

Social Revolution In 1960s America: Icons, Ideals And Discontents

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ABSTRACT

The 1960s witnessed two of the most profound social movements of twentieth-century America: the civil rights movement and the protests against American participation in the war in Vietnam. Both directly involved hundreds and thousands of people, attracting widespread media attention. Both operated mostly, outside conventional realms of political channels, relying instead on marches, demonstrations, rallies, boycotts and other forms of nonviolent protest. Teeming with confidence and faith in a kind of social change these movements were dominated by young people. This paper seeks to delineate the turmoil of political manoeuvres that took place during the 1960s in America when diverse political ideologies tended to move towards a more revolutionary outlook from the previous ones. It also charts a trajectory of the future to signify the growth of a spirit of change that influenced America's public discourses in the later decades.

But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have even seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.¹

Central to these developments and changes of Civil Rights struggle Martin Luther King Jr. became, during the sixties, one of the foremost Black leaders within America. Such acclaim, however, seems to overwhelm an equally deserving consideration, namely, the significance of King's written works. A mere handful of people bother to acknowledge that King wrote extensively during his lifetime; few dare to probe his writings seriously in terms of accuracy, perception, and prediction of the future with respect to the Black existence in a White America. Inasmuch as social scientists are inclined to cast leaders of a social movement into a "charismatic" mould, there is little likelihood of perceiving King other than as a maker of events and, upon death, a mere historical figure, for a certain moment of racial strife, who never gained, in spite of numerous publications, academic standing as a major interpreter of Black-White race relations in America. Following the rise of Martin Luther King Jr. as a nationalist icon E. Franklin Frazier observed that 'Despite the present inferior status of the Negro there have been fundamental changes in the relations of Negroes to American society which indicate their increasing integration into American life'.

Over the span of his public ascendancy, between the Montgomery bus boycott of 1956 to the Memphis sanitation workers' strike of 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. sewed together the African American dreams of freedom with global agendas of political and economic equality. King lifelong was opposed to racism, imperialism, poverty, and political disenfranchisement in increasingly radical terms. He often referred the American civil rights movement as an organised expression in demand of proper human rights that raised its voice asking for economic rights to work, income, housing and security. He never advocated for segregation; instead in August 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, had envisioned an all-inclusive world where all men sit down together at the table of brotherhood and children are judged '*not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.*' King often described himself as a mediator between the moderates and the militants, avoiding the ineffectual extremes: on one hand the traditional Negro leaders who bargained with the Whites in order to win concessions and gradually became the beholders of the white patronage and hence unresponsive to the black communities, and on the other were the revolutionary hotheads who inspired the

¹ Washington, James Melvin. "I See the Promised Land" in Famous Sermons and Public Addresses, A Testament Of Hope, Harper San Francisco Publications, New York, 1986

masses to armed resistance, but provoked repression and chances of interracial vengeance. King's idea of resistance was through mutual love and non – violence, which he achieved in Montgomery with the help of 50,000 blacks in 1956. Though his brotherhood, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) never engaged in local community organising, the Birmingham crisis of 1963 and passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act challenged the basic premise of King's non – violent resistance. This struggle of assembling and holding together a progressive coalition that could build power locally and create pressure nationally was becoming tiresome for King till finally in his last book he conceded that he had not been an effective local 'organizer' of people in an ongoing struggle. Ella Baker and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) also criticised him of inefficiency, drawing media attention to capture the pulse of dramatic confrontations and then leaving others to pick up the pieces. Throughout his life, Martin Luther had to contest the symbolism of 'The American Gandhi' bestowed upon him by the American White media. Though Martin Luther had been considerably influenced by the Gandhian ethos of *Satyagraha* and *Ahimsa*, he in his own life had swayed from the ethical to the pragmatic Gandhian ethos. This proved as a dilemma for Martin Luther as the white journalists and news consumers were overwhelmingly concerned with the possibilities of violence inherent in non – violent protests. They placed King in dualistic opposition to militants such as Malcolm X and started questioning the loyalties of black urban masses, thus creating a vile competition amongst the Black leaders. King aimed at organising and coordinating three broad constituencies : Firstly, to unify the African Americans across class lines, conjoining the leadership of the black middle class in order to solidify the 'energy' of the masses instead of letting that force being wasted through divergent political motivations. Second, reaching across racial lines to white leaders and the white middle class, King mixed religious socialism with secular American tradition of equal rights. He wanted to galvanize the support of the North, in order to achieve equality in schools, neighbourhood and the priorities in the government to act in the interest of the metropolis as a whole. In his third and most challenging mobilization, King hoped to revive the insurgent populism of the 1930s and the civil rights unionism of the 1940s. Dreaming of a powerful Negro – labour alliance for democratic socialism he sought to organise a legion of the deprived in the anti – union South.

