Keeping the Dream Alive: Highlights from the Civil Rights Movement

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To comprehensively explore the state of social conditions faced by persons of colour (PoC) during the peak of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, one must examine the legal and social struggles that imposed the socially unjust conditions. Following the end of the Civil War in 1865, the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the American constitution sought to end the inequalities that had been entrenched by slavery (Ness, 2004). Before the Civil Rights Movement, the gains in rights for PoC, that resulted from the end of the Civil War, were quickly nullified through the supreme courts, by transferring the legal definition of citizens to the states (Ness, 2004). The transfer of legal citizenship definitions to the states allowed for two-tiers of persons to exist. Paired with the legislative "Black Codes," restrictions were placed on where PoC could live and own property, setting the stage for segregation. The Civil Rights Bill of 1867 brought in a new set of supports for PoC and imposed military rule on the Confederate States (Ness, 2004; Ai-min Zhang, 2002). The Reconstitution Acts of 1867-1868, further sought to remove federal political representation to non-compliant states. However, the federal policing of rights was the determinant of upholding civil rights within the former confederate states, and Jim Crow laws enacted at the state level effectively removed the ability for PoC to experience any societal integration or social mobility (Ness, 2004; Ai-min Zhang, 2002). Social action was needed to change the tides of oppression. As exemplified in the Civil Rights Movement, both Martin Luther King Jr. and Philip Randolph would play an important role in challenging and changing the discourse of human rights through social action.

Developing the Mandate

Timeline Leading to the March on Washington

During the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956, Martin Luther King Jr. and Edger Daniel Nixon were involved in the formation of bus service boycotts to cripple the "separate but equal"

segregated bus system (Ness, 2004; King, 2001; Ai-min Zhang, 2002). This was believed to be one of the first social actions in King's movement that utilized non-violence and the acceptance of oppressor's threats to highlight social injustice. The ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court gave life to the viability of the strategy over militant action (King, 2001).

Following his momentum and coordinated efforts at social change, King formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The group was not only a group of social justice activists but also a potential political voting bloc (Ness, 2004). Both Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy sought endorsements from King. While King did not provide an endorsement to either candidate, the release of the Kennedy phone call by the Kennedy campaign was believed to have a positive influence on the votes of PoC (Ness, 2004). The narrow win of Kennedy in the 1960 election, signalled the political influence of King, the civil rights movement, and the SCLC voting bloc.

As momentum continued in the civil rights movement, Gandhian non-violent resistance principles were applied by James Lawson in the Nashville Sit-ins (Ness, 2004). Similar to earlier bus boycotts, the purpose was to highlight the cruelty and antagonism of oppressors. Participants willfully received the assaults until arrested by police (Ness, 2004). The economic implications added up, as participants would immediately fill in the spaces vacated by arrested comrades, slowing down the economy in the Nashville area (Ness, 2004). These social actions gave rise to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which would be valuable organizations for the March on Washington.

The March on Washington (for Jobs and Freedom)

Because the March on Washington was an event that was given life by several organizations, each organization had its objectives relative to their mandates. The Civil Rights Movement Archive provides original documentation that highlights some of the key objectives.

The critical legislative change sought was “comprehensive and effective civil rights legislation” that would equalize the rights between PoC and white Americans (Bayard & Cleveland, 1963, p. 4). The other nine demands included the withholding of funds for discriminatory programs, desegregation of schools, enforcement of the fifteenth amendment, banning of discrimination on federally funded social housing, allowing the Attorney General to institute injunctive suits on constitutional rights violations, formation of a training program to give PoC meaningful and dignified jobs, form a national minimum wage act, enhance the standards of labour to include more areas of work, and protect PoC from workplace discrimination (Bayard & Cleveland, 1963).

King’s autobiography suggests several outcomes that he aspired to achieve through his and the SCLC’s involvement in March on Washington. One objective was to increase understanding of the disconnect between what the white persons of faith embrace in church and evoke reflection of how those values are embodied towards all members of humanity outside the church (King, 2008, p. 218). King did not envision the march as a resistance limited to only PoC, but also “flanked by legions of white allies” (King, 2001, p. 219). Part of the mandate was, thus, a collective movement that transcended the divisions of race.

