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Martin Luther King Jr.'s Troubled Attitude Toward Nonviolent Resistance

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When it comes to the image of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., there would seem to be little to debate: he was an idealistic martyr for civil rights, a man who pressed for his "Dream" through doctrines of nonviolent resistance, patience and redemption. In a certain sense, he is a model of what can only be described as superhuman restraint, godly wisdom and infinite love, and it was these characteristics that positioned King to lead a successful civil rights movement that transformed the basic social and legal framework of the United States. But this image of King persists despite a critical fact we have yet to address fully: in his later writings, King began to question his emphasis on patience, redemption and brotherly love. Where he professed in 1958 a "deep faith in the future" [1] and the

"democratic ideal of freedom and equality … for all,"[2] a decade later he was conceding that his staunch belief in nonviolent resistance needed a different reckoning. Today, we seem to know little of the extent to which he found that his work had not achieved true equality, in his words, beyond a mere "absence of brutality and unregenerate evil."[3] We might be surprised at King's admission that, after a decade of work, "Negroes have established a foothold, no more"[4] and that nonviolence had "not been playing its transforming role."[5] King in these later writings had lost faith in the transformative potential of his earlier belief in nonviolence, and it is a loss of faith we rarely acknowledge.

How do we make sense of this change in King's beliefs, and how do we account for our image of King as an unshakable crusader for nonviolent resistance, universal justice, and brotherhood? It might be easier of us to deal with King's own professed inconsistencies and questions by ignoring them, dismissing them or marginalizing them. However, it would be deceptive to believe in such a depiction of King or to accept the enormous potential of nonviolent resistance as King originally presented it. To examine this unexplored transformation, we will consider works from the earliest and latest points of King's civil rights career: his 1958 memoir *Stride toward Freedom*, a 1968 reflection called *Where do We Go from Here?*, and a 1968 reflection article titled "Showdown for Nonviolence." By focusing on these moments that bookend much of his work, we can more clearly see the stark contrast in King's changing ideology. There

is, in other words, an important shift in the course of King's work that these moments highlight. We may be tempted to understand this shift as simply a reflection of the difficulties of the time period, and to write off King's wavering faith as simply his acceptance of the slow pace of change. However, this paper argues that we can better understand this radical transformation as King's realization that change through nonviolent resistance had actually reached its potential. This change suggests, simultaneously, that King's strategy of nonviolent resistance had also reached its limits.

Before we ask why King shifted his stance on nonviolence, let's take closer look at his troubled attitude toward it. In the 1960s, King reversed his original vision on race relations from a horizontal connection focused on reciprocity, brotherly love, and redemption to a more vertical, contractual, and antagonistic relationship. Despite King's earlier prostrations for *agape,* or brotherly love, to define the African American's relationship to the prevailing culture of the United States, the term is not mentioned in his 1960s writings. Forsaking his 1958 call for "understanding, redemptive goodwill,"[6] King bluntly declared in 1968 that "White America has allowed itself to be indifferent to race prejudice and economic denial."[7] This marks an important shift in King's thinking. He previously had placed the burden of change on African Americans, and his writings reflected the belief that African Americans needed to forgive,

love and exist peacefully with the prevailing culture of America. In 1958, King writes: "*Agape* is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. *Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it…It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community."[8] By 1968, however, he begins to transfer that sense of agency to whites. By referring to "[t]he future [that Americans] are asked to inaugurate…To end poverty [and] extirpate prejudice"[9] in 1968, King attached important conditions to a race relationship that he previously approached with the language of unconditional love. King's change in language here can be described as a shift from a focus on religious goodwill and cohabitation to a more contractual obligation. The shift in King's thinking is clear: *agape* was beginning to fade as a reality by the late 1960s.

