

Martin Luther King Jr on Racism

King Jr, M. L., 2010. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* 2nd ed. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

I. Where are we? On 6 August 1965, the United States President, Lyndon Johnson, signed the Voting Rights Act, which gave black Americans the right to vote free from racial discrimination. Within a year, a white backlash led to the election (or near election) of racist governors in states like California and Maryland, and the murder of several black civil rights activists. White Americans have resisted the continued work of the Civil Rights Movement, because they are mostly attached to the status quo and the price of eradicating injustice is high. Black Americans are still denied opportunities that are provided to white Americans: half of black Americans live in substandard housing, and, compared with white Americans, twice as many black Americans die in infancy and twice as many are unemployed. The costs involved in addressing these inequalities are considerable compared with the costs involved in desegregating public spaces. Some black Americans have lost confidence in the Civil Rights Movement, because it appears that its progress has faltered; however, this appearance is deceiving. Just as the journey towards a distant city can be momentarily interrupted by a mountain, so the journey towards equality has been momentarily interrupted by a white backlash. The modest change that has occurred was achieved by a relatively small number of civil rights activists; further change will require the concerted efforts of many more black Americans, because freedom is won not given. Violent protests and riots are unjustifiable but always possible; black and white Americans must work together to open the double lock of peaceful change.

II. Black Power: in June 1966, James Meredith was shot whilst conducting a solo freedom march through Mississippi. Civil rights activists continued the march from the location where James Meredith was shot; it later became known as the March Against Fear. When the March Against Fear reached Greenwood, a civil rights activist called Stokely Carmichael gave a speech that used the Black Power slogan; this was the first time it had been associated with the Civil Rights Movement, and its negative connotations caused a sensation in the media. The Black Power slogan has many different meanings, some of which are positive. First, it is a cry of disappointment: black Americans are disappointed by the lower value placed on black lives compared with white lives. Second, it is a call to black Americans to amass political and economic power, so they can achieve equality with white Americans. Finally, it is a call to black Americans to psychologically accept full personhood, which they were denied as slaves. Nevertheless, the Black Power movement is negative in many ways. First, it assumes black Americans will never achieve equality with white Americans, which undermines its capacity to bring about change. Second, it implicitly and explicitly advocates black separatism, which is problematic because progress (e.g. the Voting Rights Act) has only been possible with the support of white allies. Finally, it implicitly and explicitly advocates violence, even though it is an ineffective method for achieving tangible change. Although the fight for black equality is important, it must not come at the cost of black souls; instead, black Americans should use nonviolent protest to amass a type of power that is infused with love and justice.

III. Racism and the white backlash: the white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement is nothing new, it is the consequence of ambivalence and indifference among white Americans towards slavery and its aftermath. This ambivalence and indifference has been hard to overcome: slavery has a long history in America (legally established in 1650), was supported by academics, business people and the clergy, and slaves were widely owned by the Founding Fathers (e.g. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson). In order to confront racism in America, it is necessary to appreciate how widely its existence is accepted by white Americans. It is an urgent challenge and requires the reordering of priorities: the United States should not seek to become the most powerful society on Earth but the most just, and national spending should be reorganised to achieve this objective. Black Americans have secured their dignity, but in order to avoid perpetual poverty they must campaign for secure employment and a minimum income. Emancipating black Americans is not as simple as providing equality of opportunity, because something was done against them for hundreds of years. White liberal Americans must accept the necessity of nonviolent protest to secure the improved status of black Americans, rather than preferring tranquillity to equality. Among white liberal American institutions, churches have a special responsibility to support the Civil Rights Movement. Segregation is morally wrong and is not supported by a proper understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Churches have a moral obligation to speak out against segregation and lead the process of integration, which will only be achieved when American attitudes change, not when American laws do.

