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The narrative construction of leadership: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s appeal to white America

On a cool Saturday afternoon, I set out to drive from Atlanta, Georgia, to Montgomery, Alabama. It was a clear wintry day. The Metropolitan Opera was on the radio with a performance of one of my favourite operas – Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor. So with the beauty of the countryside, the inspiration of Donizetti's inimitable music, and the splendor of the skies, the usual monotony that accompanies a relatively long drive - especially when one is alone – was dispelled in pleasant diversions. (King 1958, 15)

This passage is the opening to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s autobiographical account of the Montgomery bus boycott *Stride Towards freedom* published in 1958. The boycott of the segregated seating system on the buses in Montgomery Alabama attracted national and international attention during the yearlong campaign from December 1955 and first brought King's name to public attention. The success of the boycott, following the Supreme Court decision in November 1956 ruling that the bus segregation laws were unconstitutional, added to King's fame as well as giving renewed impetus to the burgeoning civil rights movement following the 1954 *Brown* decision that ordered the desegregation of southern schools.

King's account of the boycott in *Stride* was the first opportunity for a national audience to get to know the man they had read about and seen on their TV screens during the boycott. As well as being an account of the origins and course of the Montgomery movement the book also contained significant details and stories about King's own background, family life and intellectual history enabling the reader to get to know the man Martin Luther King.

King's decision to begin, what was for many Americans their first major opportunity to get to know him, with a story about his enjoying listening to Italian opera from the Met may on first glance appear a strange one. Grand opera from the Met was after all a major symbol of elite white culture far removed from the life of rural segregation and poverty of many southern blacks and those who had campaigned with King in the Montgomery movement. It was also far removed from the background of King's own early life. Although King completed his PhD in theology at Boston University he had been brought up under the system of segregation in Atlanta and had attended a segregated school as well as doing his undergraduate degree at an all black college. At the time of the boycott King was also pastor at an all black church, Dexter Avenue, in Montgomery.

King's decision to begin his account in *Stride* with a story about his appreciation and fondness for white culture is, however, I would argue no accident. It is instead part of a consistent attempt by King to describe his values and thought in a way which would be appealing to a mainstream white audience. By describing his fondness for opera and white culture, acknowledging the greatness and influence on his thought of Thoreau, Plato, Hobbes and Mill, as he did in his essay on his intellectual origins in *Stride*, as well as elevating the influence on his thought of white theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Rauschenbusch, King was able to increase his standing - and that of the civil rights movement - in the white community, particularly among liberal whites. By showing his respect for white cultural authority King was able to represent himself as the acceptable face of black leadership at a time when many whites feared that the rising tide of black aspirations could be channelled into the Black Nationalist cause and the Nation of Islam with its charismatic leader – Malcolm X.

This paper will argue that the stories King told about the movement and his intellectual origins were significantly influenced by his desire to win northern liberal white support for the Civil rights movement. By identifying with white cultural symbols King sought to symbolically diminish the apparent difference between blacks and whites in the mind of whites thus adding to the power of his claims for black civil rights. The paper will also argue that on significant occasions King distorted the reality of the stories he told about the movement in *Stride* as well as of his intellectual origins. Whilst on some occasions these distortions were relatively harmless on other occasions, particularly in relation to King's minimisation of the influence of black thought and culture on his intellectual development, the consequences were more negative. For example, King's failure to acknowledge the importance of the black church influence on his thought and rhetoric meant that mainstream assumptions about the superiority of white culture were left unchallenged hindering the development of white understanding and appreciation of black identity and cultural difference.

Consider firstly King's description of the influence of reading the work of Mahatma Gandhi on his intellectual development in his chapter in *Stride Towards Freedom* entitled 'Pilgrimage to non-violence.' This essay, a version of which was published in the liberal Christian journal, *Christian Century*, was until relatively recently the most influential source of knowledge on King's intellectual development, thus attesting to its influence in white understandings of King (See for example Ansbro 1982 and Zepp 1989). In the pilgrimage chapter King describes how his attendance at a lecture on Gandhi whilst at graduate school inspired his enthusiasm and subsequent commitment to the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. The following passage from the chapter in *Stride* illustrates the enthusiasm with which King describes his initial exposure to Gandhi's message:

Dr Johnson had just returned from a trip to India, and, to my great interest, he spoke of the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. His message was so profound and electrifying that I left the meeting and bought a half-dozen books on Gandhi's life and works... As I read I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of non-violent resistance... the non-violent resistance philosophy of Gandhi, I came to feel was the only morally and practically

sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom. (King 1958, 97)

After describing his initial exposure and subsequent commitment to the Gandhian philosophy of non-violent resistance upon reading his work, King devoted much of the rest of the chapter to outlining the principles of the philosophy and its significance for the civil rights movement. The enthusiasm with which King described his immediate, and apparently total, commitment to the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence whilst at graduate school would undoubtedly have appealed to many white liberals. Although Gandhi was not white his ideas and philosophy had become very influential among whites liberals after the success of his Indian campaigns. Pacifist groups such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation and American Friends Services Committee had been greatly influenced by the apparent application of Christian notions of love and turning the other cheek into a viable mechanism for achieving social change as well as averting violence. These groups and their supporters had been strong supporters of King and the Montgomery movement from the early days of the bus boycott. Prominent FOR officers Reverend Glenn Smiley and Bayard Rustin went to Montgomery early in the campaign to advise King on the application of non-violent techniques to his movement.

