

King's Way: Struggle Against Inequalities
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Introduction

“Power is never good unless he who has it is good.” (King 1967: 59) This quotation relates to three central arguments that are at the heart and soul of understanding King’s approach to conflict. In this paper I will argue that King’s approach to conflict can best be understood as building a broad-based alliance through and for a nonviolent direct and strategic assault upon specific structures of subordination that analysis and action reveal to be the primary obstacles to strong and just communities of equals—this process taken as a whole combines love and power.

First, King consistently argues that violence makes a poor appeal to conscience; any quest for power must be balanced by a parallel quest for morality when the objective is to create resilient and just communities of equals in a democratic society (King 1969: 59). Second, King chooses to target institutions, agency, as well as individual behavior among Americans as a source of evil and oppression. It is important to analyze the complex structures and the inner working of individual behavior to understand how society created, revealed, and perceived the social, economic, and political inequalities Americans face, even today. By understanding both, King’s Way is better able to create principle-based strategies for change that have a higher likelihood of working and making sense to average people.

Third, King argues that revolutionary social change cannot occur if the oppressed passively wait for the change to occur without actively engaging in struggle and sacrifice. In fact, it is necessary for all Americans, no matter what race or class to take risks, engage in the conflicts, and make sacrifices in order to address the injustices in society. Only active engagement will reveal the nature and magnitude of these injustices to white communities by redirecting understandable anger into more creative strategies King argues are more likely to succeed.

Tough Minded Approaches to Love, Violence, and Morality

The basic idea of King’s approach to conflict is to think creatively and strategically about how to use nonviolent direct action as a means to gain political, social, and economic gains within a white dominated society. In order to be tough minded, King had to develop a strategy to mentally *attack and attract* his enemies. King thought if he embraced his enemies using love while attacking the injustices they have caused, this relationship would lead to cooperative change. For King, being tough minded was not him simply sticking to his beliefs, because that alone would be indistinguishable from stubbornness or an assumption of his own infallibility. King’s Way links morality to power by building a solid analytical and activist foundation for approaching adversaries resolutely while also treating them as potential allies.

Although his approach is complex, the process he takes to address conflict has only four steps. First, information is gathered to gain a basic understanding of the conflict

at hand. The second step of the process is to formulate goals which will direct the focus of the movement. Third, negotiations are undertaken for the purpose of social reconstruction. “Only when negotiations fail does one resort to some form of nonviolent direct action in order to speed negotiations to a fruitful conclusion.” (Moses 1997: 148) Throughout the process King works to cultivate an unbiased perspective about the conflict while being deeply engaged as both a persistent advocate of justice and equality and a fellow community member able to hear and understand the concerns of his adversaries. In some instances, his process of nonviolent direct action did not work when first initiated. After seeing false starts within the process, King never hesitated to take a step back to gather more information and formulate new goals. The process would then start over again because the conflict and the circumstances have changed.

Thinking is a form of action for King. Within his nonviolent direct action process, serious and detailed structural analysis was a form of action. This point is significant because it emphasized King’s critical attention to strategy when confronting a crisis, and action based on serious analysis—analysis that did not assume conclusions but honored alternative perspectives—is, for King, more likely to be morally defensible (and politically effective) action. This reveals King as a pragmatic and dialectical thinker rejecting false dichotomies like thought versus action, morality versus rationality, love versus power. This approach allows him to appreciate multiple perspectives and analyze all sides of a conflict to lead a search for underlying a common truth.

“What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic” (King 1967:37). This understanding can allow a proper interpretation of how power and love should be integrated with one another to reach its’ full potential within the relationship.

In the conflict between the whites and the black power advocates, for instance, King was able to point out the flaws of both groups. He did this by deeply engaging in the conflict to understand why each perspective believes in specific things and acts in certain ways. Central to King’s Way is his rejection of false dichotomies in favor of seeing both the tensions and the connections between concepts that we all too often frame as just opposites. Rather than love being seen as the opposite of power, King sees power and love as both in tension and connected, suggesting they are linked and that seeing them as opposites prevents us from understanding and productively addressing the conflicts we face. Power without love is simply abusive and self-defeating, as seen in the Black Power approach to conflict, and love without power is anemic, as seen in the passive and weak approach to this conflict found among white leaders, according to King. So, King is tough minded in his insistence that we must act (cannot be passive) and we must act nonviolently.

