

A CRITICAL ASSESMENT OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KINGS' PHILOSOPHY OF NON-VIOLENT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

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Abstract – The paper is a critical assessment of the practice of non-violent civil disobedience as advocated by MLK, with the aim of determining if it can be applied today both as a theory and tactic. We were able to establish that the theory and tactic have both worked and failed in equal measure. We cited some examples from the Americas and Kenya. It is still however more preferable to protest non-violently instead of destroying lives and property.

Keywords: Civil Disobedience, dissent, radical love, nonviolence, Montgomery. Boycott; Black Lives Matter Movement

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper defines, explains and analyses the meaning, principles and justification of civil disobedience, as seen from the perspective of a key proponent of the practice, namely Martin Luther King Jr.(MLK) The paper is a critical assessment of the practice of civil disobedience as advocated by MLK, using the lenses of the Critical Rational method of philosophy. In other words, the paper tries to answer the following hypothetical question: Does MLK's philosophy of civil disobedience ever work?

The term "civil disobedience" was coined by Henry Thoreau in his 1848 essay to describe his refusal to pay the state poll tax implemented by the American government to prosecute a war in Mexico and to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law.¹ John Rawls defines it as "a public, nonviolent conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in law or policies of the government."²

II. MARTIN LUTHER KING'S PHILOSOPHY OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

It already is common knowledge by now that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. vehemently opposed the use of violence in the pursuit of social, political and even economic change. He was convinced that use of violence would give the racists justification and reason to increase violence. He further believed that violence acted as a corrosive agent to the soul of the violent person.³

Dr. King's basic philosophy has been variously referred to nonviolent resistance, noncooperation, and passive resistance by others. He considered his form of nonviolent resistance as an expression of 'Christian love'.⁴ He

¹Brownlee, Kimberley, "Civil Disobedience", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/civil-disobedience/>>. Accessed on 30th January, 2020 at 3.30pm .

²John Rawls, quoted in Sabl, Andrew, Looking Forward to Justice: Rawlsian Civil Disobedience and its Non-Rawlsian Lessons. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*: Volume 9, 2001, p. 307.

³Kendall, Walter, Martin Luther King, Jr., Civil Disobedience and the Duty to Obey the Law: Where Do We Go From Here? *The Journal of Social Encounters*. Volume 3 Issue 1 Special Issue: Religion, Politics, and Peacemaking Article 10. p. 78.

⁴King, Jr., M.L. (1998). *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* Boston: Grand Central Publishing.

clarifies what he means by love in the form of nonviolent resistance through his assertion that dissenters ought to love their enemies (oppressors or racists) by first and foremost, developing and maintaining their capacity for forgiveness, secondly, by recognizing that enemies is much more than the evil deed(s) they propagate and thirdly, to exercise this dissent with the singular purpose of gaining the understanding and friendship of the foes, rather than defeating or humiliating them.⁵ This radical love for white oppressors proposed Dr. King is inseparable from the radical freedom he wants for the unfree and often unloved black people, and for all other unfree and unloved people.⁶

It was Dr. King's belief that while engaging in dissent loving enemies would help to forestall hate because returning hate for hate only served to multiply hate; it is only love that could and can drive out hate. Hate was untenable because it scars the soul and distorts a person's personality. Love on the other hand has an inherent power that can convert an enemy into a friend, which is the ultimate reason Jesus gave for such a radical love, the love of enemy also.⁷

King's nonviolent resistance also referred to as dissent through radical Christian love should not however to be equated with cowardice, but rather an active but decent resistance to evil⁸, including the evil of racial injustice. This form of nonviolent resistance advocates an attack the evil itself instead of hitting out at the moral agent. It further encourages the civil disobedient to have the willingness to accept suffering without retaliation because in doing so the disobedient avoids both external physical violence and more importantly, internal violence of the spirit.⁹ He believed he was justified in practicing and teaching to others the art of nonviolent resistance in the pursuit of justice for the oppressed because as he puts it, 'the universe is on the side of justice'.¹⁰

The kind of "Christian justice" that King stood for can be gleaned from these words words that can be found in his autobiography:

"We cannot be truly Christian people so long as we flout the central teachings of Jesus: brotherly love and the Golden Rule. We cannot come to full prosperity with one great group so ill-delayed that it cannot buy goods....let us see to it that increasingly at home we give fair play and free opportunity to all people"....if freedom is good for any it is good for all"¹¹

King was convinced that Nonviolent resistance was the route that dissenters needed to take in order to avoid chaos during struggle(s) for justice but that the resistance and dissent was necessary even to the point of losing one's life because all people are equal just as they are all imperfect; all human systems are imperfect hence the need for great humility and mutual respect as prerequisites for freedom and democratic governance.¹²

In his first book¹³, King wrote that when he completed his formal education in 1955 he had already internalized and settled on social philosophy which emphasized the belief that active nonviolent resistance was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their quest for social justice."¹⁴King quickly implemented this philosophy in Montgomery Alabama during the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 to 1956. Though it was a

⁵Kendal, Walker, op.cit. p.78.