Staunch commitment to a non-violent solution to the problem of race relations in the South was then an important part of King's appeal to a white liberal audience. He was anxious to continue to espouse the message of this commitment to this audience as he sought to build a national profile as a civil rights leader. The story of his instant conversion to the philosophy in *Stride* was a significant part of establishing his non-violent credentials. In later years - once King's credentials as a non-violent warrior had been established- the need for him to recount stories of his commitment to non-violence diminished, except at such times when the threat of violence from other black groups needed to be countered by his own non-violent vision.

King's story of his conversion to the philosophy and ways of non-violence in *Stride* would seem, however, to be somewhat less than accurate. FOR leader Glenn Smiley who went to Montgomery to support King's efforts in non-violence provides a very different account of King's early familiarity and commitment to non-violence. Smiley suggests that when he arrived in Montgomery to advise King he was unfamiliar with the work of Gandhi and had only a limited knowledge of the ways and philosophy of non-violence. Smiley's account is quoted in David Garrow's seminal biography of King, *Bearing the Cross*. Smiley describes as follows his initial meeting with King:

“I said to Dr King” Smiley recalled, “I’m assuming that you’re very familiar and have been greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi.” Ane he was very thoughtful, and he said, ‘As a matter of fact no. I know who the man is. I have read some statements by him, and so on, but I will have to truthfully say – and this is almost a direct quote ... “I will have to say that I know very little about the man”’ (Garrow 1986a, 68)

King's lack of familiarity with the ways of non-violence meant that Smiley spent much of his time in Montgomery seeking to instruct King on the philosophy and its relevance to the civil rights movement. Smiley's account is supported by that of Bayard Rustin who was concerned with King's lack of knowledge of the philosophy

and was similarly anxious to instruct him in its use to ensure the moral, as well as the political, success of the civil rights movement. Garrow quotes Rustin's description of his horror at finding a gun on King's couch half way through the bus boycott. On questioning him on its presence King explained that the bomb threats he had received during the boycott had led him to take out a gun licence. King stated that he intended to harm no one unless violently attacked (See Garrow 1986a, 72-73). Clearly King's commitment and understanding of non-violence in the early stages of the movement was not as developed and complete as his account in *Stride* would suggest.

How can we explain the story King told in *Stride*? Two points stand out - firstly King in Montgomery, as he did throughout his life, sought to portray himself as a moral leader, a man of principle, whose actions and leadership were guided by religious and moral principles. In *Stride* King represented the civil rights movement as the will of God on earth and that he was as much the servant of that will as its leader. A story that told of King's slow conversion to the philosophy of non-violence would have undermined both King's moral leadership as well as highlighting the fallibility and political nature of his leadership as he groped for a solution to problems of organization and strategy during a stressful and difficult time.

Secondly, King's conversion to and understanding of the philosophy of non-violence through instruction from FOR leaders would have highlighted not only his inexperience as a leader but also raised questions about the level of commitment that King would necessarily show to the philosophy in the future given his need to be instructed on its principles and use. The story of his swift conversion in *Stride* clearly then was designed to offset potential concerns among his audience.

All this is not to say that King did not become and remain deeply committed to non-violence throughout his life. What I am arguing is that the story he used to tell of this conversion was deliberately fashioned to serve an important political purpose – that is the strengthening of his leadership and the moral authority of the movement in the early civil rights years.

King's deliberate use of stories of his intellectual development that would appeal to white liberal audiences is not confined to his description of his commitment to Gandhian non-violence. Keith Miller has shown convincingly that King's claim in *Stride* that the fundamental influence on his thinking was from reading theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr and philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato is incorrect. Where King claimed to have been influenced by these sources Miller demonstrates the passage in *Stride* illustrating that influence was actually drawn from sermons of liberal preachers such as Harry Emerson Fosdick and Charles Hamilton. It was these preaching sources, he argues, rather than the work of erudite thinkers that was the true inspiration for King's thought (See Miller 1992). King's depiction of the influence of these preachers would have shown that he was not, in many ways, the intellectual heavyweight he made out to be but someone whose influences were instead steeped in the traditions of folk preaching.

In his essay on his intellectual development King also failed to mention perhaps the primary influence on his preaching and ideas – his upbringing in the black church. King's father and grandfather were both preachers and major figures within the black church in Atlanta. King's first exposure to the religious language and the stories of the

divine deliverance of the oppressed Israelites from slavery in Egypt occurred through listening to sermons by his father and other black preachers. It was African Americans' identification with the Israelites and their deliverance by God that helped sustain many black communities during the hardships of slavery and segregation. As I noted above, King's description of the Montgomery movement is of God acting through the movement's participants to deliver justice to his chosen people. King's quotation in *Stride* from a bystander following the news of the Supreme Court's declaration of the illegality of segregation on the buses illustrates the point well enough: "God almighty had spoken from Washington D.C" (King 1958, 160).