The Morality of Nonviolence and Alliance Building

Tough minded nonviolence is so powerful because it reveals injustices; it does not divert attention from the crisis at hand by redirecting public focus to the violent actions of black protesters. Using nonviolence allows each party within the conflict to respect one another because they are opposing the conflict with civility, and for the weaker party

nonviolence redirects the conflict from an arena where their weakness is salient (blacks lack the power whites have at this time) and into an arena where the lack of black power is linked to white privilege, structural inequality, and festering injustice, transforming a weakness into a strength by highlighting the moral dimension without resorting to violence to do so. Violence, King argues, would likely only enhance the white fear of black Americans. King believed that by using nonviolence groups show a greater respect for humanity, which allows alliances to be formed to create a better society. By creating alliances, both parties can develop a resolution together to overcome the social crisis.

The most important aspect of nonviolence and alliance building is finding the truth through honestly channeling love and ethical values within the conflict. King argues that love enhances rationality and ultimately leads individuals to discover deeper and shared truths that can connect the political and economic search for power with the moral search for truth. King argues that the morality of love is very powerful. He speaks of love from a religious perspective that involves the society as a whole. He is not referring to affectionate love (that alone tends to be ‘anemic’) but a Christian love that can bring a community together, because it requires individuals to see not his or her own good, but the good of our neighbors. This relationship between power and love highlights where both individuals seek the good of another for the sake of another will have positive results; “it springs from the need of the other person—his need for belonging to the best in the human family.” (Moses 1997:207) This statement seeks to challenge individuals who solely act upon self interest and yet likely share the moral value this form of love places on community and equality and justice. Whites may say they love Black Americans and that they support their fight for justice but if they are unwilling to sacrifice for the least of our bothers, this is not Christian love, according to King.

King questions, for instance, what programs to offer prisoners while they are incarcerated to illustrate the concrete importance of linking love and power. Some believe that they are just prisoners and who cares what they are doing during their day. This is where King believes the love of God is operating in the human heart because even prisoners should be shown compassion to exhibit the best outcome of humanity. Even prisoners are children of god. Whites who seek only extreme punishment are not acting with disinterested love; they are seeking only to protect their own individual self interest in an unproductive way. They were “unwilling to pay a significant price to eradicate the color line.” (King 1967:11) They based their decisions on their fear of Black power and the morbid fear of change to justify punishment that merely (and immorally) protects white privilege.

Neither whites nor black power advocates were acting out of disinterested love in their approaches to the race and class conflicts salient in his day, according to King (Moses 1997:203); this makes a broad-based movement alliance and electoral coalition, as well as interracial communities virtually impossible. “Returning violence for violence multiplies violence adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” (King 1967:63)

Black Americans practicing violent direct action are not seeking better outcomes for humanity; they are seeking better outcomes for themselves only. It is a monumental task to take their anger, frustration, and pain and direct it through nonviolent direct action, but it is necessary to do this. Doing so will decrease the likelihood of mistaking their efforts for revenge or discrimination and it will be doing the right thing, the moral thing, as King's Way to power. "The American Negro will be living tomorrow with the very people against whom he is struggling today." (King 1967:62) Even if black America succeeds in overpowering whites and their authority, they are only repeating the cycle of evil by accepting the false dichotomy that love and power ought to be seen as opposites. They are also enforcing the institutional arrangements that have become so evil by taking power without concerns of morality, love, and the ethical. It breeds hate and hate will continue to grow until Americans destroy themselves and their communities through chaos. Nonviolent direct action breaks the hate versus hate cycle and unites everyone on a just cause because we are all God's children. If the nation focuses on equality as the main priority, it will be a tough minded approach that will be hard for individuals to discourage without displaying their own self interest.

The next concept that is significant to defend the position of nonviolent direct action is the relationship between morality, conscience, and mobilization. King believes it is important to enlist consciences and not merely racial groups. To enlist one's conscience is to encourage individuals to join in nonviolent direct action on the basis of their own judgments. The idea of consciences brings about a group of people fighting for the goodness of humanity and not merely the goodness of their racial group. It diminishes divisiveness based on racial groups. It enables all people to become a part of one larger group to eliminate separatism and focus on how to succeed in accomplishing the important goals for the good of that group. It also allows open mindedness to develop in a movement built on strength, unity, courage, power, and love. This is why King targeted both white and black America by framing his struggle around words such as equality because it is a universal term and does not infringe on the ideas of others.

