

### LOOKING BACK: HISTORICAL LANGUAGE AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

The movement continues to exercise a considerable hold on the American imagination. Our understanding of social change, our conceptions of leadership, our understanding of the possibilities of interracial cooperation are all affected by how we remember the movement. Even much of the language that we use to discuss social issues derives from movement days. We think of the movement as a movement for "civil rights" and against "segregation." Even those seemingly innocuous terms carry their own historical baggage.

"Segregation" became the accepted way to describe the South's racial system among both Blacks and whites. In its denotative meaning, suggesting separation between Blacks and whites, it is not a very accurate term to describe that system. The system involved plenty of integration; it just had to be on terms acceptable to white people. Indeed, the agricultural economy of the early-twentieth-century South probably afforded a good deal more interracial contact than the modern urban ghetto. "White supremacy" is a more accurate description of what the system was about. "Segregation" is the way apologists for the South liked to think of it. It implies, "We're not doing anything to Black people; we just want to keep them separate from us." It was the most innocent face one could put on that system. When we use the term as a summary term for what was going on in the South, we are unconsciously adopting the preferred euphemism of nineteenth-century white supremacist leadership.

If “segregation” is a poor way to describe the problem, “integration” may not tell us much about the solution. It is not at all clear what proportion of the Black population was interested in “integration” as a general goal. African Americans have wanted access to the privileges that white people have enjoyed and have been interested in integration as a possible avenue to those privileges, but that view is different from seeing integration as important in and of itself. Even in the 1950s, it was clear that school integration, while it would potentially put more resources into the education of Black children, also potentially meant the loss of thousands of teaching jobs for Black teachers and the destruction of schools to which Black communities often felt deeply attached, however resource-poor they were. There was also something potentially demeaning in the idea that Black children had to be sitting next to white children to learn. The first Black children to integrate the schools in a given community often found themselves in a strange position, especially if they were teenagers. While some Black people thought of them as endangering themselves for the greater good of the community, others saw them as turning their backs on that community and what it had to offer. It is probably safest to say that only a segment of the Black community had anything like an ideological commitment to “integration,” while most Black people were willing to give it a try to see if it really did lead to a better life.

We might also ask how “civil rights” came to be commonly used as a summary term for the struggle of African Americans. In the late 1960s, after several civil rights bills had been passed, a certain part of white America seemed not to understand why Black Americans were still angry about their collective status. “You have your civil rights. Now what’s the problem?” In part, the problem was that “civil rights” was always a narrow way to conceptualize the larger struggle. For African Americans, the struggle has always been about forging a decent place for themselves within this society, which has been understood to involve the thorny issues of economic participation and self-assertion as well as civil rights. Indeed, in the 1940s, Gunnar Myrdal had demonstrated that economic issues were the ones that Black Americans ranked first in priority. At the 1963 March on Washington—which was initially conceived as a march for jobs—SNCC’s John Lewis wanted to point out that SNCC was not sure it could support what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964 partly because it did not have an economic component:

What is in the bill that will protect the homeless and starving people of this nation? What is there in this bill to insure the equality of a maid who earns \$5.00 a week in the home of a family whose income is \$100,000 a year?

One hypothesis, of course, would be that "civil rights" becomes so popular precisely because it is so narrow, precisely because it does not suggest that distribution of privilege is a part of the problem.

The "civil rights" language also implies the movement was about Negroes; they were the ones who did not have "civil rights." From the viewpoint of a Septima Clark or an Ella Baker, the movement was about enriching American democracy, and those in whose name it was made were not the only ones who profited from it. The movement helped Chicanos, Native Americans, women, and others demand more voice in the decisions and definitions that affected their lives. It is not immediately clear who benefited most from the movement, Black southerners or white ones. Would the post-1960s expansion of southern economies have been possible without the prior destruction of the South's archaic political and economic structures? The movement made it possible for the South to join the twentieth century.

What kind of language should we use to summarize what was achieved by the movement of the 1960s? Activists of the period often referred to it as a "revolution," and contemporary scholars often accept that usage or refer to it as having "transformed" race relations in the South. There may be an element of premature self-congratulation in this language as well. There is something strange about taking privileges that other people have taken for granted from the moment they came to these shores and acting as if there is some kind of sublime moral victory when they are finally "given" to Black people. "Oh, joy, we let the niggers vote. Ain't we grand?" If we were talking about some group other than Blacks being admitted to the basic rights of citizenship, one suspects a less giddy rhetoric might be employed. Malcolm X used to say that a man can stick a knife a foot deep into your back, wiggle it out six inches and start yelling about how much progress we're making. Even if he did pull the knife all the way out, Malcolm concluded, it was going to leave a wound.

