

Taylor studies, teaches the history of civil rights

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

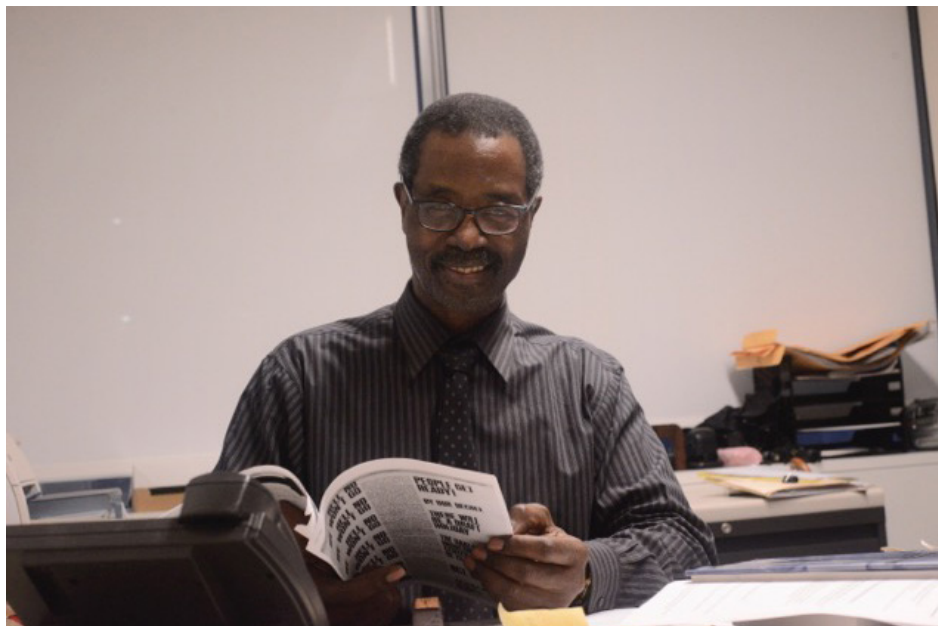
For many, the era of the Civil Rights Movement belongs to the past, a time vaguely associated with hippies and protesters. However, in the last few months, we have seen both new and old grievances surfacing, whether regarding immigrants, women, ethnic minorities, or members of the LGBTQ group.

As the Spanish philosopher and Harvard professor Jorge Santayana once said, “Those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it.” Therefore, it’s important to look at past struggles and ask ourselves whether there’s anything we can learn from them.

Someone who has worked extensively on the history of the Civil Rights Movement is Dr. Clarence Taylor. A native of Brooklyn, New York, he remembers that his interest in the history of that movement dates back to his high school years. “One particular event from my high school years that had a profound impact on me was the 1968 teacher’s strike. It divided many forces—teachers against parents, the Jewish community against the black community—and I was front in center in that struggle. I knew I wanted to dedicate my life to understanding these historical events. Why did we have this event in 1968? Why did we have the eruption of the social and protest movements of the 1960s? Those questions always caught my curiosity, and I thought college was a place where I could learn about them,” said Taylor.

He pursued a bachelor’s degree in history and a master’s degree in education and later obtained a doctorate in history from the City University of New York. Today he is a professor in the Department of History in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York.

Since his days as a student, he has seen a dramatic shift in the way people are educated. “When I was a student, there was emphasis on the way history had an impact on one’s life, but I think history—and this is also true of other subjects—now is more geared to preparing students for an exam, and so



Dr. Taylor at work.

students don’t really have an understanding of important concepts. They have very little knowledge of the past, and I see this clearly in a classroom full of freshmen.”

In spite of the misconception that history is just dates and names, his passion for history began early. “I love history, and when I went to high school in the 1960’s and early 1970’s, it was a tremendous period in American history. There were a lot of changes going on. As one person whom I interviewed said to me, ‘the 1960’s was a long decade.’”

He sees some parallels between the present and the past. “I think many of the struggles of the 1960’s are with us today. We see the fight for voting rights, re-segregation of public schools. There are economic issues that were with us in the 60’s that are still with us too. Some people mischaracterize the Civil

Rights Movement in the 1950’s and the 1960’s by noting that it was a movement to break down legal discrimination. Well, it was more than that; it was a fight for equal justice. We’re in this period now where we’re fighting for economic justice; we see that the growing disparity of wealth has a tremendous impact on communities,” said Taylor.

Taylor also finds other resemblances. “I think the similarities are quite evident between this period and the earlier period. Although I would also add that, because we do have laws on the books, institutional racism is something that is harder to get at. One example is policing, and this is an age-old problem, but not too many people recognize this as a Civil Rights issue. In particular, police brutality—there are people who deny even the existence of police brutality, so I think taking on institutional racism is

much harder because it’s more covert than overt,” he explained.

That’s why Taylor thinks it’s time for the different organizations in society to take a proactive stance. “When you recognize that there are few Latinos and African Americans in an institution, I think that an institution has the duty to question why this is the case and not just say it’s only because there aren’t enough applicants applying for the position.”

The issue of segregation in schools is an old one. When Malcom X was once asked to comment on school segregation in the south, he retorted that it was also a problem in New York City. As recently as 2014, a report by the Civil Rights project noted that New York State had the most segregated schools in the country. “It made the claim that, no, the schools were not segregated, or if they were segregated, it had to do more with neighborhood segregation,” Taylor reminds us.

Yet he thinks that just talking about it is not enough. “I think there’s little effort because the city administration doesn’t see it as an urgent issue. We see this with the growing number of charter schools, which has become a problem in terms of segregating students. We see this in specialized high schools, which few Black and Latino students attend.”

He also sees the role of black churches in their communities changing. “The reality is that there are far fewer black religious institutions involved in the struggle, and they need to get on the bandwagon. Unfortunately, these churches have moved to prosperity gospel. It’s all about making money, so this has become problematic.”

Obviously, Taylor sees some things changing but others remaining the same, and that is what we can learn from history.

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<https://vimeo.com/199886458>

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