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Dr. King: Another Failure in Chicago

by Sara Liesman

(English 1102)

Social activist and iconic leader for the African-American community, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., publically stated in his book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, that “we are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today” (King 191). Racial tensions have lingered around the world for as long as many can even remember, whether it is the color of one’s skin or the sound of their native tongue. However, many, such as Vincent Parrillo, a well-known professor of sociology, will argue that humans are not born with this hate, and that instead this angst develops through one’s community and family values (Parrillo 393). Often, the source of this hatred stems from another imbalance that is not always evident on the surface. This frustration, be it from economic inequality or family troubles, frequently results in “scapegoating,” the act of placing blame on others when it is not their fault usually to avoid the larger problem at hand (Parrillo 391). Prejudices have spawned in America from the moment new settlers arrived in the colonies. In the seventeenth century, Jamestown put up walls in order to keep Native Americans out without ever truly understanding them (Buchanan 466). Throughout time humans have become more and more aware of this injustice and how it results in racial tension, and many have fought and even died in efforts to bring about equal rights. Nonetheless, there are a few that have tried and have succeeded in some ways, but have failed and taken steps back for society in other ways. Martin Luther King Jr., a well-known African American civil rights leader, discovers problems of racial inequality while living in the slums of Chicago for 8 months during the year 1966 (King 113-114). However, as he attempts to help, Chicago riots break out. Martin Luther King Jr. has been known as the great leader, peace trailblazer, and racism terminator, but what really happened in Chicago during the 1960s? A champion of human tensions meets his match as he faces the riots of the 2nd largest city in America (“The Chicago Riots”). Social unrest in Chicago is not merely a factor of racism and prejudices that are caused by the color of one’s skin that were often found in the south, but instead they stem from deeper roots in society, and it is clear that Martin Luther King Jr. underestimated these issues while he was marching in Chicago, Illinois.

Racism is not the real source of riots in Chicago, instead, the real problems stem from inequality in housing, education, employment, and rights. Dr. King addresses these problems in his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* King makes it clear that education is the key pathway to rising out of poverty, but “the sad truth is that American schools... do not know how to teach” (King 193). He points out that it is not necessarily the inability of teachers, but the unwillingness of them as he states that “American educators... have not dedicated themselves to the rapid improvement of the education of the poor,” who, in Chicago, are predominately the minorities (King 195). Without proper education, many African Americans are unable to obtain employment (King 196) further adding to the injustices that African Americans face in Chicago that lead to scapegoats and eventually riots. Similarly, the rights of African Americans in Chicago are often overlooked as authority abuses their power, victimizing those in poorer conditions simply because they hold little political power (King 199). The final challenge that King mentions in his book is housing, which is also one of the main problems he faces in Chicago as he experienced the poor conditions that plagued the slums of African American neighborhoods (King 113). Fasil Demissie, a professor at DePaul University, is also aware of the inequalities in housing in Chicago. In Demissie’s review of “High-rise Ghettos as an American Project in Chicago,” Demissie states that

the “towering ghettos sometimes referred to as ‘federal prisons’ have remained ‘a testament of failed public housing policy’” (Demissie 689). Not only is the housing poor in the slums of Chicago, but in Dr. Ami M. Shah’s article “Variations in the Health Conditions of 6 Chicago Community Areas: A Case for Local-Level Data,” it is revealed that communities with poorer housing conditions are also subject to more diseases (Shah 1485). Evidence shows that the African Americans’ lack of power does not entirely stem from the color of their skin, but more so from the institutions that are supposed to hold together society. In order to see any form of change, not only would King have to help improve the morals of citizens, but he would also have to piece together Chicago’s failing social structures.