The words 'black' and 'power' are hinting at the impression of black domination rather than black equality. This slogan heightens the distrust of black Americans because of the violence and their fight for black power because it manifests an approach to conflict that is solely based on power, without a link to morality. As such, it makes adversaries more fearful, and when your adversary has more power making them more fearful of you is not a productive strategy. "The slogan itself is a cry of disappointment that white power has failed to bring equality to their racial group." (King, 1967) It is a response to the real solution of their sufferings being hopelessly distant and unattainable. It is the emotional outcry of black Americans and the violence is due to their frustration, anxiety, and pain. The promises made before are left unfulfilled and the life of a black American is still less significant than the death of a white American. The white moderates feel that they can set a timetable for the Negro's freedom and equality. The white legislators passed laws on behalf of Negroes rights that they never intended to implement has brought about the black power movement. King understands black Americans frustration and respects their emotional outcry; yet continues to support his own beliefs of nonviolent direct action. He refuses to support the slogan and this

illustrates King's tough mindedness; which he displays throughout his entire struggle for justice.

King links power to love in his emphasis on struggle and sacrifice as well. Black Americans are struggling to gain any power to achieve their political, economic, social goals of equality. Their frustration with whites and their lack of implementation of laws brings about the black power movement. Both whites and black power advocates are struggling with the concept of power. "Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose." (King 1967: 37) Black Americans are fighting for this kind of power because it is necessary to implement justice and equality for their own racial group; while choosing to fight violently is choosing to leave others out, diminishing the possibility of the kind of robust political alliance necessary to succeed.

In order to achieve their legitimate goals, their slogan should be aimed at attaining black equality through an approach to political, economic, and social power that is grounded in love, equality, and justice. No group can rise to a stable form of power through separatism when they will need to live in the same communities with their adversaries after the revolution is complete. The Irish, Italians, and Jews emphasized their unity as a whole but never missed the opportunity to create alliances with political machines or trade unions to amass a greater strength against their cause. They rejected the false dichotomy of unity and integration and succeeded by seeing the connection as well as the tensions between racial solidarity and American communities.

"Power and morality must go together, implementing, fulfilling and ennobling each other. In the quest for power I cannot by-pass the concern for morality." (King 1969: 59) King argues that nonviolent direct action is the only way to achieve power and maintain a conscience concern for morality. King believes that love and ethical concerns allows black individuals to bring social change to unjust institutions. Nonviolent direct action can therefore "save the white man as well as the Negro." (King 1967:59) By have a tough minded approach against violence; King believed that all Americans can implement love and morality to change the injustices of their time. Being tough minded and having a tender heart grants a correlation to fight for humanity and the common interest between black and white Americans.

Why Fight at All?

The value of fighting is that the conflict brings the underlying tensions to the surface where building a broad-based alliance becomes possible. According to King, (and Gandhi and Jesus) it is necessary to engage in conflict to initiate social change. King believed that using strategic nonviolent direct action, conflict between whites and blacks would reveal the injustices (or the truths) of society. King for instance, chose to allow the student's of Birmingham to participate in the peaceful demonstration, even if it was breaking the law; it was necessary during this time frame. The police were violent as they sprayed the children with fire hoses, watched as their dogs attacked them, even pushed them down, hit them, and swore at them. These demonstrations of extreme hatred were broadcasted on television for all Americans to see the truth and injustices of their social structure.

The real truth can only emerge from a conflict if both parties are willing to engage in the conflict with their adversaries. Both interaction and contact creates a broad-based alliance in which both whites and black power advocates can find a resolution together. First, they will define the problem and bring in hidden points of view to the situation. Second, sorting through different views will result in a broad solution to their social crisis. This process is completely different from a compromise; both parties develop new broad and creative solutions in which they do not blend together narrow perspectives forcing an unstable or unjust solution.

