

Radicalism of Nonviolence in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

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Abstract

Non-violent direct action was a method of protest in the U.S.-American civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., among others, used it to contest segregation. In this article, I suggest that King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) deliberately confronts white moderates and aims to highlight the violence against African Americans in the United States. In the letter, King claims that justice does not happen by itself and needs non-violent direct actions. In this respect, King's approach is not that different from Malcolm X's, against which King is traditionally positioned. To make this case, I examine King's perception of civil rights history, engage with the ideology of colorblindness and consider King's non-violent philosophy. Subsequently, the article turns to the radicalism of King's letter and argues that he saw white moderates as problematic in the struggle for racial justice. Finally, I address King's understanding of direct action, which stems from the concept of civil disobedience. In doing so, this article also discusses similarities between King and other civil rights activists like Malcolm X and Mahatma Gandhi with regard to racial movement tactics. I conclude with a discussion of King's philosophy of nonviolence as an immediate action against violence. Ultimately, this article not only discards the idea of King being best understood as a proponent of passiveness but also shows how intellectually active he was in combating racial injustice.

Keywords

Nonviolence – Disobedience – Passiveness – Radicalism – Colorblindness – Justice – Civil Rights

Introduction

Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) is renowned as a civil rights activist. He is known, above all, as a peaceful reformer. However, MLK had a controversial vision at the heart of his non-violent approaches. Violent and non-violent actions are two opposite political poles in the history of the civil rights movement that have been applied by activists like MLK and Malcolm X. MLK called for a non-violent form of activism, while Malcolm X promoted a violent response against the injustice and violence Black people experienced in the United States. While they advocated for different approaches in their mutual quest to achieve justice, King's and Malcolm X's tactics are not entirely dissimilar. Against a common understanding of his work, this article suggests that MLK's approach to the civil rights movement actually combines both poles. More precisely, I argue that MLK's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" expresses a noticeable change in his political vision. I suggest that MLK's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" deliberately confronts white moderates and aims to highlight the violence against African Americans in the United States. More strongly than



before, MLK here claims that justice does not happen by itself and needs non-violent direct actions. In this light, MLK's approach is not that different from Malcolm X's, against which he is traditionally positioned. To make this case, I will first analyze the historical context and investigate significant political incidents that correspond to MLK's main arguments. Then, I will provide a short overview of how the mainstream political authorities have distorted MLK's image. This essay puts forward a critical analysis and highlights MLK's perception of civil rights history through the racial ideology of colorblindness and the concept of nonviolence. Based on this, I will read the letter to examine MLK's new radicalism, emphasizing his increasingly active engagement in the civil rights movement. Afterwards, I will concentrate on MLK's understanding of direct action, which stems from the concept of civil disobedience, as theorized by Henry David Thoreau. In doing so, this paper studies the similarity between MLK and other civil rights activists such as Malcom X and Mahatma Gandhi in terms of their political tactics. I conclude with a discussion of MLK's philosophy of nonviolence as an immediate action against violence. In summary, this article not only discards the idea of MLK as a proponent of passiveness but also shows how intellectually active he was in eradicating racial injustice.

Historical Background

MLK's contribution to the civil rights movement has arguably been the most effective display of nonviolent civil disobedience in African American history. In this section, I outline MLK's early activism and the events leading up to his time in jail and his writing of the "Letter." Historian William King explains the beginning of MLK's activism as follows:

The seeds of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s revolutionary consciousness [...] [were] first planted during his student years at Morehouse College. [...] His radicalism, however, would not fully blossom until after the Selma to Montgomery March which concluded one era of the struggle at the same time that it signaled the beginning of another. In but thirteen short years [...] Martin Luther's local level, as the focus of his activities shifted from the Southern stage to a global level, in seeking to spread social justice in human affairs. (2)

The Birmingham Campaign was an outstanding example of nonviolent resistance by MLK. The protest was directed against racial segregation in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. "Under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the organization King founded in 1957 to coordinate direct action campaigns, the nonviolent method would revolutionize race relations in the South" (Colaiacovo, "Paradox" 20). As minister of the SCLC, MLK was invited to "Birmingham to participate in nonviolent efforts to secure equal rights for blacks" (Colaiaco, "The American Dream" 4). Unfortunately, the campaign was followed by serious consequences for MLK and his fellow Black protestors as Barbara Maranzani outlines:

On April 12, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and nearly 50 other protestors and civil rights leaders were arrested after leading a Good Friday demonstration as part of the Birmingham Campaign, designed to bring national attention to the brutal, racist treatment suffered by blacks in one of the most segregated cities in America [...].