Planning Process for the March on Washington

The idea and planning for a March on Washington had been established earlier by Philip Randolph. The March for Jobs was cancelled after a successful lobbying campaign in 1941 with then-President Roosevelt on executive order 8802, which ended racial discrimination in federally funded industries during world war two (Wilson, 2013; King, 2001). After King received an invitation to the Whitehouse in 1963, King and Randolph agreed to implement a march for both freedom and jobs that year (Ness, 2004). The partnership between the NAACP, the SCLC for organizing the march (at the National Mall), and the scale of individuals and organizations called

upon, would fit within Parada, Barnoff, Moffatt, & Homan's (2011) objectives of social action for legislative change. The primary lobbying tactic for the demonstration would thus be providing a visual to politicians on the ability to move voters on a social issue. The organizing manual's repeated emphasis on there being no other locations for the march outlined the vision of concentrating all efforts solely on Washington, D.C. (Bayard & Cleveland, 1963).

The policies within the movement's organization had a clear intent to include persons with different socioeconomic statuses. The organizing manual outlined the need to increase publicity to media and those impacted by policy, so persons with low or no income could partake and be represented (see Bayard & Cleveland, 1963; March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1963). Members of the movement raised funds to offset the financial burden of participating in the social action, and nation-wide transportation plans for cost-effectiveness were formed (see Organizing Manual No. 2; Bayard & Cleveland, 1963). Thus, the empowerment of the most marginalized through sharing their voice was at the very heart of the event.

Field organizers were also an essential component in the success of the movement. Twenty-one states and the district capital had field organizers (see Organizing Manual No. 2; Bayard & Cleveland, 1963) responsible for organizing the committees in their regions. Leadership was developed within the communities, with opportunities to help fundraise, marshal the event, build awareness of the social movement, and aid participants in the travel to/from Washington D.C (see "covering community organization for the march and recommended travel companies," 1963; Bayard & Cleveland, 1963). The self-directed organization of each region in their participation highlights the empowerment of the people by cultivating leadership and participation by individuals organically within their communities. This could fit well with the community development approach at the mezzo and macro levels by recognizing the need to

unite multiple groups that may have not previously been associated together in a new form of social action (Parada, Barnoff, Moffatt, & Homan, 2011).

Participants of the March on Washington

To have a context for the diversity of participants in attendance, an exploration of the number groups seeking to advance civil rights signify the number of people seeking to create social change. Some of the groups that focused on civil rights during this era included the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU), Angela Davis's Che-Lumumba Club (CPUSA), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (Ness, 2014). Document archives additionally list American Jewish Congress, the Industrial Union Department AFL-CIO, the National Conference for Catholics for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ), National Council of Churches of Christ in America (NCC), the National Urban League, and the Negro American Labor Council (Bayard & Cleveland, 1963; see newsletter #2 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1963). An extensive array of local unions, churches, and community organizations was also present (see Bayard & Cleveland, 1963). The number of organizations participating demonstrated the reach of the social movement.

Resulting Changes in Social Policy

In King's autobiography, he discusses how both Bringingham and the March on Washington changed the course of Kennedy's priorities on the significance of civil rights legislation (King, 2001). It was Kennedy's belief, according to King's account of the meeting, that the march would have an impact on the minds of members of Congress (King, 2001). The

progression of social actions and momentum of the civil rights movement acted as a catalyst for the will of the people to enhance the rights and legal protections of PoC. The organizing members of the March on Washington were granted a meeting with President Kennedy and Vice-President Johnston after the march, providing further opportunity to directly partake in lobbying (The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, 2019). The passing of both the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act by 1965 suggest that the movement was persuasive enough to provide momentum for some legislative change (Ness, 2004).

Evaluating the Effectiveness of the March on Washington

As noted by King (2001), the media often only gave attention to topics raised by PoC when it would provide some degree of theatrics or possessed qualities that would enhance viewership. Beyond legislation, the significance of the social action was that it was mainly reported with respect by media (King, 2001). King (2001) believed that the diverse collection of individuals who maintained an inspiring and confident message of the future of the human race was needed to build momentum in the fight for equality. I believe that the partnerships brokered by the founding chairmen effectively built on the earlier grassroots movements in a new form.

