

CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAM:

The fashioning of a “new consciousness” in Southern African-Americans through the Montgomery Bus Boycott

Brittney Shepherd

“**P**ychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem, is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery.” —Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The fashioning of a new consciousness and a newfound self-respect within Southern blacks’ mentality was a key element in the adoption—or rather in the understanding—of nonviolent principles present within the Civil Rights Movement. The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, based on the tenets of constructive program, was one of many factors that brought forth this new consciousness in the minds of Southern African Americans. Furthermore, the ultimate success of the Bus Boycott helped encourage future participation and dedication to nonviolence during the Civil Rights Movement.

Before delving into the logistics of the boycott and its contributions to the rest of the movement, let us first understand the importance of constructive program and the foundation that it provides. The basis of constructive program within a social movement, or within any community, offers a possible solution to the ensuing problems present within the community. Gandhi offers this definition: “Civil disobedience, mass or individual, is an aid to constructive effort and is a full substitute for armed revolt” (Gandhi, 1941; 3). As alluded to in the name “*constructive program*,” it *constructs* something positive despite the subsequent negative problem. It is the basis for nonviolence in that it is the conversion of a negative state into a positive state.

Four important aspects of constructive program can offer some insight into the importance, or downright necessity, of this indispensable foundation to the Civil Rights Movement. First, within constructive program, everyone can participate—everyone from the oldest man, to the youngest child, and at times, as in the case of the Civil Rights Movement, the oppressor. This notion of working together creates a community which functions as a whole for a common purpose. “Working together creates a sense of shared destiny and unity, as almost nothing else does” (Nagler, 2001; 187). Secondly, constructive program offers a solution that can be worked on everyday—further incorporating the dedication to nonviolence and the move-

ment into the realms of daily life. Here, the nonviolent actor is permitted to be active within the movement *of his own free will*, without “hav[ing] to wait for the right time, weather, circumstance or depend on a big turnout on some special occasion” (Nagler, 2001; 188).

Furthermore, this model works towards a goal that is proactive (Nagler, 2001; 189). It is within this element of constructive program that the basic element of nonviolence is best displayed—truth; truth is where one finds strength to continue in one’s cause. And lastly, constructive program defeats the dependency model of the oppressor over the oppressed. It turns dependency around and therefore discredits the power relations that reign. It offers a restructuring of power and allows the exploited to see their own power within the situation—but not their power over the exploiter, rather their power to re-vindicate the

power dynamics, discontinuing an unhealthy dependency on the exploiter. More simply stated: they experience the power within themselves.

Arne Naess states that participation in constructive program “foster[s] that *minimum*

of self-respect which was indispensable for meaningful participation in nonviolent campaigns” (Naess, 1974; 109). The main idea is that through a restructuring of ideals and power, the nonviolent actor is able to not only fashion a new position in the movement, but also a new mentality rooted in truth and love. This mentality incorporates all those involved within the struggle, including the oppressors.

The mental formation of the modern civil rights movement is an illustration of re-articulation processes or re-valuation processes. As we stated earlier, in order to win mass support for the tactics of direct action and nonviolence, it was necessary to replace the established cultural norms through which blacks, mainly Southern blacks, had previously sought to ameliorate the impact of racial oppression such as feigning ignorance or diverted humility. Blacks now tired of this old regime and these laborious tactics now aimed to oppose the system of segregation with righteous and disciplined action; nonviolent resistance grounded in constructive program offered the solution.

First, Southern blacks needed a jumpstart. The decision made by Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955 to peacefully

Constructive program offers a restructuring of power and allows the exploited to see their own power within the situation.

reject the powers of segregation was the first cornerstone of the ensuing boycott and resulting mentality of unity within the Southern black community.

“Rosa Parks acted spontaneously when she refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery in December 1955; yet it is also true that she had shortly before returned from a leadership seminar at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, the South’s principal training center for union organizers” (Lynd, 1995; xxviii).

Here, as Rosa Parks invokes the power of nonviolent

tactics, we see that the prevailing movement was secured within the principles of nonviolence in the minds of the organizers. It is good to note the spontaneity of the movement as well as the structured elements that preceded it in the minds of the organizers in order to understand the developing consciousness and unrest with the problem at hand.

Now that the movement had sparked a beginning, let us explore the elements of constructive program that are present within the boycott based on the previous framework. As to the element of participation, from the beginning of the movement there is an amazing collaboration of both leaders and citizens. Students of Alabama State College willingly hitched rides while the “sidewalks were crowded with laborers and domestic workers, many of them well past middle age, trudging patiently to their jobs and home again, sometimes as much as twelve miles” (King, 1958; 430). Nearly all ministers offered to drive a shift of the carpool. It is important to notice the multitude of participants in the boycott here. The avenue of protest was not limited to the young, able-bodied, idealistic youth of the state college, but included the elderly, children, men and women. The ability to participate and integrate themselves within the protest, literally in the path of the protest, allowed African Americans of Montgomery to understand



Rosa Parks art by “Undiminished” Hao Li

that the success of the boycott lay within their own powers. Despite years of impenetrability into active resistance against segregation, Southern blacks had found a measure where everyone could participate. There was a fusion of the entire black Montgomery community all the way from prominent ministers, the NAACP, black taxi drivers, to grandmothers. Understanding that the success of the boycott lay within their own hands, or rather feet, Southern blacks formulated a newfound sense of fulfillment, of purpose. This unity within mind and action was a basis for success within constructive program. This consciousness would only further propel adherence to nonviolence within the minds of Southern blacks.