Martin Luther King's faith in America seemed unshakable, and it continued to separate him from Malcolm X, who did not believe that America could be changed significantly through an appeal to the conscience of its white citizens. Tensions and conflicts between Martin and the young activists of SNCC continued to deepen as the latter was increasingly attracted to the ideals of Malcolm, especially in regard to their attitude towards the Whites. But despite manifold challenges and the lurking fear of being unpopular with the people, Martin never lost faith towards the American dream that says 'We shall overcome black and white together'. As Martin inspired the southern black masses, Malcolm led their counterparts in the northern ghettos. Malcolm enjoyed a relative advantage over Martin as he belonged to this underclass and thus understood better the oppressed condition of the masses and the feelings harboured by them against those who rendered them the status of the marginal. Malcolm told the masses that if their wretched condition was going to change, they could not depend upon the whites – the very ones who created the situation - to change it. He was hence mercilessly critical towards the black poor for their callousness and named them as 'walking zombies', 'dry bones', and even 'dead people cut off from their cultural history'. In their mutual opposition, Malcolm and Martin taught us the relationship between self – defence and non – violence. Malcolm was right to insist that African – Americans should achieve their freedom 'by any means necessary' refusing absolutely an inch of ground for the exploiters to shape the dynamics of possible resistance. A Black man should have the right to adopt any means to achieve freedom which other human beings have done to gain freedom. Martin Luther, on the other is possibly right in his claim that nonviolent direct action is resistance and not passivity or cowardice. Indeed it was the only creative way, that an African American minority of ten percent could fight for freedom and at the same time avoid genocide, the other form of racism. Kenneth Kinnamon in her essay '*Afro – American Literature, the Black Revolution and Ghetto High Schools*' finely captures this milieu of social and political changes and designates this 1960s as an era when the 'Negro turned towards a renewed consciousness' and hence is the era marked with topsy – turvey changes.

In his book '*The Trumpet of Conscience*' Martin Luther addresses the crisis that has presented itself before the contemporary youth as he writes '*There is a second group of young people, the radicals. They range from moderate to extreme in the degree to which they want to alter the social system. All of them agree that only by structural change can current evils be eliminated, because the roots are in the system rather than in men or in faulty operation. These are a new breed of radicals. Very few adhere to any established ideology; some borrow from old doctrines of revolution; but practically all of them suspend judgement on what the form of a new society must be.*' Hence post – 1962, Martin Luther truly had to face very challenging times when day by day negotiation was becoming an impossible prospect for him. In the wake of the Vietnam War, Martin Luther launched forthright criticisms against the war policies of the Lyndon Johnson administration which drew severe criticism from both white and black leaders. Largely influenced by his studies of Hegel, Martin believed that truth was found in neither of the opposites of the right or the left (Thesis and Antithesis) but rather in a middle position (Synthesis), which itself was derived from the encounter of the two extremes. The critical opposition of Martin and Malcolm's political views are hidden in the great migration of the blacks

from the rural South to the urban North, which began before the First World War and continued through the 1950s. Blacks expected to find the *freedom* that had eluded them for so many years in the South, they expected to gain like other Americans the right to live wherever they chose to and befriend those whom they wanted to. Instead they found themselves crammed into small ghetto sections of the city, paying the white landlords for rent, food and clothing and in return getting lynched by the police who were no less brutal than the Southern slave holders. Malcolm, being an inhabitant of these underbelly ghettos had witnessed cruelty from much closed quarters. Hence the distant dream of Martin for a colourless, classless society is nothing more than a utopia to him which he slants as a 'Nightmare'. In this cross current of ideological differences Malcolm and Martin had been strayed away miles from each other, but very interestingly towards the end of their short – lived careers they had started complimenting each other; though they had met only once in their lifetime in Washington D.C., on 26 March, 1964 where both of them attended the US Senate session of the Civil Rights Bill. James H. Cone in his book, '*Martin & Malcolm & America*' finely sums up the impact of Malcolm and Martin upon America as he writes 'Martin and Malcolm illuminate the two roads to freedom that meet in the African – Americans' search for identity in the land of their birth.'