MLK, however, was not to be silenced and continued his activism from inside the jail. "Letter from Birmingham Jail," James A. Colaiaco explains, "was written in response to 'An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense,' published by eight white Alabama clergymen in the Birmingham News, charging that the recent direct actions in the city had been 'unwise and untimely'" (Colaiaco,

"The American Dream" 2). Not only did the clergy members' criticism of MLK's direct action not suppress him, but it was a reason for him to oppose racism more radically.

Martin Luther King, Colorblindness, and Nonviolence

People honor the peaceful civil rights leader who delivered the "I Have a Dream" speech. Yet, the public is often unaware of the rebellious and assertive figure who dedicated his life to achieving political and economic equality. Stewart Burns notes that political forces "no doubt contributed to the general public's image of King as if frozen in time delivering his dream at Lincoln Memorial on August 28th, 1963, which has left the wrong impression that King's political idea and vision did not develop significantly in his last half-decade" (7). Not only has his famous speech not been widely read by the public – most of his legacies, including his calls for human rights and racial and economic equality, have also been misrepresented by some conservatives. Ronald Turner refers to "the misuse of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s image and legacy by liberals, neoliberals, conservatives, and neoconservatives who cheaply invoke Dr. King's words even as they kill the substance and spirit of his radical message" (107). Along similar lines, Jeanne Theoharis observes with regard to Martin Luther King Day that "[t]here is a year-round American habit of stripping King of his radicalism and altering him to fit or agree with a wide range of ideas in need of credibility or cover from allegations of bigotry" (Theoharis qtd. in Ross). According to Theoharis, white conservatives in particular have distorted MLK's legacy and diminished the extent of his controversial attitude against racism – usually by picking and choosing parts of MLK's rhetoric that fit their purpose. As result, not only has MLK's image time and again been misinterpreted through the ideology of racial colorblindness, but the radical aspect of his legacy is also "forgotten" despite his annual "remembrance" in the context of Martin Luther King Day (Hall 1234).

The ideology of colorblindness suggests that people living in a society should not acknowledge skin color. "Colorblindness assumes that social identities, specifically race, are constantly downplayed by individuals who are outside of a specific racial/ethnic minority group" (Fergus 2). Accordingly, the public is led to believe that colorblindness results in ending racial discrimination and injustice. Through colorblindness, MLK expected society not just to be ignorant of skin color but to embrace freedom and justice for Black people. For MLK, the practice of colorblindness would bring white and Black people together as a united society, a society in which justice and equality would not be reduced to the color of skin.

Even though MLK's message went well beyond calls for cross-racial unity, his activism is often conveniently reduced to his ideology of racial colorblindness alone. As American activist Mary Berry observes: "Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that whatever the need for provocative or appealing rhetoric, the society has never been color-blind, and the Constitution from the beginning permitted discrimination based on color and sex" (142). The misconception is that MLK cared only about racial issues when he, in fact, talked about controversial issues ranging from imperialism to socialism to the Vietnam War. In this regard, Hall writes:

We hear little of the King who believed that "the racial issue that we confront in America is not a sectional but a national problem" and who attacked segregation in the urban North. Erased altogether is the King who opposed the Vietnam War and linked racism at home to militarism and imperialism abroad. Gone is King the democratic and socialist who advocated unionization, planned the Poor People's Campaign, and was assassinated in 1968 while supporting a sanitation workers' strike. (1234)

As Hall argues, MLK did not only fight against racism but supported many struggles, including struggles against poverty and for global liberty. Civil rights historian Steven F. Lawson likewise stresses that, later in his career, MLK “no longer fought exclusively for civil rights, but for human rights as well” (249). MLK can therefore both be seen as a Black pastor who pursued equality for Black people and be understood as an activist whose rhetoric and tactics were put in service of a more general struggle for human rights.