⁶King, Jr., M.L. (2015). *The Radical King*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. p.4.

⁷King, 2015, pp. 55-64

⁸Kendal, Walker, p.78.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰King, 2015, pp. 39- 53

¹¹King, Jr., M.L. (1998). *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* Edited By Clayborne Carson. New York: Warner Books Inc. pp. 9-10.

¹²Kendal, Walker, p.85

¹³King, Jr., and M.L. (1958) *Stride Towards Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. Edited By Clayborne Carson *Introduction* (2010) Boston: Beacon Press.

¹⁴David Chappell (2018 at 2:00 p.m. GMT+3). The radicalism of Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent resistance. *The Washington Post*. Jan. 15, 2018 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/01/15/the-radicalism-of-martin-luther-kings-nonviolent-resistance/>Last accessed on 31.01.2020. 12:40 pm.

nonviolent action it almost crippled the bus company in terms of profit and succeeded in getting it to abandon its policy on segregated seating of whites and blacks on their Montgomery City Lines buses¹⁵. The philosophy worked!

Nonviolent resistance is at present being applied in various places. Examples include the recent events in United States of America where both violent and non-violent protests have been commonplace since the death of George Floyd on 25th May 2020. The Black Lives Matter Movement that has spilled over to places outside USA was the product of these protests. For the last three years security forces in Venezuela have continued repressing non-violent protests, resulting in spontaneous violence free protests and carrying out targeted, arbitrary arrests of opponents or perceived opponents throughout the country¹⁶ and Kenya, where After a lengthy back and forth drama over the 2017 presidential elections, incumbent President Uhuru Kenyatta was re-elected by a narrow margin in November. Opposition leader Raila Odinga and his opposition National Super Alliance (NASA) claimed that the election was stolen and organized sporadic actions over the course of the following months. While there were at that time major incidents of electoral violence, Odinga and NASA did largely claim the mantle of nonviolent resistance.¹⁷

III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING'S NON VIOLENT RESISTANCE

In the previous section we have clearly articulated Dr. King's nonviolent resistance philosophy mentioned at least one incident where it has worked. There are also occasions when instead of working it metamorphosed into violence.

As a philosophy, nonviolence was unassailable. As a tactic, it worked well in the context of an embattled South, where national attention focused on the shrinking hard core of white racists who refused to give ground to the civil rights movement.¹⁸

But nonviolence proved less effective as King tried to take his movement national. In 1966, he launched the Chicago campaign, a combination of marches and education intended to highlight the entrenched, but complex, racial disparities in the Windy City. The marchers again encountered white racists who shouted epithets at them, but many Northern whites saw racial disparities as merely the unfortunate outcome of economic disparities. Markets, not men, were to blame, and they refused to see the moral appeal behind King's nonviolent activism.¹⁹

IV. CONCLUSION

Dr Martin Luther King Jr. advocated for non violent civil disobedience as a tactic to help champion civil rights for blacks and minorities in USA. This tactic brought about mixed results. It for instance succeeded during the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 to 1956 but also failed at Chicago's Windy City.

Just like in Montgomery and Windy City, MLK's type nonviolent philosophy works sometimes but fails in some modern protests. Cases in point are the very recent protests that followed the death of George Floyd in May 2020 and in the now too common pre and post election protests in Kenya.

¹⁵Balci, H., Balci, F. (2011). Strategic nonviolent conflict: The Montgomery Bus Boycott. p.323. International Journal of Human Sciences [Online]. 8:2. Available: <http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en>. Last accessed on 31.01.2020. 1:20pm.

¹⁶<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/venezuela#5c1ee9> retrieved 31.01.2020. 2:53pm.

¹⁷<http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2018/01/12/five-nonviolent-resistance-movements-to-watch-in-2018/>. Last accessed on 31.01.2020. 2:58pm.

¹⁸"Martin Luther King and the Philosophy of Nonviolence." Los Angeles, CA: *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, summer 2017 Volume 32 No4 <https://www.crf-usa.org/images/pdf/Martin-Luther-King-Philosophy-Non-Violence.pdf>. Last accessed on 9/7/2020 at 4:49pm.

¹⁹"Martin Luther King and the Philosophy of Nonviolence." Los Angeles, CA: *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, summer 2017 Volume 32 No4 <https://www.crf-usa.org/images/pdf/Martin-Luther-King-Philosophy-Non-Violence.pdf>. Last accessed on 9/7/2020 at 4:49pm.

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