A case can be made that much of the language we use actually obscures the nature and complexity of the movement. Similarly, a case

can be made that the way in which Martin Luther King is remembered—or disremembered, if you will—contributes to a dumbing down of the discussion. The King of popular memory is the King of August 1963, calling the peaceful throng to the ideal of brotherhood. That memory hardly does justice to the mature King. In the final years of his life, he articulated a more challenging vision of the American future and a more pessimistic assessment of America's capacity for achieving it. Thus, in those years, he was constantly at odds with the press, the White House, and much of the liberal establishment.

There was no way he could have avoided getting caught up in the Black power turmoil. The term derived much of its impact from the fact that it made white people uneasy, to understate the matter. King went to great lengths to explain it in less threatening ways, but he also refused to disavow the young people, many of whom he had worked with for years, who kept shoving the term in the nation's face. Other leaders of older civil rights organizations felt they had to distance themselves from the new radicalism, at least in part because they were worried about the loss of white support. King refused to join the general condemnation. He came to feel that some whites were exploiting the Black power controversy, using it as an excuse not to think about correcting social injustice. This was a part of King's growing disenchantment with liberal America. Too many who styled themselves liberal were only concerned with the problem when they could think of it as a southern problem, not as something in their own backyards. Too many could react supportively when racist violence was being directed against Negroes but were not much concerned with racial inequality as an evil in and of itself, could not see that poverty itself was violence, that the ghetto represented institutionalized violence against its inhabitants.

In his last years, King showed considerable capacity for sticking with what he saw as the principled position even when it was clearly costing him support. He was publically opposed to the Vietnam War when most of the country still supported it. With few exceptions, his advisers encouraged him to downplay his opposition. King did just the opposite; his criticism grew more caustic. On April 4, 1967, a year before his death, he gave a speech at Riverside Church in New York that did not equivocate.

We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world. . . . The great initiative in this war has been ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours.

The national press spent the next week castigating him. The *New York Times* warned that "to divert the energies of the civil rights movement to the Vietnam issue is both wasteful and self-defeating." The *Washington Post* concluded that he "has diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country and to his people." The *Chicago Tribune* warned Negroes that if they wanted to continue to make progress, "they had better get responsible leadership and repudiate the Kings and the Carmichaels." These remarks pretty well reflect the tone of national press coverage of King in his last year.

His criticism of the Vietnam adventure caused a further deterioration of his relationship with the White House. His relationship with the FBI was already about as bad as it could get. The bureau—which had labeled the "I Have a Dream" speech "demagogic"—had long been engaged in a campaign to destroy King, taking every opportunity to feed rumors and negative information about him to opinion leaders here and abroad, even trying at one point to trick him into committing suicide. J. Edgar Hoover publically called King "the most notorious liar in America" and privately called him "the burrhead."

King's growing radicalism meant increasing skepticism about whether the nation's conscience could be reached on economic matters, that he put increasing emphasis on racism as a national problem, not a regional one, and as a problem closely tied to economic exploitation. It meant that he increasingly described problems of inequality in structural terms, not in terms of individual prejudice.

If we look honestly at the realities of our national life, it is clear that we are not marching forward: we are groping and stumbling; we are divided and confused. Our moral values and our spiritual confidence sink, even as our material wealth ascends. In these trying circumstances, the black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws

of racism, poverty, militarism and materialism. It is exposing evils that are deeply rooted in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.

In public discourse, he avoided the term *socialism* because it engendered such an emotional response, but at the end of his life, his vision of the good society included some form of democratic socialism.

Popular images of King tend to remember his emphasis on brotherhood and interracialism while conveniently forgetting that he saw them in the context of a structural transformation of society. The "I Have a Dream" speech remains so popular, we might suspect, because it does not suggest that social change is going to cost anybody anything. "In death," Adam Fairclough wrote:

King became a symbol of national unity, a moderate reformer from the South, a foe of irresponsible militants, a deeply "American" figure whose achievements testified to the resilience of American democratic ideals. The uncompromising opponent of the Vietnam War, the harsh judge of American racism, the scathing critic of free enterprise, the militant advocate of "poor people's power" had to be quickly forgotten.

Ironically, King's memory is typically constructed in a way that makes it less likely that Americans will have the discussion to which he was inviting them. His memory obscures the message of his life.

We might say much the same about how the memory of Malcolm X has been constructed. There was a good deal more to him than the prophet of rage. Indeed, if one looks at the last years of these men's lives, the gap between King's thinking and Malcolm's is less than one might expect. If King was an advocate of fundamental economic restructuring, so was Malcolm X, and he was not reluctant to talk about it bluntly: "You show me a capitalist and I'll show you a bloodsucker."