Similar to MLK’s ideology of colorblindness, his strategy of nonviolence was later misinterpreted as well. As an advocate of nonviolence as a political strategy, MLK understood it as a method of resistance that was “passive physically but strongly active” (qtd. in Miller 82). Subsequently, however, the idea of nonviolence was utilized to promote a peaceful image of MLK that undermined his rebellious actions. In other words, even though MLK indeed preached nonviolent resistance as the basis of his civil rights activism, the reasoning behind this strategy should not be ignored. As MLK writes:

In any nonviolent campaign, there are four basic steps: a collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action [...] You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. (Letter from Birmingham Jail 1)

MLK here clarifies that this strategy seeks to effect change through the moral means of “negotiation” and “self-purification” (1) and thereby established that nonviolence does not mean being submissive and calmly waiting for justice. On the contrary, he envisions forceful change through morality. Despite this, MLK’s emphasis on love has made the public portray him as overly peaceful rather than assertive. Arguably, this aspect of MLK’s activism is misunderstood because of public misconceptions about his religion. Elsewhere in the letter, MLK discusses love with regard to Jesus Christ: “Was not Jesus an extremist for love: ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them’[,] [...] [w]as not Martin Luther an extremist: Here I stand” (6). Understood against this backdrop, MLK’s concept of love means fighting for human rights in every respect of life. Of course, it might have been difficult for the public to distinguish between, on the one hand, a man of God who applied direct action and the image conservatives and politicians created on the other. As Adam Roberts clarifies about the function of love in MLK’s discourse: “King’s emphasis on ‘love’ was similarly liable to cause misunderstanding about the nature of non-violent action” (231). As a religious figure, MLK became an icon for the public whose resistance did not go beyond peaceful rhetoric and praises. Similarly, Timothy B. Tyson agrees that “Martin Luther King’s message was not unlike that of a gospel singer who goes from church to church, making a joyful noise unto the Lord, lifting people’s hearts and giving them the strength to do what they know needs doing” (97). MLK’s peaceful rhetoric thus caused people to fail to realize the real purpose behind his strategy of nonviolence.

A “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to the World

MLK called for justice and equality for Black people and worked toward realizing a united society. This view of justice is also evident in his letter when he contends: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” (1). MLK’s commitment to racial equality did not mean that he was guided by white

rules or acted the way white people wanted him to act. Theologian James H. Cone clarifies MLK's view: "Since Martin spoke a message that appealed to whites, they saw their image in him and embraced what they saw. That is why they joined with Blacks to make King's birthday a national public holiday" (36). Many white moderates thus considered him a peaceful reformer who focused only on race. Maia Niguel Hoskin, however, argues that MLK's legacy is about more than race. However, "[w]hat many others misinterpret in King's emphasis on love is that he believed love would change people and inspire them to dismantle unjust laws and systems of oppression" (Hoskin). Simultaneously, "King was blamed" by other white moderates blamed "for race riots, blamed for black children going to jail, blamed for the bombing that killed the four girls in a Birmingham church, even blamed for his own death. Long before he was murdered, his character was assassinated" (Crow Museum). There are misinterpretations of MLK's movement by white moderates. Of late, these misinterpretations of MLK's activism have been joined by disagreements among African Americans who believe his nonviolent approach to be. Arguably, however, this group of people fails to see MLK's radicalism – a radicalism that becomes more pronounced in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which also takes a stand against the colorblindness of white moderates. Identifying the white community as part of the problem, MLK here gives up this own language of colorblindness to explicitly condemn the white moderates' actions. MLK's letter thus takes direct aim at white moderates for their support of a racist system: "Unfortunately, demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the [Black] community with no alternative" (1). MLK also calls out the white moderates for their ignorance, noting that voices of the black community have not been heard by a white public invested in "monologue rather than dialogue" (2) In another part, he refers to "the inexpressible cruelties of slavery" (9) to present tangible reasons for direct action.

Nevertheless, he contends: "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the [Black man's] great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice" (5). Explicitly, MLK here attacks white moderates for their preference of a tranquil status quo, characterizing them as "dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress" (5). MLK's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" also offers a strong argumentative response to the clergymen's criticism discussed earlier. In this regard, MLK takes particular issue with the idea that the direct action of the Birmingham Campaign was "untimely" (2): "For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every [Black person] with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never'" (3). Arguably, MLK's writing here expresses a shift from hopeful leader to rebellious reformer who demands to finally see some change. As Barbara Allen asserts, "King asked Americans to judge themselves and their institutions according to values and commitments that transcended and informed constitutional choice" (72). Along these lines, MLK judged white moderates for their past (in)action and asked for a reasonable response. At the same time, MLK's letter addresses white moderates with urgency: "justice too long delayed is justice denied... I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time concerning the struggle" (3). MLK explicitly refers to 'delay' to inform white moderates that there is no justice. Implicitly, the letter accuses white moderates of consistently pretending to live in peace and denying the reality of racial segregation. MLK's radicalism becomes more noticeable when he ironically closes his letter by stating "I am afraid it is much too long to take your precious time" (9). Of course, reading the letter might take the clergyman's "precious time," but MLK and his people were waiting for their "God-given rights" for about "340 years" (3).