As to the second element, transportation, whether it be to a job, or to the downtown market, affected everyday life of nearly every black Southerner. Furthermore, because the actual course of the bus boycott was one that affected the every day lives of Southern blacks, commitment to the movement was further solidified. Dedication can be seen as these nonviolent resisters continued to walk for almost a year on a daily basis in diligent protest. The commitment to working everyday on a common goal, within a common community, with a determination to unify oneself with all urged Southerners forward in their quest, day in and day out until:

“(1) courteous treatment by the bus operators was guar-

anteed; (2) passengers were seated on a first-come, first-serve basis—Negroes seated from the back of the bus toward the front while whites seated from the front towards the back; (3) Negro bus operators were employed on predominantly Negro routes” (King, 1958; 436).

The idea here is that progress is achieved with every step that is taken—bringing the Southern black closer and closer to their victories, internally and externally. The act of walking had become symbolic; symbolic of the history of struggle, symbolic of the present movement, and symbolic of the future that the world held for the black Southerner.

The proactive aspect of the Montgomery Bus Boycott lies mainly within the symbolic nature of the protest beyond merely the physical nature. As black Southerners “substitute[d] tired feet for tired souls” (King, 1958, 437), truth seeped from the soles. Blacks of the South, or of the entire nation for that matter, could no longer endure the spiritual, emotional, mental, physical, or emotional demands of segregation. If they opted to walk until all these problems were solved, then so be it. But it seemed for right now, within the consciousness of the black South, the ending of segregated buses would be sufficient. Its higher symbolic connotation would carry farther as well. This basis of constructive program offered a clear understanding of both principle and action within the minds of the nonviolent protestors.

The most influential element of constructive program on the emerging consciousness of the Southern black was the restructuring of power relationships—most notably the dependency relationship. As the statement by King reads at the very beginning of this paper, the psychological freedom gained through a sense of self-worth derived from love of all—the oppressed and the oppressor—is the strongest tool you can have in your fight, or rather your journey, with nonviolence. Southern African Americans had “no alternative but to protest... we come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice” (King, 1958; 435). King states that the prevailing relationship between blacks and whites in the South has been one of dependency where blacks have accepted their ‘inferiority’ to whites and often have resigned to tactics, which accept the violence that is used against them. Now, within the realm of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, this relationship of dependency has been completely eliminated as Southern blacks reject an imposed system where they are continuously subjected

to hatred and violence, and instead adopt their own system—which thrives. The previous relationship therefore that existed between white and black Southerners is restructured, allowing for a redefinition of self for the black Southerner. If he was no longer defined as ‘inferior,’ what exactly was he then? He was “...somebody...a person...a man with dignity and honor” (King quoted in Naess, 1974; 114). This mentality would provide the needed strength to continue with the quest

Southern African-Americans “substituted tired feet for tired souls” according to Dr. King.

for equality.

In the end, the most important factor that sprung from the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott was the realignment of the self within the minds of Southern blacks. Through the different elements of nonviolence, provided by the framework of constructive program, Southern blacks were able to “grapple with a new approach to the crisis in race relations” (King, 1958; 450). This new approach offered a means to gain unity, to gain strength, to gain momentum in the struggle for equality. As Southern blacks experienced a realignment of the legislation

The relationship of dependency has been completely eliminated as Southern blacks reject an imposed system of hatred and violence.

surrounding their bus system, they also experienced a realignment of their own minds to that of a more powerful, a more purposeful mind. In the larger social scene, the Montgomery Bus Boycott offered a glimpse of hope of what could be achieved through not only the tactic of constructive program, but also through the creation of a new attitude, a re-evaluation of sorts. Martin Luther King had this to say about Montgomery: “One can never understand the bus protest in Montgomery without understanding that there is a new Negro in the South, with a new sense of dignity and destiny” (King, 1958; 468). It is this ‘new Negro’ geared with an understanding of nonviolence that later enters into the Civil Right Movement with her head high and heart pure.

Bibliography

1. Gandhi, M.K.; *Constructive Program: It's Meaning and It's Purpose*; Navajivan Publishing House; 1941.
2. King, Martin Luther King Jr.; *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*; Harpers San Francisco; 1986.
3. Lynd, Staughton and Alice Lynd; *Nonviolence in America*; Orbis Books; 1995.
4. Naess, Arne; from *Gandhi and Group Conflict: An Exploration of Satyagraha*; *Universitiesforlaget*; 1974; *Peace and Conflict 164A Reader*—Week 2.
5. Nagler, Michael; *The Search for a Nonviolent Future*; Inner Ocean; 2004.
6. Omi, Michael and Winant; Chapter 6, “The Great Transformation,” from *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*; Routledge Chapman Hall, 1986; *Ethnic Studies 21AC Reader*—Week 6.