"Black Power" was first used as a slogan in the civil rights movement by Stokely Carmichael during the Freedom March through Mississippi in June 1966. Outraged by the shooting of James Meredith, Carmichael agreed to join hands with Martin Luther and Floyd McKissick, who was the director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to continue the march. The slogan of 'Black Power' gathered immense popularity when it sounded in the public as the blacks had long witnessed the horrors of White power. Martin Luther thought that the term 'Black Power' which had been long before used by Richard Wright should not be adopted as he could perceive the coercive force of the term that had already created a fissure among the marchers as some called for 'Black Power' while some others called for 'Freedom Now'. He had advised Carmichael and McKissick to drop this term as the press had already associated this slogan with violence and pointed out the fact further that some rash statements by the marchers had already substantiated the suspicions of the media. Martin Luther maintained that Black Power is essentially an emotional idea which can have varied responses from varied people and can even vary in meaning for the same person on different occasions. In his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (1967), Martin Luther pens down his ongoing struggles with the fresh ideologies of the day, and his uneasiness over witnessing people following unsubstantiated ways that could hardly provide them any freedom. King states that the members of SNCC, including Carmichael, had the impression that the life of a black in white America had no meaning. He recalled how this impression was reinforced during the Selma Movement when both Jimmy Lee Jackson, a Negro, and the Rev. James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister, had been killed by white racists, but President Johnson in his *We Shall Overcome* speech, felt it appropriate to mention only Reeb. Martin Luther never fuelled the idea of racial hatred, instead he wanted to accept the whites with the virtue of forgiveness, since he had a place for Jew and a Gentile. King's integrative vision of the just society synthesized socio political emphasis on the self and the community. Whereas much modern Western thought conceptualises them as polar opposites, King's intellect resisted such dichotomies and consistently sought to transcend apparent opposites through the dialectical exercise of synthesis and reconciliation. For King, Communism and Capitalism were both failures in realising the dreams of the masses. Communism failed to respect the value of individual liberty of expression. By asserting the absolute priority of collective life over the individual life, Communism found it permissible to coerce conformity, stifle individual creativity and productivity, and established the State as a pervasive force in human affairs. Capitalism on the other hand, failed to realise that the authentically free life is basically social. By reifying individual rights over the common good and denying the interdependence of human life, Capitalism encourages egocentric, acquisitive, competitive behaviour which tends to compromise the prospect and quality of a shared sense of values, experience and community. Martin Luther in his last book also contended that the implicit and often explicit belief of the Black Power Movement in separatism was totally unrealistic. He rationalised the view that if blacks chose to develop their political strength through separatism and by concentrating on the few cities and countries where they are at majority, such an effort would leave out most of the blacks from the mainstream of American political life. It was wise for the black to seek a kind of territorial autonomy instead of contesting elections with two or three black representatives from the predominantly black districts. John J. Ansbro in his book *Martin Luther King Jr.: The Making of a Mind* critiques the viewpoint of Martin Luther as he observes 'King explained that Black Power in its positive sense was a call to black people to acquire the political and economic strength to achieve their legitimate goals. He felt that the acquisition of legitimate power was crucial to the solutions of the problems of the ghetto.' Carmichael's speeches and writings revealed his position to be more antithetical to King's philosophy of nonviolence. King had implied in his last book that the only violence Carmichael proposed was defensive violence. Although it is true that Carmichael often advocated defensive violence, it is also true that he did not consistently reject aggressive violence. The only concession Carmichael made to nonviolence was to recommend that blacks should adopt nonviolence as a philosophy in their relationships with each other. In his book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* which he co – authored with Charles Hamilton he says 'We must develop an undying love for our people...' He and Hamilton described this consciousness as 'a sense of peoplehood; pride, rather than shame, in blackness, and an attitude of brotherly communal responsibility among all black people for one another'. Investing community feelings amongst the Blacks,

Carmichael vents out his anger in his book and indicates of a possible upsurge; as he writes 'When black people call for black – run and all – black organizations, they are immediately classed in a category with the Ku Klux Klan. ...we cannot and shall not offer any guarantees that Black Power, if achieved would be non – racist.... If black racism is what the larger society fears, we cannot help them'. The tremors of a violent nationalist struggle can be well felt in the words of Carmichael along with the receding popularity of Martin Luther King Jr.

