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“The Economics of Nonviolence: Gandhi, King, and Mandela.”

Introduction

Nelson Mandela’s recent passing sparked numerous comparisons of the three great proponents of nonviolent activism. It goes without saying that due to historical chronology, prodigious study, development, and implementation of nonviolent strategies, Mahatma Gandhi must be considered the greatest of the three. Nevertheless, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mandela certainly have their claim to greatness given their interpretation and implementation of Gandhian principles. The question that remains, which deserves a clear answer, is how one should rank these three proponents of nonviolence from an economic perspective. In other words, how have the populations for which these men fought fared economically? We endeavor to explore this question below.

Gandhi

It is often forgotten that, at his core, Gandhi was an Indian nationalist. Whether fighting for the rights of Indians in South Africa or to oust the British from his country, Gandhi’s goal was always aiding the Indian cause. Nonviolence was just the tool that he chose wisely to use to achieve his objective. At the end of the day, the British left, and Gandhi and Indians were left with an entire subcontinent to love, grow, and develop for themselves. Even today, Indians hold tightly to ownership of their country and economy. Although changing at the margin, Indians still prohibit foreigners from gaining “control” of key industries. Consequently, we can argue that Gandhi was superbly successful in achieving his primary goal: India for Indians. Accordingly, India continues to grow as an Asian and world political and economic power.

King

King’s purpose evolved over his period of activism. Initially, he used nonviolent approaches to secure civil rights for Afrodescendants in the US. However, by the time of his assassination in 1968, he was actively engaged in organizing economic boycotts to extract economic benefits for Afrodescendants. While successful in ensuring that civil rights laws were in place (not necessarily that the funding to enforce them effectively was provided), he was much less successful in ensuring economic rights for Afrodescendants. Today, Afrodescendants suffer from an unemployment rate that is about twice the US national average, 25 percent of Afrodescendants live in poverty, less than 7 percent of Afrodescendant businesses are large enough to hire employees, and, 40 years later, there are no Fortune 500 companies that reflect ownership control by Afrodescendants. Moreover, Afrodescendants have settled at the bottom of most national socio-economic rankings. Therefore, from an economic perspective, King’s nonviolent approach produced limited success.

This reality is often overlooked by those who unabashedly point to the likes of Oprah Winfrey, Robert Johnson, Jay-Z, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and a handful of other famous and marginally wealthy Afrodescendant artistic performers and athletes.

Mandela

Mandela is praised often for his transition from a violent to a nonviolent approach to dismantling apartheid in South Africa. It was the violence that forced the apartheid government to recognize a need for change and to ultimately jail Mandela. It was the nonviolence that brought Mandela out of jail and into negotiations with the apartheid government. No doubt, Mandela engineered great social change in his country. However, in the final analysis, none of the change was too onerous for South African whites to accept. Therefore, one could argue that, given the alternative (great loss of life and much smoldering infrastructure), Mandela negotiated change that benefited South African whites more than South African blacks. Today, South Africa is experiencing 25 percent (mainly black) unemployment, and is ranked as one of the world's most unequal societies economically. Because of Mandela, whites have been able to retain their lives and lifestyle. They continue to own and control most of the means of production even though they comprise less than 10 percent of the population. Of course, Blacks occupy many important political positions in the country, and they control certain economic operations. However, it is common knowledge that economic power trumps political power, and white South Africans have retained a preponderance of economic power. Therefore, the truce that Mandela negotiated using nonviolent tactics is likely to be temporary; it is just a matter of time before black South Africans rise again in an effort to claim what is rightfully theirs—economic control of their country.

Conclusion

Our assessment of Gandhi's, King's, and Mandela's effectiveness in using nonviolent strategies to secure a better life for their people leads us to conclude that Gandhi was the most effective. King died young and did not have sufficient time to pursue his economic agenda. Nevertheless, the state (a policy of integration) that he left Afrodescendants in, unless things change dramatically, is likely to produce a long-run result of the disappearance of Afrodescendants from the US landscape. The current rate of mixed marriages and offspring is very rapid. In addition, imprisonment, excessive drug use, and disease promise to curtail the fertility of many Afrodescendants. One day in the not too distant future, we may find that Afrodescendants, as they are known today, no longer exist. Mandela was the least successful of the three trumpeters of nonviolence. He permitted white South Africans to apply a band aid to cover up apartheid, maintain essential aspects of their lifestyle, and continue to drain the country's natural resources. By the time black South Africans awaken to reality, they may find that much of the resources that their country has to offer the world are gone, and that they are only marginally better prepared to control their government, economy, and future. Regardless, they are likely to rise up and fight to reserve South Africa for black South Africans.

The most enchanting aspect of this countervailing view on three great champions of nonviolence is that Europeans go out of their way to hold high each proponent. And rightly so. Gandhi's nonviolence allowed the British to exit India without tremendous loss of life and resources. Admittedly, the British lost access to a tremendous amount of wealth from the subcontinent.

However, the British were in no position to fight even Indians after World War II. King's nonviolence allowed whites in the US to gain much greater access to, and massive benefits from, the Afrodescendant economy and to control more directly Afrodescendant communities. All whites had to give up were a few cultural idiosyncrasies, which had heretofore separated the two groups. Even so, much of the cultural change was mere lip service. We now know that it is impossible to legislate effectively against White Supremacist attitudes and racism. Mandela's nonviolence permitted white South Africans to continue to control the most essential aspects of South Africa and to bleed the country of its resources. Many poor blacks in South Africa continue to suffer economic and social indignities daily. Most importantly, white South Africans have engineered a situation where wealthy black South Africans are now at logger-heads with poor black South Africans. This is just the type of "divide and conquer" scheme that has worked so effectively for Europeans against people of color the world over.

These results explain, in large measure, why Europeans praise Gandhi's, King's, and Mandela's accomplishments. Nonviolence is what Europeans order for people of color. At the same time, Europeans continue with their use of violent military force to manage the world as they see fit in order to maintain the control and power that really matters—economic control and economic power.

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