A cursory reading might construe King's shift as a result of a change in the presiding sentiment in the white community at the time. The logic here is simple and compelling: in 1958, King could talk about *agape* because whites were responding to his ideas, but in 1968 the increased stubbornness of whites forced him to be more demanding. In other words, King was only as magnanimous in his hopes for a communal racial order as the proportion of whites who appeared to be receptive to such a vision. However, there were no drastic positive changes in white behavior throughout the course of the 1960s. This cursory

reading would also ignore the extent to which the white community in the late 1950s was uncomfortable with the thought of change. In 1958, for instance, King himself had decried the country's "tenacious and determined resistance"[10] to change as the very impetus of the civil rights movement; and yet, he managed to believe at the time in forgiveness and redemption for the abuses the African American community endured. In other words, this resistance from the prevailing white culture of America was largely the same a decade later, when King seemed to give up on *agape*. Clearly, King's altered understanding of race relations did not reflect a change in attitude in the prevailing culture of the United States. In fact, we could argue that it was quite the opposite: his transformation in thinking actually reflected a frustration with the *lack* of change in those attitudes. It is no secret that, even after historical civil rights legislation, African Americans continued to find their civil rights violated and continued to find equal employment a distant reality. Simply put, King had hoped that nonviolence would spark far more change. His sense of *agape*, however boundless, could never be realized when the prevailing culture remained unwilling to negotiate its social position and wealth.

King's discovery of the limits of his earlier tenets caused a change in tone from hopeful patience in 1958 to frustration in 1968. In 1958, for instance, King urged his followers to love for "the need of the other person" and "expect no good in return, only hostility and persecution." [11] But King's later writings

became more aggravated. In 1968, in his "Showdown for Nonviolence," King reflected on his "bitter experience"[12] even though he had cautioned his early followers against "succumb[ing] to the temptation of becoming bitter."[13] In this article, King delivered a no-holds-barred account of the disappointments that marked the civil rights struggle for African Americans. He lamented the United States' "tragic mix-up in priorities"[14] (like spending more on the Vietnam War than on domestic programs) and its insufficient social legislation when compared to European nations.[15] King concluded: "All of the misery that stoked the flames of rage and rebellion remains undiminished."[16] Statements like this reveal the extent to which he was becoming bitter at the pace of social change envisioned by his original faith in nonviolence. Despite professing in 1958 to expect little more than "hostility and persecution,"[17] King was becoming frustrated just a decade later.

Why, then, does the perception of King as a staunch idealist persist? One reason is because King continued to speak in favor of nonviolence, *agape* and universal justice even as he was beginning to question their efficacy. It is difficult for us to hear King's misgivings on the strategy of nonviolence, in other words, when he vowed in 1968 to continue to "preach it and teach it,"[18] even if nonviolence were to fail. In his "Showdown for Nonviolence," he even spoke of a survey in Detroit that revealed a majority of people believed in the effectiveness of

nonviolence,[19] and in this writing he seems to pull great hope in his strategy of nonviolence from the public's continued faith in it. But what we tend to miss in his writings and his speeches are the important qualifications he himself makes: he warns about the inevitable violence from frustrated African Americans. Speaking about several recent job riots, King warned in 1968 that "The urban outbreaks are "a fire bell in the night," clamorously warning that the seams of our entire social order are weakening under strains of neglect."[20] This was an idea King rarely brought up in his earlier writings, and when he did, they were more abstract. (Compare, for instance, his language earlier, in 1958: "Forces maturing for years have given rise to the present crisis in race relations."[21]) The disparity between his declarations and his qualifications are critical to understanding King as a more complex actor in the civil rights era of the 1960s, an understanding from which we should not exempt ourselves. However subtle his misgivings, we can see a growing sense in King that nonviolent resistance was not as capable of achieving the kind of equality that many had come to expect.[22]

But we also tend to continue believing in King's image as a crusader of nonviolence because he seemed to be an advocate for the poor, not just for the African American community. Such an emphasis on poverty rather than on race alone produces, for us, an image of true *agape*. This understandably gives us the impression that King remained committed to nonviolence and to universal justice. It is hard, in other words, to miss his belief in a