Both black power advocates and whites have distinct ideologies of how they should exhibit and utilize political, social and economic power. However, both ideologies are severely wrong because they are missing the significant correlation between power and love. According to King, “power at its best is love implementing the demands of Justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.” (King 1967:37)

Power without love cannot implement the demands of justice. King argues that whites are enacting a form of love without power; they mistakenly believe their love for blacks is real even though they are unwilling to use their power to challenge white privilege and make equality and justice a form of reality. Black power advocates were trying to mobilize power without love which led to using violence; distracting the conflict from principle to persons in which the injustices within institutions, agency, as well as individual behavior remained.

Why are Equality and Class so Important?

King not only had to face the issues of white racism, he also had to confront black skepticism. He attempted to create a broad-based alliance between blacks and whites to overcome past oppressions and forge a nonviolent, community-friendly resolution. King strategically chose specific words that retained meaning in American heritage to convince both whites and blacks to engage in the conflict together. According to Moses, King’s strategy was to use the word “equality” in which he used phrases such as “God’s children,” or “the American dream” to reach whites and black power advocates on a more intimate level. King’s Way aimed to use the commonality of equality and relating American heritage to frame the conflict. He chooses equality because it attacks the structure, agency, and individual behavior implementing the social, political, and economic inequalities.

The structural inequalities facing the system of government and its officials contributes to the philosophy of “just desserts”; which was commonly believed during this time period. This philosophy enforces the belief that individuals are treated unequally as a consequence of their actions; completely ignoring structural inequality. The perception of “just desserts” is practiced within the criminal justice system. For instance, King offered one example: “It was like freeing a man who had been unjustly imprisoned for years, and on discovering his innocence, sending him out with no bus fare to get home, no suit to cover his body, no financial compensation to atone for his long years of

incarceration. What greater injustice could society perpetuate?" (King 1967:79)

Efforts to eliminate structural inequalities by creating new policies is promising, but implementing them among society against competing perspectives proves to be difficult. King's approach using equality and strategic nonviolent direct action involves every individual burdened with economic disadvantages, the unemployed, sections of labor and welfare recipients. King is not only targeting the whites in power, but structure and agency as well. Whites in power are not only demonstrating racism against blacks but also against whites; any individual in poverty that may be from different racial group or ethnicity. Creating a common goal or interest among adversaries can lead to a broad-based alliance. King argues that "a true alliance is based upon some self interest of each component group and a common interest into which they merge." (King 1967:151)

By using the common goal of equality, it initiates a national crisis. King believed that "the agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother's keeper because we are our brother's brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." (King 1967:181) According to Moses, King argues that the inequality of black Americans is going to hurt all Americans with time; which makes revolutionary changes necessary for national growth in the future.

The Struggle for Justice

African Americans were suffering because the voting rights act and the civil rights act (revolutionary changes) were not being implemented or enforced throughout structure, agency, or individual behavior. King refers to this as a "mockery of law". One example is the Supreme Court's decision on school desegregation; which has not made history like it was foretold to. "After twelve years, barely twelve percent school integration existed in the whole South, and in the Deep South the figure hardly reached two percent" (King 1967:10). These schools that were proclaimed to be integrated ended up practicing tokenism; only a handful of African Americans were dispersed within a white dominated structure. "This is where King places blame on White America and their perspective on tackling the struggles of black Americans." (Moses 1997:201)

Many segregationists believed that blacks have come far enough. Some even declared that democracy is not worth having if it involves equality. These individuals were not willing to sacrifice and strongly believed that whites were superior to blacks. The majority of Americans are in limbo between the two extreme ideologies: choosing to fight for equality or maintain tranquility; keeping blacks suppressed. According to King "they are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it." (King 1967:11)

The black power movement formed out of despair and bitterness against the whites because their promises of equality had failed them. King understood black power advocates but emphasized that actions based on despair are a poor tool to carve out tomorrow's justice. (King 1967:48) It is necessary to harvest their negative emotions as being a productive outlet of creative nonviolent direct action. African Americans must

support each other as establishing group identity, pulling economic and political threads together, as well as being open minded toward alliances with different groups. For instance, King advised blacks “to play our role as Negroes we will have to strive for enhanced representation and influence in the labor union.” (King 1967:142) King saw this as a great opportunity to show whites that blacks were important in the nation’s survival because of their economic influence in the work force.