Compared to the north, the southern victories were unparalleled due to a few major differences that King failed to take into consideration. In the south King’s operations were successful, but in Chicago Martin Luther King Jr. falls short of a victory, merely smearing a thin layer of hope over the real problems. Operation Breadbasket increased Negroes’ earning power by more than \$20 million annually for three years in Atlanta, Georgia, however it only rose \$7 million in Chicago (King 145). The second largest city in America (“The Chicago Riots”) should have been able to raise more money than the southern city, Atlanta, but instead Chicago raised less than half, revealing deeper problems in the campaign of Dr. King. Mike Royko addresses one of the main weaknesses of King’s campaign in his book, *Boss: Richard J. Daley of Chicago*: “King’s southern tactics—the peaceful march, the soul-stirring speech—could blow the minds of southern white rustics, but they were old stuff to Chicagoans” (Royko 147). James R. Ralph Jr. builds upon this idea and states that the lack of new ideas led to “black apathy” (Ralph 30). Not only did old tactics lead to a different outcome than the south, but *American Pharaoh: Mayor Richard J. Daley—His Battle for Chicago and the Nation*, the most recent book about Daley, reveals that “although the civil rights movement had prevailed in the South by choosing narrow goals... the Chicago Campaign would have to pursue a broader agenda” (Cohen and Taylor 356). King would have to change his whole agenda and method of marching if he wanted to make any transformations in Chicago. Without tackling larger problems than the usual southern sit-ins, there would be no improvements in Illinois. Martin Luther King Jr. bit off more than he could chew when he tackled Chicago as the first city of the north to lead marches as the “problem [of Chicago] is simply a matter of economic exploitation,” (Cohen and Taylor 356) which calls for a “reconstruction of the entire society” as expressed by King one year after Chicago (Sturm 101). Although many of the complications in the north were created by King and his advisors, there is also evidence that Daley made it more difficult for an outsider, such as King, to succeed in his city. Mayor Richard J. Daley welcomed King into his city and started his own civil rights agenda before King arrived. Cohen and Taylor provide insight into this situation in their book: “with all the headlines about civil rights, it was hard to get excited about yet another [headline]” (Cohen and Taylor 353-354). By exhausting the topic of civil rights, Daley and the Chicago media hindered the hype and motivation that King expected to instill in Illinois. Supporters of King will claim that he was doomed before he even entered Chicago, but the real tragedies occurred when he began to leave his mark on the lives of those within the city.

In Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s attempt to bring peace to the city of Chicago, King ended up slowing down the progress of social change and causing more havoc than harmony. Although King is credited for being a peaceful demonstrator, the *Chicago Tribune*, exposes that “time and time again, the effects of ‘peaceful’ demonstrations here and in other cities have been to arouse false hopes among the Negroes and animosities between the white and Negro people... and the civil rights leaders... know that false hopes and animosities will lead to violence” (“Preventing Riots”). One of King’s activists noted “We march, we return home emotionally drained,... replenish our strength, and go back” (Ralph 30). There are only so many times people can be pushed down before they start to become angry, violent, and revengeful and it was the hidden agenda of King to push these bitter feelings into the people of Chicago. On the record King condemns violence, however, he also said,

“It would be foolhardy for me to condemn them without condemning the conditions which lead to them” (“Dr. King Castigates Black Power Rioters”). In this way, King points the blame at the conditions that the blacks are in, when there is evidence that he is one that put African Americans in the position of being a victim. King’s “peaceful” protests often resulted in injured marchers: King was amazed as he saw their noses broken without retaliation (Ralph 30). Even on a smaller level, it is evident that Dr. King is the problem in the city of Chicago.

