

Dr. Martin Luther King and Black Power Movement

There have been consistently glaring omissions by biographers of Martin Luther King concerning his statements embracing Black Power as a *concept*. The focus usually has been on his statements rejecting Black Power as a *slogan*, without making the distinction that King himself made between Black Power as a *concept* and *program* on the one hand, and the use of the phrase as a *slogan* on the other.



When the militant cry of “Black Power” burst on the public scene in mid-June 1966 in Greenwood, Mississippi during the Meredith March Against Fear, King suggested that the Black Power slogan had negative overtones and was causing divisions within the march. King preferred “black consciousness” or “black equality” instead of “Black Power.” He reasoned that the words “black” and “power” together give the impression of black domination rather than black equality. King debated with Stokely Carmichael of SNCC and Floyd McKissick of CORE over the matter. He asserted that a leader must be concerned about the problem of semantics, and the “Black Power” slogan carried the wrong connotations. Carmichael replied by saying that the question of violence versus nonviolence was irrelevant. He argued that the real question was the need for African Americans to consolidate their economic and political resources to achieve power, as practically every other ethnic group in America had done. King had no problems with this, but he responded by stating that ethnic groups such as Irish and Italians did not use slogans of Irish or Italian power, but they worked hard to achieve power. King stated, “This is exactly what we must do. We must use every constructive means to amass economic and political power. This is the kind of legitimate power we need,” He added, “But this must come through a *program*, not merely a slogan.” [emphasis added].

If we look at the **primary sources**, then it is clear that Dr. King had problems with Black Power as a *slogan*, but unlike the established civil rights leadership – which denounced the Black Power advocates – he called for and worked to implement Black Power as a *program*.

Dr. King’s Statements in Support of “Black Power”:

“Black Power, in its broad and positive meaning, is a call to black people to amass the political and economic strength to achieve their legitimate goals. No one can deny that the Negro is in dire need of this kind of legitimate power. Indeed, one of the great problems that the Negro confronts is his lack of power. From the old plantations of the South to the newer ghettos of the North, the Negro has been confined to a life of voicelessness and

powerlessness. ...The plantation and the ghetto were created by those who had power both to confine those who had no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness. The problem of transforming the ghetto is, therefore, a problem of power – a confrontation between the forces of power demanding change and the forces of power dedicated to preserving the status quo." (Where Do We Go From Here, pp. 36-37). Emphasis added.

*"Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice. One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. ...What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. ...**There is nothing essentially wrong with power. The problem is that in America power is unequally distributed.**"* (Where Do We Go, p. 37). Emphasis added.

"Black Power is a call for the pooling of black financial resources to achieve economic security. ...If Black Power means the development of this kind of strength within the Negro community, then it is a quest for basic, necessary, legitimate power. Finally, Black Power is a psychological call to manhood." (Where Do We Go, p. 38).

*"Black is beautiful and as beautiful as any other color. When we believe that, this is something very necessary, this is something very constructive and very creative. **So, the concept of Black Power is something we are certainly able to understand and accept.** ...So as we talk about power, we must always see power as the right use of strength."* ((SCLC Staff retreat, Frogmore, SC, 11/14/66). Emphasis added.

"Power is the ability to achieve purpose. Certainly the Negro needs power because this is our problem, we are powerless. We have been powerless economically and politically in the ghetto itself in a sense came into being to keep the Negro in his powerless position." (Frogmore, SC, 11/14/66).

"Power is not the white man's birthright; it will not be legislated for us and delivered in neat government packages. It is a social force any group can utilize by accumulating its elements in a planned, deliberate campaign to organize it under its own control." (Where Do We Go, p. 157).

King acknowledged in an interview that the unsuccessful "end slums" campaign in Chicago was an implementation program for the concept of Black Power but, as the *Baltimore Sun* reported on July 10, 1966, "under a more palatable name." The *Sun* further recorded that King "totally indorses [sic] the concept of 'black power' " as enunciated by McKissick and Carmichael. The newspaper also noted that King's statements placed SCLC, CORE, and SNCC "in basic agreement on the new 'black power' direction of the movement." King indicated that his differences with CORE and SNCC over "Black Power" were only semantic.

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Dr. King did not only endorse the concept of Black Power as an individual, he endorsed it as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Similar to the Black Power advocates, SCLC advocated the building of a positive and cohesive concept of black history and fostering "a sense of ...community" among African Americans. In addition, SCLC resolved that it would encourage and work toward true community through the development of economic and political power, and by constant emphasis on African Americans "owning and controlling their communities."

This emphasis was exactly what Black Power advocates were calling for, though they may have sometimes said it in different words. Beginning in late 1966, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported that "black power is a most timely issue in the country today." The Bureau later commented that there is a "**marked tendency on the part of SCLC to move away from integration and move toward economic and political power.**" (FBI files, 10/27/66; and 2/26/68). Emphasis added.

King continued to support, promote, define, and even defend Black Power as a functional program in 1967 and 1968...