King's nonviolence is often juxtaposed to Malcolm's presumed support for violence, but that does not do Malcolm's position justice. Malcolm put different spins on it at different times—including times when he seemed deliberately provocative—but the central point for him seemed to be that Blacks should pursue their liberation "by any means necessary." This view meant that violence was an option, but that is

different from saying it was his program. "I don't advocate violence," he said in a 1965 speech. "But if a man steps on my toes, I'll step on his." It may be even closer to the truth to say that Malcolm's violence was largely symbolic. Maintaining that Blacks have the right to self-defense is another way of affirming their membership in a common humanity. Expecting them always to respond to humiliation and injury with meekness and love is to expect the superhuman.

As a Muslim, Malcolm X enthusiastically preached the party line about white devils, but after he left them, he denied that there were fundamental differences among people based on race. "I believe, as the Koran teaches, that a man should not be judged by the color of his skin but rather by his conscious behavior, by his actions, by his attitude toward others and his actions towards others. . . . I believe in recognizing every human being as a human being, neither white, black, brown nor red." King could not have said it better.

On one issue, King and Malcolm thought pretty much alike from the beginning. When it came to gender, both held rigid, traditional views. Ella Baker thought that King had difficulty relating to women as equals, and the only two women who served on the SCLC board during his tenure felt essentially the same way. During his Nation of Islam period, Malcolm's attitudes toward women were remarkably backward, referring to them as "deceitful, untrustworthy flesh" and the like. Nonetheless, we have more evidence that Malcolm was changing in this respect than we have for King. Late in his life, Malcolm claimed that he had learned from his travels to the Middle East and Africa that societies could not be liberated if women were not. Over the objections of some of his more traditional comrades, he insisted that women were going to hold positions of real power in his Organization of African American Unity. He told one colleague that one of the things he most regretted in his life was having taught the brothers to "spit fire" at the sisters. It is popular to play "What if?" games about what might have happened had Malcolm lived longer. Malcolm was almost certainly the most influential nationalist figure of his day. Had he lived, could his voice have helped counter some of the sexist tendencies in the nationalist organizations that proliferated in the late 1960s?

In the tumultuous final months of his life, Malcolm was reexamining old assumptions ("I'm not dogmatic about anything. I don't intend to get into any more straitjackets."). We cannot know where he would

have come down, but it seems clear that without giving up his uncompromising nationalism, he was inviting us to a discussion much more complex than “violence versus nonviolence.” There is a complexity and depth in his thinking that gets lost when he is reduced to the one-dimensional, fist-shaking man at the podium.

The way we “remember” King and Malcolm X is, of course, only illustrative of the way we remember the larger movement. We tend to construct our memories in ways that make us feel good but that also obscure much of what the movement was trying to say. In 1998, for example, David Halberstram, who covered the movement as a journalist, wrote an admiring essay about the courage and the impact of the early sit-in participants:

Consider what they did. When they had started out, they were virtually alone. Only the Supreme Court . . . seemed sympathetic. . . . Yet only five years later both parties in the Congress were competing to pass legislation trying to outlaw voting injustices; the Justice Department had become their activist partner; the FBI, however reluctantly, had come aboard; and the President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, was their principal convert. . . . What they had accomplished in that brief time span still strikes me as a shining example of democracy at work.

There are arguable interpretations here, to be mild about it, but that’s not the most important issue. The problem is that the thinking here is a perspective, just one possible perspective on the movement but one that few Americans are likely to recognize as such. From another perspective, we could emphasize another set of “facts” in summation of the movement—the many innocent lives, lives of some of the least privileged of Americans, that had to be sacrificed to make the Justice Department “activist”; the way federal agencies “came aboard” partly to control the movement; the way in which Black radicalism made civil rights legislation seem like a cheap way out; the fact that many of the young people who gave the movement so much of its dynamism think that what they experienced was not some shining example of democracy but the betrayal of it. The more one appreciates the price a small number of people paid to liberate us from our past, the less miraculous the whole

thing seems. Depending on how it is framed, even stressing the courage and idealism of the young people can be a dangerous game. The youngsters developed a series of powerful questions about how this society generates and sustains inequality. We praise their courage while ignoring their questions. In that context, "Our civil rights activists sure were brave" may serve the same ideological function for this generation that "Our nigras are happy" served for another, a way of denying the need for discussion of underlying problems.

Both the movement's achievements and its shortcomings can be taken out of context. If some seem prone to romanticizing the accomplishments of the movement, others, including some Black youth, seem to think the movement accomplished little or nothing, that racism is unchanged from what it used to be. In part, this thinking may reflect how little contemporary youngsters understand just what racism used to be. In part, it may be that some of them are proceeding from a Hollywoodesque version of historical change, where all problems have to be resolved by the last scene. Thinking about history in that way stands in sharp contrast to the way many movement veterans thought about it. They understood their lives as chapters in an ongoing struggle. Ella Baker, who had organized Black history programs in the 1920s and was organizing against South African apartheid in the 1970s, was asked once how she had kept at it so long. She answered in terms that reflected one enduring vision of the movement:

But if people begin to place their values in terms of how high they get in the political world, or how much worldly goods they accumulate, or what kind of cars they have, or how much they have in the bank, that's where I begin to lose respect. To me, I'm part of the human family. What the human family will accomplish, I can't control. But it isn't impossible that what those who came along with me went through, might stimulate others to continue to fight for a society that does not have those kinds of problems. Somewhere down the line the numbers increase, the tribe increases. So how do you keep on? I can't help it. I don't claim to have any corner on an answer, but I believe the struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on.