Despite the obvious influence of the black church and the white liberal pulpit on King's preaching and thinking neither is referred to in *Stride*. These influences would have no doubt have had less influence in cementing his intellectual and philosophical credentials among white liberals than the work of esteemed philosophers and thinkers.

There are a number of other stories that King told in *Stride* designed more for their effectiveness in representing the movement to white audiences than for their veracity. For example, King tells of his instant commitment to the bus boycott following the arrest of Rosa Parks. Garrow, however, provides evidence that King was sceptical about the likely success of the movement as well as concerned about his family and church commitments and thus reluctant to initially get involved (See Garrow 1986a). Such scepticism, if represented in *Stride*, would have tarnished King's image as a selfless movement leader as well undermining King's representation of the boycott as part of the divine plan.

Similarly, King describes in *Stride* Rosa Parks' act in refusing to give up her seat on the bus, thus sparking the boycott, as an unplanned and spontaneous act. King describes Parks' action as part of the *Zeitgeist* of history that had chosen her to ensure the improvement of the conditions of African Americans. Whilst it is likely that Parks' actions were not planned it is nevertheless true that Parks' had for a long time been an active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). Parks had also been a similarly active member of the Montgomery chapter of the Women's Political Association (WPA), an important women's group in the fight for black equality in the South. Parks' awareness of, and involvement in, the issues of injustice against blacks is thus clearly apparent - she was not an isolated and apolitical actor in the course of history as King's representation suggests.

Just as importantly Parks' action, and the subsequent boycott that took place, was not an isolated incident in the southern struggle. The NAACP in Montgomery had for a significant period of time sought to establish a case against the Constitutionality of the bus segregation laws. As Garrow notes, a young woman, Claudette Colvin, who had, like Parks, similarly disobeyed the bus segregation laws was originally intended to be used to test the bus segregation laws. Colvin's actions had occurred a number of months before Parks refused to give up her seat on the Montgomery bus. When it was discovered that Colvin, a teenager, was pregnant and unmarried the use of her case was abandoned as it was thought that she would provide an unsuitable model for the cause of desegregation among white Americans (See Garrow 1986a, 25). Parks would through her role in the NAACP have been well aware of the earlier attempt to use Colvin for the test case when she similarly refused to give up here seat to a white man on the Montgomery buses.

King's story of Parks being present on the Montgomery bus through the Zeitgeist of history, removed from the previous political manoeuvres, is, however, a more compelling story. The effectiveness and historical power of this story is evident through the continuing emphasis on King's description of Parks' actions as resulting from a spontaneous and isolated rebellion in the ongoing media coverage of the beginnings of the civil rights movement.

What then were the costs of King's representation of his intellectual origins and the origins of the civil rights movement in *Stride*? Whilst King's representation of himself as a cultured man to his white audience and one who came easily and decisively to the ways of non-violence may have aided in gaining from northern liberals the strategy nevertheless had political costs. By failing to acknowledge the significance of his black cultural heritage King reinforced prejudices about the superiority of white culture and learning and the simple nature of black culture. This view formed part of the basis for white prejudice against African Americans. Similarly, by failing to acknowledge the difficulties and vacillations, as well as the political nature of his and others' role in the civil rights movement, King contributed to his deification as an American hero. Whilst this process aided King's public profile it also added to the criticism King received when his campaigns were not successful or when he in some way disappointed sections of white America - as he did when he criticised American involvement in Vietnam. It also meant that when King was assassinated it was easier to return to deification, the King holiday being part of that process, rather than participate in an honest assessment of his career and his foibles, both personal and political, as well as recognise his ongoing criticisms of American society at the end of his life.¹

In this paper I have argued that the stories King told about his own intellectual origins and the origins of the civil rights movement in Montgomery in *Stride* were part of a conscious political strategy designed to win support from northern whites for his own leadership and the civil rights movement in the South in the 1950s. King realised that a black leader who identified with and celebrated white culture would have a greater chance of winning support for the southern civil rights agenda. This identification with mainstream symbols was also present in King's speeches where he frequently quoted aphorisms from western literary and intellectual figures to justify black equality. These stories and illusions proved an effective tool in the process of winning large-scale white support for the civil rights movement. King's failure, however, to acknowledge the importance of his black cultural heritage meant that many whites remained ignorant, and possibly dismissive, of the rich cultural heritage of African Americans. Whilst King did try to introduce stories in his speeches on the achievements of African Americans a greater recognition of the role that his own immersion in black culture played in his own life and development may have helped to break down the racial stereotypes that exist in certain sections of American life.

¹ For consideration of the process of King's deification as an American hero with the inconvenient edges smoothed out see Harding (1996).

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