After the assassination of Malcolm X, the new nationalism drew its ideology and methods from the struggles of colonized people in Asia and Africa. The movement that gained a character of Garvey's 'Return to Africa' was to be led by blacks, and goals were to be those decided only by the blacks. One slogan was often used besides "Black Power" and it was, "Power to the People." New leaders, still mourning the death of Malcolm, who had generated great vital energy in the struggle for freedom imitated him in rhetorical style and echoed his belief in Pan-African unity. Groups like the Black Panthers followed the attitude which Malcolm held at the time of his death that black liberation must be achieved with the cooperation of those whites only who recognize the racism built into the structure of the United States and talk of an alternative order. The political milieu gained an impulse of separatist logic that provided ground for a distinct Black Rhetoric of the 1960s. As the rhetoric of the black leaders became more threatening to whites, there seemed to develop a concerted national effort to eliminate the leaders. Some of the acts of retaliation were so fierce that local prosecutors against the Black Panthers have been placed under court injunction not to reveal actual grand jury reports on police activity.² These tactics seem to have succeeded. Most Black leaders active in the late 1960s were either dead due to police atrocities, in exile, or in jail awaiting trial. Civil rights rhetoric was increasingly becoming enveloped by the more vocal anti-Vietnamese war leaders. In 1965, Julian Bond, a SNCC staff member, was barred from assuming his seat in the Georgia state senate because of his antiwar views. These and other events prompted Martin Luther King, Jr., to make public speeches against the war, which gained considerable publicity after he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1966. In 1967, the heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali was stripped of his title after he refused military induction, claiming that his status as a Nation of Islam minister qualified him for a draft exemption. Vietnam War deaths were the major factor stimulating negative change in public opinion against the war, the African-Americans being significantly more antiwar than whites. The whole of the US government came under an action scanner regarding its dubious war policies. King tried to fill Lyndon Johnson's gap between promise and program, advocating jobs, income support, and self – help. At Syracuse University in July 1965, King carefully distinguished between guaranteed work and guaranteed income. Rather than a handout, guaranteed work would be 'dignifying' for poor people. He advocated his idea that those 'physically able to work, useful employment must be found in private and public domains.' For those who are unable to support themselves, the federal government should provide a 'subsistence minimum without stigma'. King also had in mind 'the unemployed ... the aged, widowed heads of families ... broken families with children and the disabled' and voiced for a mode of economic upliftment so that rich are not only the custodians of wealth, instead the public money should be evenly distributed. Thomas F. Jackson in his book *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* explores the different facets of King's vision of economic democracy and international human rights that calls for a radical redistribution of political as well as economic power as King was well aware of the fact that the mid – 1960s ghetto unrest were in reality revolts against unemployment, powerlessness, police atrocities, organised racial violence and overall against the prevalent lawlessness that had become the order of the day.

The 1960s in America was full of radical changes in both the social and political spheres, giving birth to some world class leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Carmichael McKissick, Elridge Cleaver and many others. The principal leader of this era, Martin Luther King Jr. too had undergone radical changes in his political ideologies as his life progressed. From the staunch believer of non – violence in Montgomery he went on to become the nationalist leader who voiced for economic equality of the blacks. Though he met with several quarters of criticism he never created the atmosphere of enmity for popularity. After the split from Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X had started complementing some of the ideas of Martin Luther, and as pointed out by James H. Cone there were huge anticipations in the air that Malcolm and Martin would merge together as a political force had not Malcolm X been assassinated in 1965. Though there are some rounds of criticism from the black women writers stating that Malcolm and Martin had placed an excessive premium upon manhood, which in turn negated the contribution of black women, the 1960s along with the civil rights movements had definitely become the symbolic representation of the African – American identity.

² Knewly, Henry J. account in 'Police Registers' in "The Tribunal" published by Merger Corp. New York. 1975.

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