#### POSTSCRIPT: THE LEGACY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Which of the following best reflects your understanding of the role of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights movement?

*A. Dr. King was the main force behind the civil rights movement, its chief strategist and most important leader.*

*B. The course of the movement was influenced by a great many people, among whom Dr. King was perhaps the most visible and best known to those outside the movement.*

Mind you, assessing the impact of any individual on a complicated social movement is an inherently difficult task, all the more so in cases in which participants themselves have widely divergent opinions, which is the case here. Beware of confusing notoriety with impact. Consider, too, that your response will say as much about you as about your historical knowledge. The way you respond to the question is likely to reflect your own attitudes, hopes, and fears about the American racial situation, your assumptions about which changes matter, as well as your assumptions about what the movement was trying to do.

It is not clear that anyone really regards King "as merely one among many leaders" but many, especially among those who committed a substantial part of their life to the movement, question the idea that King was somehow the central force behind the movement. Thus, this questioning is not merely the viewpoint of young militants born after the movement. In 1965, August Meier, one of the deans of civil rights historiography, wrote an assessment of "the phenomenon that is Martin Luther King," noting the paradox that while much of the outside world saw him as *the* civil rights leader, many within the movement criticized him for what they saw as his conservatism, his indecisiveness, his tendency to premature compromise, his unwillingness to expose himself to the physical risks that other activists had to face, his investment in currying favor with the powerful, as well as for being isolated and aloof. For most of the period between the Montgomery bus boycott and the 1963 Birmingham campaign, "King appeared not to direct but to float with the tide of militant direct action."

King's real importance, Meier contends, inhered in his ability to articulate Black demands in ways which resonated deeply for many audiences, Black and white. In particular, his "conservative militance," as Meier terms it, gave white people to understand that they had to change but that "he is their good friend, that he poses no threat to them." Thus, King played a particularly important role in making the movement re-

spectable. In this, he was aided by the existence of more frightening alternatives. "King would be neither respected nor respectable if there were not more militant activists on his left, engaged in more radical forms of direct action." At the same time, precisely because he was a centrist, in both temperament and politics, King was able to keep channels of communication open, not only between activists and much of the nonactivist white community, but between different wings of the movement as well. Under this interpretation, King played a role that few others would have been equipped to play, but that is far different from saying that he was the central force behind the movement. With due allowance for variations in emphasis, that kind of more nuanced assessment of King would have represented the view of many scholars, activists, and intellectuals whose understanding of the movement wasn't filtered through the popular press.

In 1963, the leaders of the Birmingham movement decided that the honor of announcing that a desegregation agreement had been reached should go to Fred Shuttlesworth, in recognition of his long and valiant struggle, without which the Birmingham movement of 1963 would probably not have been possible. As one biographer of King put it, "Although Shuttlesworth announced the terms of the settlement, the reporters would not be satisfied until they heard it from King himself, as most of their readers knew nothing about Shuttlesworth." Most of the nation saw the movement through the eyes of a national press corps that understood little about either the roots of local struggles or the internal dynamics of Black communities. It would be an oversimplification to say that the media made King; poll data, among other sources, indicates that many ordinary Black Americans felt a profound connection to him. Nevertheless, King became an important part of the media framing of the civil rights story, which meant that his name and voice became associated with initiatives neither he nor SCLC had started or in which they played a marginal role: the sit-ins; the freedom rides; Birmingham; the Albany, Georgia campaign; the Selma campaign. As noted earlier, in some of these cases, including Albany and Selma, King's involvement brought new levels of attention and energy, but it did so at the cost of obscuring the role of others who made the initiatives possible. The press tended to see only the final act and reported that as if it were the whole story.

Insisting that the movement was larger than Dr. King does him no

dishonor. The reassessment of King in recent decades is less a rewriting of history than a correction of it, bringing popular understandings of his role more closely into alignment with the views of many of those who were closest to the movement. We can be sure that treatments of the movement, which virtually reduce it to Dr. King, mask the wide diversity of opinions and political styles among African Americans and do violence to our collective understanding of how deliberate social change gets made. Perhaps the most important point to remember about King is not that he "led" the movement but that the movement gave him a platform from which he could appeal to the long-slumbering angels of our better nature, which he did as well as any leader of his time, probably better. That is honor enough.