IV. The dilemma of negro America: black Americans face problems created by their history of oppression. It is impossible for white Americans to understand these problems, because history has not forced them to endure similar suffering. Importantly, slavery has left a legacy of family dysfunction among black Americans. Before the Civil War, black families were routinely split up on the shores of Africa or in American auction houses. Some white Americans argue that black Americans should emulate the successes of other immigrant communities, but none had to endure slavery and its aftermath. Today, black American families are confined to ghettos, in which they are systematically deprived of the economic, educational, and political opportunities that white Americans receive. In Chicago, it is astonishing that black children grow up neglected, poorly educated, and without access to basic healthcare when the city boasts the highest average salary in the world. The dilemma black Americans face is how to keep up with white Americans when they started the race so far behind, and the need to keep striving in order to have any hope of catching up. To achieve this, black Americans must work together to raise their collective self-esteem; rejoice in their own culture, rather than attempting to imitate white culture; and work together, rather than falling victim to envy and internal division. Black Americans must also make full and constructive use of the freedom they already possess; they must strive to reach the heights of their chosen professions, and demonstrate openly the excellence they are capable of achieving. Finally, black Americans need to unite around powerful nonviolent action programmes; they must join together, with their own middle class and poor communities from other parts of the United States (including poor white Americans), to improve the life of the nation.

V. Where are we going: the Civil Rights Movement lacks the power to pressure the government into delivering its programmes, so amassing power must come before attempting to deliver programmes to improve the lives of black Americans. Nonviolent protest is the mechanism by which this can be achieved, and black Americans must continue to secure support for it from other communities. Black Americans have some economic power that they can leverage to their advantage. First, black businesses have symbolic significance. Second, black employees are over-represented in a number of key industries, which means they can amass economic and political power through participation in the labour movement. Finally, black consumers are a significant source of income for numerous businesses, which means boycotts can be particularly effective at securing concessions. Black Americans also have increasing amounts of untapped political power, because the black population of urban areas is on the increase owing to black migration, white flight, and black fertility rates. Effective organisation of the Civil Rights Movement is incredibly important. Black organisations will have to be permeated with mutual trust between all leaders and supporters, incorruptibility in the face of white attempts to divide and conquer, and militant determination. There are numerous programmes that the Civil Rights Movement could champion; however, the most important is the elimination of poverty. Strictly speaking, this is not a civil rights issue, because two-thirds of the poor are white Americans; nevertheless, its eradication would do much to improve the life of the nation. The most effective solution to the problem of poverty is the introduction of a guaranteed income (which would cost an estimated \$20 billion per year); there is already a great deal of opposition to this idea, but it can be overcome through organised campaigning. Like the practice of cannibalism, the existence of poverty is uncivilised and can no longer be tolerated.

VI. The world house: despite the struggles black Americans face in the United States, they must not forget they are part of a world house. Everyone on Earth is now a neighbour, as a result of numerous scientific and technological revolutions. Nevertheless, just as scientific and technological progress has advanced at pace, so too must moral and spiritual progress, because new technologies are useless unless we know how to make meaningful use of them. Now is the time for people to undergo a moral awakening, lest they destroy themselves by misusing their new technologies. One of the moral imperatives of the time is the need to work around the world to eliminate racism, because it is not a uniquely American phenomenon. Beyond racism, the nations of the world must work together to wage a war on poverty. Today, it is possible to end poverty and its associated problems if more economically developed countries give just two percent of their gross national products to less economically developed countries. Finally, the nations of the world must work together to achieve lasting peace. Historically, leaders like Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and Adolf Hitler have attempted to achieve peace by subjugating other nations. Today, world leaders should recognise that this is an arrogant and pointless endeavour; they must put an end to war before war puts an end to them. The people of the world must shift from being thing-orientated to being person-orientated. When profit and property is more important than people, it becomes impossible to overcome racism, materialism, and militarism. This is a call for a worldwide fellowship that embraces all human beings and disregards differences of tribe, race, class, and nation; it is based on the unconditional love envisaged by the religions of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism. The time is now, and it is important that people act to bring about a world order predicated on love before the opportunity to choose between chaos and community is lost.