

Martin Luther King Jr on Racism

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I. Where Are We?

I

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. One year later, black civil rights activists were protesting in Chicago, where they were subjected to physical and verbal assault by white Americans, many of whom waved Nazi flags. In states including California and Maryland, many white Americans reacted negatively to the Voting Rights Act, leading to a white backlash in which racist governors were elected (or almost elected) and black civil rights activists were murdered. Some commentators reflected that a decade of the Civil Rights Movement had left black Americans in a worse position (despite the passing of the Voting Rights Act). The Selma to Montgomery marches and the Voting Rights Act ended the first phase of the Civil Rights Movement and started its second phase; however, white Americans resisted further racial equality and justice once racial discrimination in voting was illegal.

II

White Americans have resisted the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement, because they are mostly attached to the status quo. Additionally, illegalising racial discrimination and the segregation of black and white Americans in public spaces is cheap; providing quality education, housing, and job opportunities is considerably more costly. 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. A large number of industries depend upon keeping the salaries of black Americans low. The legal structures introduced to prevent racial discrimination are poorly designed and largely unenforced, which is why 90 percent of schools in the Southern United States are still segregated. Most white Americans are troubled by injustice, but they are not willing to pay the price required to eradicate it.

III

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. It is true that the material welfare of black Americans has not improved over the last decade, but significant change has occurred: the registration of black voters has increased by 100 percent in almost every state of the Southern United States (including by 300 percent in Virginia and by 600 percent in Alabama), and eleven black Americans are now members of the Georgia House of Representatives. The fight is far from over, but progress has been made; additionally, nonviolent protest has co-opted ordinary black Americans into the Civil Rights Movement, transforming it from a movement of lawyers and lobbyists into a popular struggle in which all can engage.

IV

Despite progress, black Americans are still confined to the basement of the Great Society. 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. During the last decade, black Americans in the Northern United States have been neglected and progress has stagnated; it is clear that pressure must be sustained across the entire United States in order to ensure the continued progress of the Civil Rights Movement. Nonviolence is the only sure way to achieve progress; however, it is inevitable that violent riots will occur if peaceful protest is met with irrational obstruction. White Americans have a responsibility to demand racial equality from their local and national governments, because black Americans only hold one of the keys to the double lock of peaceful change.

II. Black Power

I

In June 1966, James Meredith was shot whilst conducting a solo freedom march through Mississippi. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress of Racial Equality (led by Floyd McKissick), and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (led by Stokely Carmichael) united to continue James Meredith's journey (known thereafter as the March Against Fear). Although the March Against Fear was nonviolent and included white Americans, many black civil rights activists had reservations about repudiating violent methods and including white allies. When the March Against Fear reached Greenwood, Stokely Carmichael gave a speech that used the Black Power slogan, which was the first time it had been associated with the Civil Rights Movement. Stokely Carmichael and Floyd McKissick were determined to continue using the Black Power Slogan, despite its association with violence; consequently, a compromise was agreed to use neither the Black Power nor the Freedom Now slogans for the rest of the march. Nevertheless, the media used to incident to suggest that the Civil Rights Movement was divided.

II

The Black Power slogan has many different meanings, and sometimes even different meanings to the same person depending upon the context. First, it is a cry of disappointment: black Americans are disappointed by the lower value placed on black lives compared with white lives; the failure of the federal government to enforce laws that exist to protect black Americans; and the prioritisation of the Vietnam War over the War on Poverty. 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. As slaves, black Americans were denied full personhood and encouraged to become utterly subservient to and dependent upon their masters; the Black Power slogan encourages black Americans to shake off any sense of subservience or dependence. In order to achieve true freedom, black Americans must embrace their long and illustrious history, however marred by slavery, and affirm their own value.

III

Beyond its slogan, the Black Power movement holds negative and self-defeating values. First, it is a movement motivated by despair: implicitly, the Black Power movement assumes black Americans will never achieve equality with white Americans, which is an assumption that undermines its capacity to bring about change. Second, it is a movement that implicitly and explicitly advocates black separatism; this is problematic because progress has only been achieved with the support of white allies. Additionally, black Americans only comprise 10 percent of the population, which means that progress towards equality is impossible without forging alliances with other groups (e.g. poor white Americans and trade unions). Finally, it is a movement that implicitly and explicitly advocates violence; however, violence is an ineffective method for achieving peaceful change. More change was achieved by the nonviolent protests of the Civil Rights Movement than by the violent Watts riots, and more black Americans died in one night of the Watts riots than in ten years of the Civil Rights Movement. Ultimately, violence creates the very thing that it seeks to destroy: evil (and evil cannot drive out evil, only love can do that).

