicit in the confrontation, his account of the events necessarily becomes a simple narrative. The characters in his story could have become three-dimensional only if he had been able to create in his readers some degree of empathy with each of the opposing sides, some sense that real people honestly held sets of values which history had here brought into conflict. Because he himself apparently regards the values of one of the parties to the dispute as patently false, and even a little absurd, he is never able to communicate successfully why a dispute was taking place. All he can do is record *seriatim* the outward evidence that, for some reason, people were quite upset. Throughout most of Mr. Garrow's chapters, therefore, the reader has the distinct feeling that he is plowing through a modern-day version of the chronicles of the Venerable Bede. One might even argue that an account from an almanac would have been superior reading were it not for the fact that, in his last chapter, Mr. Garrow surprises us by offering an idea.

Unfortunately, for Mr. Garrow and for his readers, the idea which he has had is not a very convincing one. In Chapter Seven, he argues that whereas at the outset of Martin Luther King's career, King believed in nonviolence as a philosophy and a way of life, by the time of Selma, King accepted nonviolence only as a strategy, a way of gaining sympathy for his cause. Mr. Garrow's evidence for this assertion is the dual observation that King's early writings embrace the philosophy of nonviolence and that at Selma King cleverly manipulated the news media to produce favorable publicity. But surely the fallacy of such reasoning must be evident even to Mr. Garrow. It is certainly true that King's early writings espouse philosophical nonviolence, but then so do his later writings; at no time in his career did his public utter-

ances on this subject vary. It is certainly true that King manipulated the news media at Selma, but then he sought also to manipulate the news media at Montgomery, Albany, and Birmingham; at no stage of his career was he devoid of a shrewd tactical sense. One cannot offer formal pronouncements as evidence for an earlier position and actual strategy as evidence for a later one. The nature of the evidence chosen must be consistent.

How could Mr. Garrow have fallen into such gross errors? I am inclined to believe that his failures both of research and of logic proceed from a single source: the social sciences' view of history. Mr. Garrow is not a historian but a political scientist. His view of the past has, I fear, been distorted by the difficulty which social scientists appear to have in acknowledging the complexity of human motives. The real solution to the problem presented by the fact that Martin Luther King both proclaimed his faith in the redemptive power of nonviolence and was prepared to use the doctrine in a manipulative way to defeat his opponents almost certainly is that he believed both things at once. The capacity of men for what George Orwell called "doublethink"—the ability to believe with equal sincerity two mutually exclusive concepts—is almost infinite. Every person practices it every day. But of course this notion is much too messy for the social scientist, who seeks whenever possible to account for persons' attitudes—indeed, often for an entire group's attitudes—in terms of the direct influence of a specifiable and testable motive. Science cannot tolerate loose ends, but human society is filled with them. In attempting to create uncomplicated, verifiable explanations for the activities of human beings, the social scientist must necessarily oversimplify.

Thus, when Mr. Garrow encountered two essentially contradictory attitudes toward nonviolence in his study of King, Mr. Garrow could not accept that King could have held both without being aware of the contradiction and, rather than conclude that King was a hypocrite, therefore decided that King's beliefs must have changed. I suspect that Mr. Garrow's difficulty in developing empathy with the values of Judge Hare, Solicitor McLeod, Mayor Smitherman, or Sheriff Clark proceeds from a similar source. He knew that they were Americans, whose values were professedly a part of the American democratic creed. When he found them treating Negroes in a most un-American way, he in a sense threw up his hands, pronouncing their behavior merely emotional, racist, incapable of rational explanation. Of course history demands that we understand the viewpoints of each party

to a controversy—understand them so fully, indeed, that we can state them compellingly. Otherwise we must fail to indicate the true complexity of the human dilemma. But such an understanding will inevitably generate an extremely complicated, even a perverse, explanation—an explanation almost quintessentially unscientific.

Of a piece with Mr. Garrow's historical failures, too, are his repeated efforts throughout the book to form on the basis of the events at Selma generalizations which may be used to understand the effects of any demonstration anywhere, as if historical events were not discrete. History is, or at any rate ought to be, the discipline which most fully appreciates the existence of the fourth dimension. Historians must be ever aware that as human society moves forward through time, it constantly changes, so that events which happened in the past are bound to the past and may not be generalized to explain other events at other historical moments. But if society is to be examined by a rational process akin to the scientific one, then historical events must be treated as if they were data, in some considerable measure interchangeable. Nothing reveals the fallacy of social scientific assumptions more clearly than this observation. Until Mr. Garrow and his fellows in his discipline are able to shed the scientific blinders which they wear, I fear that their investigations of the past will almost always be condemned to fall into the category into which *Protest at Selma* indisputably falls: bad history.