

After the death of Martin Luther King: chaos or community?

The world is shocked once again by a senseless act of violence in the United States. One after another, Negroes have died in the long struggle to bring racial justice to the American continent. Most have died unsung—lynched, murdered, and buried in the swamps of the American South. Until recently their deaths awoke the conscience of few Americans, and brought no change to the racist structure of the Southern economic and social system.

Now to their number is added Dr Martin Luther King. No other Negro leader had such a following among his own people, not even Medgar Evers, who was shot in the back on his own front door in Mississippi, or Malcolm X, who died at the hand of a fellow-Negro in New York. King's message of nonviolence, his relentlessly courageous pursuit of justice, the wisdom and tolerance of his appeal, made him a leader throughout the United States and a respected figure in the world arena. His award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 was justly earned.

Through his extraordinary gift of eloquence and personal charisma, he particularly became the go-between across the gulf separating black and white in America. He tried all the time to interpret the black man to a cynical or uninterested white society. As he wrote in his last book, "Chaos or Community?" "the cries of Black Power, and the riots, are not the causes of white resistance, but the consequences of it." And for all his heartfelt commitment to nonviolence he was far too aware of the degradation of the Negro ghettos in the North to indulge in any glib condemnation of violence.

He sought to interpret the positive side of Black Power which he had practised after all himself—the use of boycotts and the vote to create a lever for change, and the need for black people to feel proud of their blackness. But he argued against violence. "Nowhere have the riots won any concrete improvement as have the organised protest demonstrations," he wrote. But in speaking out thus, perhaps inevitably he began to lose his appeal for the young and the chronically unemployed in the ghettos. In this he was no different from other Negro leaders. No one, not H. Rap Brown, not Stokely Carmichael controls the ghettos. The violent spokesmen of Black Power are not the leaders, but the led. The real incitement to violence is nothing more complex than the television screen, with its tantalising commercials of the white American dream, with its news of massive stock-piling of

weapons by white police forces around the nation, with its reports of Congressional cuts in the poverty programme because of the war in Vietnam.

King's death robs America of her most vigorous spokesman for moderation and integration. There is no sign of anyone who can take his place. But as long as there is no dialogue between violent and nonviolent elements within the Negro community, it is hard to see how the tension in the present conflict can be scaled down. The demands of economic justice for the American Negro can no longer be met by piecemeal legislation here and there, hard though even this is to achieve. The passage of the various civil rights acts in the early 1960s which King did so much to bring about have made almost no difference to the bulk of the Negro population in the North.

Integration, in the sense that a few middle-class Negroes can now move out of the ghetto into the suburbs, into decent jobs, even into prestige positions, has clearly failed to alter things for the 90 per cent who are left behind. Integration must now mean that Americans need to see their black brethren as a deprived group for whom massive economic aid is necessary. But money alone will not cure this, although money in vast quantities is an essential ingredient. The invisible barriers around the ghettos must be dismantled. Housing and schools for people on low incomes must be built in middle and upper income neighbourhoods. Integration is not something that only happens at the other end of town. Higher taxes from the middle class must pay to cure the neglect of centuries of exploitation. Private enterprise and the profit motive are not sufficient agents for change. Private industry cannot be left to provide jobs for the thousands who have been made jobless precisely because private industry prefers to automate.

Perhaps these programmes are beyond the means of traditional American society. They are no easy ideological pill for Americans to swallow. As King wrote in his last book, "The hard cold facts of today indicate that the hope of the people of colour in the world may well rest on the American Negro, and on his ability to reform the structure of racist imperialism from within and thereby turn the technology and wealth of the West to the task of liberating the world from want." Harsh words. But with his assassination, America has moved one step nearer to chaos, and one step farther from community.