Overall, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” shows a noticeable change in MLK’s perspective and a transition from an optimistic reformer to a subversive critic. As a civil rights activist, MLK paved many ways and spent nights in jail to advocate for a peaceful life with equal rights and justice for Blacks and whites. MLK states that for him there was

no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community [...] we repeatedly asked ourselves: “Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?” [...] “Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?” (2)

In contrast to what has been known about MLK as a passive character, MLK’s willingness to ‘present his body’ illustrates the nonviolent radicalism of his approach – a dimension that also comes to the fore, for instance, when he asserts that “when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters” (3) with impunity, direct action becomes necessary.

It is impossible to pinpoint precisely where MLK’s radicalism started in his political life. However, his radicalism flourishes in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” when the results do not meet his expectations – for example, when white moderates break their promises and Black people become “the victims” (2) of white moderates’ ignorance. Reviewing work by MLK scholar David Garrow, historian Steven Lawson, noted that, while “[t]he Two-Kings concept” – which contrasts an early, supposedly more peaceful MLK with his later, apparently more radical self – “is a valuable one, [...] it should not be interpreted too rigidly. King’s later thinking reflected ideas he had harbored previously” (Lawson 253). Arguably, however, MLK’s new radicalism is notable in the letter, when his revolutionary sense increases gradually along his accumulating experience of ‘broken promises,’ and erupts when the clergymen criticize his direct action as “precipitat[ing] violence.” (King 5).

Throughout his letter, MLK’s rhetoric reveals his persuasiveness and eloquence – for instance, when he defends his reasoning by claiming to “merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive” (5). In using straightforward language to accuse and remind the white moderates of the violence that had been meted out against Black people, MLK, as Mott states, relied on “his ability to gently answer charges that he is impatient, radical, an ‘outside agitator’; to surprise the reader into an unexpected awareness of what the charges imply and to transform the very charges leveled against him” (416). At the same time, MLK’s tone remained deeply informative and courteous, allowing him to shed light on the most significant issues. Not coincidentally, Cone states that “King’s shift to progressive and radical social thought was a permanent feature of his mature civil protest” (qtd. in Dyson 56).

MLK and Two Other Radical Activists

MLK’s new radicalism grew stronger when he failed to see an end to the long-time oppression of Black people. Increasingly, he relied on the idea of civil disobedience, seeking to shape nonviolent action into a resistance that could be much stronger against firmly rooted racism. Brent Powell states that “Martin Luther King, ‘fascinated’ and ‘deeply moved’ by Thoreau’s essay [on the subject], built upon the work of both Thoreau and Gandhi” (26). In this sense, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” reflects Henry David Thoreau’s theory, as “King embodied much of what Thoreau advocated. As with Thoreau, King’s conscience guided him” (Powell 27). Hence, Thoreau’s theory of civil disobedience can be understood as an important influence for MLK’s

activism. In his letter, for instance, MLK directly underlines each individual's responsibility as a conscious societal element, mirroring Thoreau's approach. About civil disobedience, MLK claims that "[o]ne has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws" (King 3). MLK further justifies his reason for breaking the law, which is similar to Thoreau's approach. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," MLK thus goes beyond being a cautious and peaceful leader and takes a radical stance. He urges white moderates to achieve justice, saying: "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed [...] There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair" (3). In such a situation, of disobeying unjust laws becomes a necessity.

MLK's nonviolent civil rights movement strategy also resembles Mahatma Gandhi's in terms of its morals. This similarity is noticeable, for example, when King notes: "A just law is a manufactured code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code out of harmony with moral law. An unjust law is a human law not rooted in eternal and natural law" (3-4). For MLK, the concept of civil disobedience was therefore not only reliant on Thoreau's ideas alone; Thoreau's civil disobedience theory inspired Gandhi as well, and similar ideas eventually informed both Gandhi's and King's political activism. In this regard, Barbara LaBossiere asserts:

While Thoreau coined the phrase "civil disobedience" Gandhi and King outlined the characteristics that presumably distinguish it from other forms of principled resistance. According to this classic version of civil disobedience, it must at least meet certain moral criteria to be justified, if not defined, as civil disobedience. (318)