IV

Given increased calls for the use of violent protest, it is tempting to some to abandon nonviolent methods; however, widespread support for violent protest does not make it right, and people should not abandon nonviolent protest because it is unpopular. Human beings should strive to be people of conviction rather than conformity. One of the greatest paradoxes of the Black Power movement is that it repudiates white society whilst simultaneously encouraging violence (one of the most brutal and uncivilised aspects of white culture). Although the fight for black equality is important, it must not come at the cost of black souls. Africans and Americans should not attempt to emulate Europeans in creating new societies; to do so would be to emulate the inseparable twins of violence and materialism that have corrupted Europe. Humanity is waiting for something other than blind imitation of the past; human beings should turn away from violence and materialism and attempt to shape a new type of society that furnishes them with a new type of power. This power should not be corruptible, but infused with love and justice that will give people hope for a better future.

III. Racism and the White Backlash

I

The white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement is nothing new. Some white Americans justify the white backlash by claiming the low status of black Americans is a consequence of their inferiority or idleness; however, it is clearly 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. Thomas Jefferson and George Washington). This long history of slavery and subjugation has led some white Americans today to believe in their racial superiority, and they have done everything in their power to avoid enforcing laws that prohibit racial discrimination. After the Emancipation Proclamation (i.e. the abolition of slavery in 1863), the Civil Rights Act (1964), and the Voting Rights Act (1965), racists conspired to avoid the effective enforcement of the law; there is nothing new about the white backlash.

II

In order to confront racism in America, it is necessary to appreciate how widely its existence is accepted by white Americans. They are like the prodigal son from the parable of Jesus: they have abandoned the house of democratic ideals the United States was founded on, and discovered themselves lost and unhappy in the foreign land of racial discrimination. White Americans should come to their senses and return home. This is an urgent challenge, and it requires the reordering of priorities: the United States should not seek to be the most powerful society on Earth but the most just, and national spending should be reorganised to achieve this objective. The excitement and enthusiasm of the Space Race dwarfs that of the War on Poverty, as does the amount of money spent on it. Likewise, the annual error in the Vietnam War budget (\$10 billion), is five times greater than the entire budget for antipoverty programmes. Black Americans have secured their dignity, but in order to avoid perpetual poverty they must campaign for secure employment and a minimum income.

III

White liberal Americans are essential to changing the status quo; however, some are more obstructive than members of the Ku Klux Klan. This is because some white liberal Americans consider the issue of integration to be aesthetic; as soon as a handful of black Americans are in positions of power or living in predominantly white neighbourhoods they consider the job done. Emancipating black Americans is not as simple as providing equality of opportunity, because something was done against them for hundreds of years. Now, something must be done for black Americans for them to achieve true equality. Nonviolent protest exposes the tension created by racial discrimination, but it does not create it (just as a doctor exposes cancer but does not cause it). White liberal Americans must accept the necessity of nonviolent protest, rather than preferring tranquillity to equality. Additionally, white liberal Americans should accept increasing black leadership of the Civil Rights Movement and seek to support it. Black Americans need the help of white Americans as much as ever, and committed liberals should ignore the message of the Black Power movement, because the struggle is really about justice not race.

IV

Among white liberal American institutions, churches have a special responsibility to support the Civil Rights Movement. In the past, some churches have furnished slavery and segregation with moral respectability, and others have excluded black Americans from joining their congregations. However, segregation is morally wrong and unsupported by a proper understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This clearly states that all human beings have equal and intrinsic value, because all are created in the image of God. Fundamentally, segregation is morally wrong because it denies true freedom to black Americans, which is the capacity to make decisions and take responsibility for them. Segregation deprives black Americans of the ability to make certain decisions for themselves and renders them victims of circumstances they are not responsible for. Churches have a moral obligation to speak out against segregation and lead the process of integration. This will be achieved when American attitudes change, not when American laws do. Attitudes are unenforceable, but when intergroup and interpersonal living occurs without prejudice then the work of integration will be done.

IV. The Dilemma of Negro America

I

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. The central experience of black Americans is pain, which is caused by a persistent and repeated refusal to provide equal access to economic opportunity and power. Additionally, 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. On plantations, black Americans had no legal right to marriage, were forced to interbreed like livestock, and were raped by their owners. Consequently, when freedom came, mothers were frequently unable to identify the fathers of their children. Once black Americans settled in cities, women often found it easier to secure employment than men, because they had domestic experience; consequently, matriarchies were formed, and black men frequently became depressed and turned to domestic violence. 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. Living in a ghetto is like living in a cave; the inhabitants of the cave see the world going by, but they are ignored by those passing. In Chicago, this is what happens when white Americans take the metro from the suburbs to the city: they pass over the acutely deprived ghettos oblivious to the suffering going on within them. It is astonishing that black children grow up neglected, poorly educated, and without access to basic healthcare in the same city that boasts the highest average salary in the world. Additionally, because racial discrimination often prevents black Americans from securing well paid employment or fair mortgage rates, they are trapped in the ghetto. This leads to the perverse situation in which ghettos are more expensive to live in than affluent suburbs (a four bedroom apartment in the ghetto of Lawndale is \$10 per month more expensive than a five bedroom house in the suburb of Gage Park). 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.