King's autobiography describes the participants as coming from "almost every state of the union" (King, 2001). King noted that age and race were not determining factors for participation in the march, noting the attendees were "White, Negro, and of all ages. It had adherents of every faith, members of every class, every profession, every political party, united by a single ideal" (King, 2001, p. 222). White churches were also credited as being in attendance (King, 2001). Members of national and international unions were also significantly present, along with local unions that "threw their full weight into the effort" (King, 2001, p. 222). The optics of the crowd attending the March on Washington provided a powerful example of the growing opposition of oppression by those of privilege. This allowed the movement to be successful in making those

impacted, and their allies, unavoidably visible to both the media and government. While the satyagraha techniques used earlier in the movement did increase the risk for personal harm, participants earlier in the campaigns of the south were trained and partook with consent and knowledge of the risks (King, 2001). I consider the march, and the buildup of non-violent resistance leading to it, to be a good implementation of tact to foster solidarity, while also providing an environment of hope in humanity and future (Bishop, 2015).

While effective, the March on Washington was not perfect. I believe that a critique of any social action needs to consider both the social and cultural components of history. Many of the involved groups had a strong faith background, which would fit with the social supports and systems in place at the time. Notably missing from the participation list, however, was the Nation of Islam (see Bayard, & Cleveland, 1963). King recognized the divide between non-violent and more militant approaches (King, 2001). The absence of the Nation of Islam may have been deemed as necessary, given its philosophical orientation as a separatist and militant approach in the Black Liberation Movement (Ness, 2004). Othering between the groups is noteworthy, as isolation can provide a barrier to the collective healing process (Bishop, 2014).

Malcolm X, then high-ranking within the Nation of Islam, did participate in the March on Washington, despite his criticism of the march itself (Ness, 2014). We do not know if the criticism was a result of ideology conflicts, a lack of invitation, or a result of feeling rejected by the Christian and non-violent segments of the civil rights movement. No documentation of correspondence from organizers could be found regarding outreach or collaboration with the Nation of Islam on the march. There were, however, no rules or regulations barring Nation of Islam members from attending. The question raised is how the movement impacted a community that already experienced dual oppressions based on race and religion. One can only speculate

how this may have altered violence and further feelings of marginalization that emerged after the assassinations of both King and Malcolm X.

While King reflects on his interactions with Malcolm X with respect, despite their differences, he depicts Malcolm X as being antagonistic towards the implementation of non-violence (King, 2001). In hindsight, Malcolm X would soon convert to Sunni Islam and become less radical and more reconciliatory in his views (Ness, 2004). There may have been a window of opportunity to acknowledge Malcolm X's presence at the march, without giving him a direct audience – signalling a need for both groups to come together for collective healing and recognition of the common shared experience of suffering because of race (Bishop, 2015). Doing so could have highlighted solidarity between both groups in their experience of oppression, while also undermining the stance that violence was the answer to liberation. The stakes were high, though, as King (2001) continued to have concerns about the platform for violence from the Nation of Islam. King may have been making an assumption, however. It would not be until after the events of Selma, Alabama in 1965 that King's wife (King was in jail at the time) would learn Malcolm X was beginning to develop an "interest in working more closely with the non-violent movement" (King, 2001, p. 268). Malcolm X would be assassinated in 1965 before having an opportunity to establish a formal partnership in non-violent resistance (Ness, 2004). Death by assassination, without the opportunity to publicly proclaim interest in non-violence with King bears the question of how followers would process and deal with the loss.

Conclusion

The historical events of the Civil Rights Movement and March on Washington demonstrate a clear and thoughtful path towards social action that influenced policymakers through an undisputable show of resistance. Careful consideration went into the events leading to the March on Washington. Each victory of the movement built on the gains of the last. While

methodological, it was not perfect. Some of the most marginalized persons of colour, while not formally rejected, were not embraced or welcomed in as a part of the movement. While retrospective reflection does not capture the complexities of the conflicts, there was a potential turning point in the Nation of Islam that could have provided a bridge for further inclusion to deescalate the tensions and provide opportunity for collective healing.

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