universal march for equality when, in 1968, he recalled their collective work at protesting peacefully: "When we began direct action in Birmingham and Selma, there was a thunderous chorus that sought to discourage us. Yet today, our achievements in these cities…are hailed with pride by all."[23] His emphasis on the collective "we" and on achievements "hailed with pride by all" helps to reify the impression we have of King as an unwavering advocate of nonviolent resistance. Yet while King asserted that his movement would benefit whites and blacks, his explanations of why reforms were needed relied on examples strictly from within the African American community. This focus on the African American community had the effect of potentially alienating poor whites who were eager to advocate King's nonviolence campaign in the 1950s but found themselves out of place a decade later in a movement that seems less inclusive in the words of its leader. For instance, when expounding on the "economic question" in 1968, King addressed the unemployment rate of African American youths.[24] He noted, rather cynically, that "[w]hen you have a mass unemployment in the Negro community, it's called a social problem; when you have mass unemployment in the white community, it's called a depression."[25] By stressing the neglect that African Americans suffered from society at large, King set them apart as his primary focus and thus made his mention of benefits to impoverished whites seem like a passing suggestion rather than a goal he took as seriously as the eradication of black poverty.

This essay has meant to be polemical, but it has also meant to suggest ways for further and more full inquiry into King's radical transformation in his thinking. In 1958, as a newly championed leader, King invested so much time and energy under the banner of a philosophy he fully endorsed that he could not lower his hopes for full equality for a moment. Yet when he stopped and reflected in 1968 about the extent of his achievements and how they measured up to his earlier predictions, full equality seemed even further beyond his reach than when he started. Confronted with the desolation of the situation and the imminence of what he called a violent "holocaust"[26] and "guerilla warfare,"[27] King knew he had to make changes to his approach. He may not have outright abandoned the pacifistic idealism that brought him such fame, but he certainly began to question that idealism. He seems to have begun to adopt a more grounded realism. He still called his vision "nonviolent resistance" by name, but his new outlook demonstrably lacked many of the elements by which nonviolence was known to his fellow Americans, elements like *agape*, reciprocity, and patience. This does not mean, of course, that King should not be lauded for his persistence and his role in transforming the political, racial and economic landscape in the United States. He remained, even in his most troubling moments with *agape*, a constant opponent to violence. But we rarely

consider King as an ordinary man, one who had his beliefs rattled and who began to evolve in his thinking.

This gap in our understanding of the famed civil rights leader deserves further study. There are obviously more reasons and circumstances that would account for this shift between 1958 and 1968 than this paper can address, and there are certainly more nuances to the accounting I have put forth. Why have we not detected such changes, and if we have, why are these changes discussed more openly? A more thorough line of inquiry into these questions would do well to start with an analysis of the media, which sensationalized and deified King in an effort to attract mass readership. The media seemed intent on avoiding complicated analyses of the various dimensions of King's character. We would also do well to look at the way history is written, especially when it is relatively recent. When textbooks rely on newspaper accounts for a primary perspective on a vital player in American history, for instance, it is not surprising that students would come to adopt a similarly static conception of a figure like the Reverend King. Certainly, the 1960s was a time of great cultural change spearheaded by leaders such as King, and having stable actors for our retelling of such a tumultuous era helps lend a sense of constancy to the entropy of history. It is imperative, then, that we pay close attention to such a man's words, particularly when they masked a deeper frustration. It is a contradiction that we should take care to explore.

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Endnotes

[1] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1958; Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 95. Citations refer to the Beacon Press edition.

[2] Ibid., 190.

[3] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968; Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 4. Citations refer to the Beacon Press edition.

[4] Ibid., 20.

[5] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Showdown for Nonviolence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1986), 64.

[6] King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 92.

[7] King, "Showdown for Nonviolence," 71.

[8] King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 94.

[9] King, "Showdown for Nonviolence," 71.

[10] King, *Stride Toward Freedom,* 185.

[11] Ibid., 93.

[12] King, "Showdown for Nonviolence," 65.

[13] King, *Stride Toward Freedom,* 92.

[14] King, “Showdown for Nonviolence,” 67.
[15] King, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, 14.
[16] King, “Showdown for Nonviolence,” 64.
[17] King, *Stride Toward Freedom,* 93.
[18] King, “Showdown for Nonviolence,” 69.
[19] Ibid., 70.
[20] Ibid., 71.
[21] King, *Stride Toward Freedom,* 182.
[22] King, “Showdown for Nonviolence,” 71.
[23] Ibid., 65-66.
[24] Ibid., 67.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 65.
[27] Ibid., 69.