II

Black Americans face a number of challenges because of their dilemma (i.e. starting the race so far behind white Americans). First, there is a temptation to admit defeat, drop out of school, or attempt escape through alcohol and drug abuse. Second, there is a temptation to strike out at American society by engaging in antisocial behaviour and gang violence. Finally, there is a temptation to attempt to build an isolated black nation within the United States, separate from white Americans. All these responses to the dilemma are negative, because they fail to address the problem. Instead, black Americans must work together to raise their collective self-esteem; they must rejoice in their own culture, rather than attempting to imitate white culture. Black Americans must also work together, rather than falling victim to envy and internal division. The Egyptians fermented envy and unrest among the Hebrew slaves; it was only when the Hebrew slaves united that they were able to liberate themselves. Finally, black Americans must 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.

The fourth challenge that black Americans face is the need to unite around powerful nonviolent action programmes. This is necessary, because people who oppose the dismantling of systems of racial discrimination are neither passive nor patient; consequently, defeating them requires proactivity and pressure. Nonviolence is important, because the objective of black American protest against racial discrimination is not revolution, it is elevation to equality with white Americans. Violent protest is self-defeating, because it threatens to destroy the institutions that black Americans want to participate in. Fighting against poverty is difficult, because the Constitution of the United States does not guarantee human rights; however, a nation with a gross national product of \$750 billion should consider the alleviation of poverty a moral necessity. Mass nonviolent protest will not be enough to bring about transformative change; people must unite in voters' leagues, political parties, and workplace unions in order to apply the necessary pressure across the entire socio-economic system. All black Americans, including the middle class, must join together, and they must welcome support from other poor communities (including those of white Americans). Black Americans are uniquely equipped to help improve the life of the nation.

V. Where We Are Going

I

The President of the United States has recently demonstrated indifference towards the demands of the Civil Rights Movement, which is accused of failing to furnish the federal government with deliverable programmes. This is a distraction, because there is an abundance of potential programmes; what the Civil Rights Movement lacks is the power to pressure the government into acquiescing. Amassing power must come before delivering 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. Unlike white Americans, black Americans do not have access to other means of making their voices heard (e.g. the media), so they must take to the streets.

II

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 (e.g. truck transportation, steel production, and car manufacturing), which means they can amass economic and political power through participation in the labour movement (i.e. by joining trade unions). Finally, black consumers are a significant source of income for numerous businesses, which means boycotts are particularly effective at securing concessions for black Americans. In Atlanta and Chicago, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference has successfully secured increased opportunities in numerous businesses by threatening them with boycotts unless they stock the products of black businesses or hire more black employees.

III

Black Americans 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. If black Americans begin to register and vote in higher numbers, then they will be able to exert considerable influence over politics in the decades to come. Nevertheless, black Americans must also begin to nurture and support black politicians, because unless a class of black politicians is created then black Americans will never be properly represented. Black Americans must make alliances with groups that share similar goals, like poor white Americans who want to see their material conditions improved. Black communities must champion citizens who exercise their democratic rights and make it socially unacceptable not to take an active interest in politics.

IV

Effective organisation of the Civil Rights Movement is incredibly important. Historically, organisations within the Civil Rights Movement have been beset by two major weaknesses. First, petty divisions and rivalries between competing organisations and leaders (sometimes justifiable but sometimes unjustifiable). Second, a sense of complacency created by achieving easy victories relatively early. In truth, some legislative change was already long overdue, so actions like those in Birmingham and Selma quickly catalysed amendments to the law; however, moving forwards, the Civil Rights Movement will have to be considerably better organised to achieve continued gains. 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.