“We must not permit adverse winds to overwhelm us as we journey across life’s mighty Atlantic; we must be sustained by our engines of courage in spite of the winds.” (King 1967:47) King claims that when we confront social structures of injustice, one enters into a zone of suffering; sacrifice is necessary to reveal the injustices of society. King’s supporting argument is that “structures of evil do not crumble by passively waiting. If history teaches anything, it is that evil is recalcitrant and determined, and never voluntarily relinquishes its hold short of an almost fanatical resistance. Evil must be attacked by a counteracting persistence, by the day-to-day assault of the battering rams of justice.” (King 1967:128) Society will repeat social practices of injustices until adversaries engage within a conflict to reveal them.

King argues the best way to attack structure, agency, and individual behavior is using nonviolent direct action because violence only enforces the social, political, and economic equalities within our social structures. “Nonviolence is a powerful demand for reason and justice. If it is rudely rebuked, it is not transformed into resignation and passivity.” (King 1967:21) Violent actions can be suppressed but actions of nonviolence pose questions and promote ethical thought. Passive waiting will never seize the opportunity to reveal the injustices of society and violence will distract the fight from persons to principles. Nonviolent direct action is the only way to coerce social change into structure, agency, and individual behavior by emphasizing love, morality, and ethical compassion for the common good of humanity. “To establish a racial understanding, this relationship will not be found ready made. “It must be created by the fact of contact.” (King 1967:28) The true conflict will never be solved completely if a struggle does not take place within the fight for justice.

The line of progress, according to King, is never straight. Once following the straight line, obstacles will be encountered which will cause the path to bend. “A final victory is an accumulation of many short-term encounters.” (King 1967:12) The struggles of the past decade were aimed to achieve improvement in the South. All of the programs were virtually applied to the South and the implementations of those programs were soft. So, King used the term equality to challenge America to divert back to its founding principles by relating Americans to their heritage and history. It challenged society to confront the economic, political, and social inequalities that were imbedded within the structure, agency, and individual behavior of society. It is a way to unite the North and the South in the same struggle; a broad-based alliance advocating for equality. “No great victories are won in a war for the transformation of a whole people without total participation.” (King 1967:20)

Concluding Thoughts

Actually reading Martin Luther King Jr.'s work and hearing him speak connected me to the social problems of his time period. I was able to understand the deep underlying tensions within structure and agency and the significant role institutions had in keeping blacks suppressed. I also became enlightened to the sacrifices he made as an individual. He was a leader chosen by the people and he did not have a choice once he started the civil rights movement. Many people depended on him to lead to victory within the white dominated society. His family had to share him with the movement, his work, his church, and the American people. King hardly ever got the chance to lead his own life because he had many responsibilities; almost impossible for one man; which was very admirable. On his vacation with his family to Jamaica he was even writing his books on the different movements. He was always working to achieve harmony within communities and sacrificed so much; and ultimately, his life. The concepts he preached, he led by example which motivated other Americans to follow in his footsteps of sacrifice and advocacy for equality.

I have grown in the sense of understanding King as a philosophical thinker. Before, I simply thought of him as a black rights advocate and a spiritual leader. I underestimated his intelligence of conflict management and his approach of nonviolent direct action; I never knew the strategic value behind his decisions. His strategy was based on political thought driven by beliefs of morality and love. I admire how he attempted to create a common interest between white and black Americans because he genuinely believed in humanity; he had faith even though many individuals committed acts that would discourage that faith.

My final thoughts are that King was a necessary figure head within this time period and his legacy is fitting to his accomplishments. His approach to conflict by using nonviolent direct action was more mature than most Americans could even grasp. For King to take on the white dominated society with sincerity for humanity showed more dignity than most leaders of today possess. He not only possessed strength but enough courage to risk his life for the betterment of society. He had faith that Americans could and will implement equality among all racial groups and ethnicities. Although as a nation we have grown since then, some structural inequalities still persist in which Americans should never stop fighting for equality. King spoke of the problem as being a never ending struggle and we should re-instill that view today. By taking on this perspective, it will allow us to fight for true equality and eliminate the social, political, and economic inequalities; only if we confront the social issue with compassion, love, and sincere beliefs of morality.

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