MLK, like Gandhi before him, refers to the purity of nonviolence through moral means derived from his religious views. MLK claims that "nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek" (85). Even Gandhi, who was an advocate of nonviolence, considered the possibility of controlled tension that could be directed toward the oppressors. Susan Hacker explains that "Gandhi hoped to achieve not through traditional forms of warfare but through a new pattern of action which would allow for a 'basic tension'" (119). Like Gandhi, MLK was committed to moral values. However, while MLK adopted Thoreau's strategy because of the racism African Americans faced at the time, he followed Gandhi's thoughts. For instance, in his letter, MLK contends that "we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society" (2). Thus, "Gandhi and King chose their methods based on the social conditions of their day, the general political ideals of liberty and equality, and certain concurrent moral commitments that they held before they decided to resist" (LaBossiere 320). Ultimately, MLK used both Thoreau's and Gandhi's thoughts as sources, bringing together the most significant values needed to establish a civil rights movement.

Comparisons between MLK and Malcom X usually underline the differences between the two figures. It is commonly perceived that MLK was a peaceful and passive leader, while Malcom X is frequently presented as an active leader who promoted a violent response to racial inequality. However, as mentioned before, a closer look at MLK's letter shows that he was a rebellious man who supported forceful challenges to injustice. Other similarities between MLK's and Malcom X's approaches exist as well. For instance, in his letter, MLK informs white moderates that "[o]ppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever" (King 6). Similarly, Malcom X famously asserts that: "[i]t is time for [Black people] to defend themselves" (qtd. in Condit and Lucaites 291). Many critics, like Rod Bush, agree that "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s views increasingly came to resemble those of Malcolm X" (49). Accordingly, there have always been doubts about whether to

consider Malcom X and MLK within the same political spectrum or to place them on two opposite poles. Significantly, MLK at times also uses provocative language in his letter, for example when he notes that he is “not afraid of the word ‘tension’” (King 2). Not coincidentally, Cone suggests that “[t]he radical Martin King sounds like Malcolm X” (32). Cone indeed sees MLK as a rather radical figure: “It is interesting to note that Martin, the apostle of nonviolence, did more to create violence between blacks and whites than Malcolm” (34). Along similar lines, Stewart Burns argues that “King seemed to be following the example of Malcolm X, in his last year spoke compellingly of the need to ‘expand the civil-struggle to a higher level to the level of human rights’” (11). That is not to say that MLK imitated Malcom X’s celebration of Blackness; but, at the same time, MLK’s call for resistance often appears to echo Malcom X’s rhetoric -- for instance, when MLK informs white moderates that “[i]f [...] repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history” (6). Addressing this tendency, Adam Roberts insightfully notes:

Although Martin Luther King opposed the use of violence in politics generally, and although he opposed it strongly and eloquently the struggle for civil rights, his was not an absolute ethical rejection of violence for all circumstances. He did slowly move towards the latter position, but his rejection of violence was never complete [...]. And he recognized that sometimes the threat of violence in the background may have contributed to winning concessions from opponents. (230)

While MLK was loyal to his nonviolent approach until his death, this approach should thus not be misunderstood as one invested in passivity; instead his transition from a hopeful leader to a more radical reformer arguably signaled his growing appreciation for a more forceful brand of political activism.

Conclusion

MLK wrote “Letter from Birmingham Jail” using a piece of paper, and “[w]hat emerges’ from these scraps of paper is a literary, legal and religious masterpiece, an apology for civil disobedience” (Tiefenbrun 255). The letter is complex and has been considered by many contemporary historians and scholars to be an important political document of the civil rights era. The letter furthermore documents MLK’s unique traits as a civil rights activist, as well as his conceptual indebtedness to Thoreau and Gandhi.

Though MLK’s ideology of colorblindness has been misinterpreted, his writing sheds light on the utterly radical role he played in pursuing justice and racial equality. In particular, his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” served to show that he was committed to his religious values but could nonetheless be disobedient when necessary. It also illustrates his provocative yet non-aggressive tone, which became more evident after his unsuccessful attempts to reason with white moderates. Despite the general public understanding, MLK and Malcom X were thus similar in their approaches to resistance and provocation. Overall, the letter’s undeniable counterargument for justice and the elimination of discrimination thus paint MLK rebellious reformer – and not as a submissive pacifist.

Author Biography

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