V

There are numerous civil rights programmes worthy of consideration; 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. Historically, solutions aimed at improving housing, education, and employment opportunities have been suggested; however, these are problematic, because they require considerable coordination. 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

I

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. Only a century ago, human beings were unable to fly, generate electrical light, or communicate via telephone. The future promises space flight, a cure for cancer, and levels of automation that will provide astronomical amounts of leisure time. Across the world, scientific and technological changes have been accompanied by demands for freedom from colonial oppression. For centuries, the countries of Western Europe exported their cultures by conquering and subjugating foreign lands, but now their colonial governments are being thrown off as nations liberate themselves. Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever, and the Exodus story is repeating itself around the world today. The story of black Americans and their struggle for racial justice is just another chapter in this global freedom revolution. Nothing is more tragic than for men to live in these revolutionary times without realising it; however, there are always people who ignore change or work against it. 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. Western civilisation is particularly vulnerable at the moment, because it has increased its material welfare without nurturing its spiritual welfare. Now is the time for people to undergo a moral awakening, lest they destroy themselves by misusing their new technologies.

II

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. Racism persists in South Africa, Rhodesia and Angola, and racist governments are propped up by countries like the United Kingdom and the United States. Racism is closely related to economic exploitation, and, even in countries where racial equality has been established in law, neocolonial superpowers work to keep black people poor (e.g. the United States in South America). 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 (e.g. famine); over the next 20 years, if more economically developed countries give just two percent of their gross national products to less economically developed countries then world poverty will be almost entirely eliminated. Countries like the United States should enter into this project without attempting to use aid to coerce other countries into adopting their foreign policy; instead, they should recognise that, given the interrelated nature of human societies, what is good for others is ultimately good for the United States. 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; human beings now have the power to destroy civilisation several times over, so they must put an end to war before war puts an end to them.

III

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. Human beings must acknowledge that neither capitalism nor communism provide a satisfactory solution to the spiritual bankruptcy of the world: capitalism denies the importance of the collective, whilst communism denies the importance of the individual. Today, human beings need a socially conscious democracy that safeguards the rights of the individual and ensures the material wellbeing of all its members. A true revolution in values will reflect badly on the extreme inequality between rich and poor, and the issues of neocolonialism, warmongering, and callous domestic policy-making. The United States is the most wealthy and powerful nation on Earth, and is in the perfect position to lead a much needed revolution in values. Around the world, people are rising up and demanding their freedom from historic systems of exploitation and oppression; in the United States and other more economically developed countries, people should support this revolutionary action against injustice. 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 world 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.

George Thinks

Where Do We Go From Here is the last book that Martin Luther King Jr wrote before he was assassinated in 1968. It's an interesting read, because it marks a subtle but important shift in Martin Luther King Jr's thinking on the eve of his death, which begs an important question: would the ideas in Where Do We Go From Here have changed the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement if they had been realised? So, what is this subtle but important shift? In brief, it's a movement away from tackling racism towards tackling materialism and militarism. Of course, this doesn't mean that Martin Luther King Jr ignores the continuing issues caused by racial discrimination in his book, just that he frames them in a much wider landscape, which includes the evils of poverty and violence throughout American society and elsewhere. In the final chapter of Where Do We Go From Here, Martin Luther King Jr implores us as readers to rise up in support of the freedom revolution taking place around the world. We are told that we need to bring about an increase in the moral and spiritual awareness of humanity.

In many ways, Martin Luther King Jr argued for considerably more than racial equality towards the end of his life: he argued for social equality within and between nations. I think he had come to the conclusion that, to at least some extent, racism is simply a way of using economic exploitation and violence to deprive one group of people from enjoying the opportunities afforded to another group. The benefit of this process is that it reduces the cost of providing opportunities to the in-group, because they aren't afforded to the out-group even though their taxes contribute to them. In the United States, Martin Luther King Jr argued that poor white Americans were increasingly becoming victims of the systematic deprivation that black Americans had long been subjected to, and that neocolonial policies were creating similar inequalities between less economically developed countries and world superpowers. Given the wealth of the United States, Martin Luther King Jr found it morally abhorrent that poverty still existed and so little was being done about it.

Of course, I don't want to diminish the considerable amount of thought and reflection that Martin Luther King Jr gives to racism in Where Do We Go From Here, because the first four chapters focus almost exclusively on this scourge and the aftermath of slavery. However, and it's a big however, most of these chapters involve historical analysis; it's only in the final third of the book that Martin Luther King Jr lays out his roadmap for the future of the Civil Rights Movement, and it's not necessarily what you'd expect. His blueprint involves lifting the world out of poverty and securing peace on Earth by applying the considerable pressure of nonviolent protest. Sadly, neither of these things have happened in the decades since Martin Luther King Jr's death; if anything, most measures of inequality reveal that the gap between rich and poor has widened since the 1960s. So, Where Do We Go From Here remains relevant today, not only because it provides a compelling argument for why racism has proved so difficult to eradicate, but because it also illuminates solutions to a myriad of other social problems.