King brought his own children to the ghettos of Chicago and within days he noticed their tempers flaring and a change in attitudes (King 114), yet he says that “the amazing thing about the ghetto is that so few Negroes have rioted” (King 113). This reveals that the source of growing tensions stems for Dr. King himself. In the past King has mediated tensions and brought about social movements peacefully, but King’s lack of hope for Chicago drags down the peace morals of the citizens. In King’s book he admits how “[it is amazing that] many ghetto inhabitants have maintained hope in the midst of hopeless conditions” (King 113). King’s false-hope is evident to the poor in Chicago and makes it clear to the people that peace and logic will not bring about change in the eyes of Dr. King. Despite advocating for peace, King was so determined to have a victory (“The Chicago Riots”) that he was willing to secretly turn towards violence. During King’s time in Chicago, blacks were turning “away from the Gandhian precepts of King toward the black nationalism of Malcolm X” (Carson). However, King’s arrogance would not allow him to leave the city until he obtained a victory, and his tactics were evident to many great leaders.

Due to King’s ignorance and pride, many officials did not appreciate King’s stay in Chicago, and believed that he lead to more problems than solutions. Reverend Joseph H. Jackson, also an African American, blamed King for the violence in the city and in an interview with Mike Wallace Jackson states that “it is not a normal procedure to expect young people to rise up against a city, it has to be outside interference, somebody who should not be doing it” (“The Chicago Riots). Jackson blames King for the riots and violence that came about with King’s arrival. The reverend doubts “whether...a continuous dramatization... of the city’s failings would ‘help us solve’ its problems” (Ralph 30). The constant reminder or the problems that the Africans were facing, with no new solutions would have created a negative atmosphere among the blacks and potentially prohibited a process that required everyone to be on the same page. Even Ralph Metcalfe, a leading black alderman, said: “We have competent leadership in Chicago and all things necessary to work out our own city’s destiny” (Ralph 30). Chicago had plans to reform and Daley was well aware of the problems that blacks faced, but without sacrifices from both sides, no changes could be made. “Daley himself had praised King for his successes in the South, but he saw no reason for the Nobel Peace Prize winner to ally himself with Chicago civil rights agitators who for months now had displayed no respect for the efforts of his regime to make Chicago a better home for its citizens” (Ralph 30). Whites such as Daley, and Blacks, such as Metcalfe and Jackson, both wanted Dr. King to leave Chicago. Although there were some that supported him, such as Jonathan Alter, just an eight year old boy when his family invited King into their home (Alter 42), the opposition from powerful men such as Daley should have lead King away from the city. Instead of King’s arrival bringing forth more change, his presence hindered progress because the leaders of the city were unable to work together and so much of the alliances were split. Chicago would have been able to solve the problems that it faced on its own, but after King arrived, many actions took much longer to complete than they would have before, and even today we are still burdened with the same problems that existed in the 1960’s.

Instead of having a positive effect in Chicago, King actually prolonged processes and took steps back instead of forward. Although King is celebrated as a hero today, there is clear evidence that he did more harm in Chicago than good. “Since 1986, [Chicago] has invested more than \$4.5 billion in local, state, federal, and private funds to create, improve and maintain more than 215,000 units of affordable housing for people of modest means” (“Mayor Daley Takes Part in Ribbon-

Cutting for Dr. King Legacy Apartments”). At first glance this reform may seem like a victory for King, but a closer look at the evidence reveals that they only started raising the money over twenty years after King was in Chicago. To say that this monetary fund was a victory would be inaccurate due to the large gap in time between 1966 and 1989. More evidence reveals that even today housing in Chicago is prejudiced and the struggle for equality continues (Demissie 689). However, despite all the harm that King has done to Chicago when it comes to progress, he still left behind his legacy throughout America.

Every year we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day without really comprehending all that he has done. Most of us jump to the conclusion that he died a martyr, who only brought about peace during civil rights movements, and many are quick to turn a blind eye to his actions in Chicago. In fact, a biography about King mentions every year of his life between 1959 and 1968 except for 1966, the year that he is in Chicago (Carson). Dr. King underestimated the deeply rooted problems of Chicago and struggled to find victories during his stay, however, King’s actions and ideas in Chicago changed the city forever. Despite his efforts, Chicago continues to heal from the touch of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and in time the city shall be able to solve its own problems and it will soon build a legacy similar to King’s, one that forgets its downfalls.

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