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# **Holding Back the Flood of Fear: The Impact of Cohesion on the Use of Violent & Nonviolent Tactics in the Civil Rights Movement**

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## **Citation**

Hajná, K. (2022). *Holding Back the Flood of Fear: The Impact of Cohesion on the Use of Violent & Nonviolent Tactics in the Civil Rights Movement*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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# **Holding Back the Flood of Fear:**

The Impact of Cohesion on the Use of Violent & Nonviolent Tactics  
in the Civil Rights Movement



# Universiteit Leiden

*Bachelor Project: Social Movements and Political Violence*

*BSc Political Science: International Relations and Organizations*

*Leiden University, The Netherlands*

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**Date:** May 30, 2022

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**Word count:** 7798

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“May all who suffer oppression in this world reject the self-defeating method of retaliatory violence and choose the method that seeks to redeem.”<sup>1</sup>

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Nonviolence is fine as long as it works.”<sup>2</sup>

– Malcolm X

## 1. Introduction

What determines whether a movement uses violent or nonviolent means to achieve their aims? Why would a single movement change its attitudes about the tactics they employ across its lifespan?

The use of violence and nonviolence as a tactic is a part of a heated debate among social movement scholars (Larson, 2013, pp. 867-868). One of the prevailing stances on movements which opt for violence is that by unleashing destruction, the movement is unable to achieve their goals (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2014, p. 96). According to this strand of thought, a single act of violence is capable of destroying the movement as a whole (Popovic, 2011). The key principle of a movement’s success is thus nonviolent discipline (Popovic, 2011).

However, in the vein of the works conducted by Sharp (1973), Gamson (1975), and Tarrow (1998), violence can be perceived in a different light. The authors provide, among others, the argument that the use of violence as a tactic is not a spontaneous and irrational result of frustration. On the contrary, violence is an instrumental act that is often translated into effective and concrete results. Violence as a tactics also does not have to be as senseless as it might appear, and instead has an intrinsic logic of its own (Barak, 2003, p. 165). There are rationales and contexts for the use of structural, institutional and interpersonal types of violence as an effective means to reach a movement’s desired outcome (Barak, 2003, p. 139).

As can be seen, the debate surrounding the use of violent/nonviolent tactics in social movements is a continuous one, and the proposed explanations for what determines a movement’s tactical choice are numerous (Pearlman, 2011, p. 2). However, the abovementioned theories and arguments do not devote sufficient attention to how the dynamics present in a movement impact their tactical choice. The unity and cohesion present

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<sup>1</sup> King, 1957, p. 222

<sup>2</sup> Pearlman, 2011, p. 217

within a movement could be a deciding factor in determining the movement's tactical choice. Though scholars have seen movement cohesion as an important component in social movement success, the precise cohesion dynamics and how they can shift in the movement's lifespan are less understood.

Pearlman's (2011) theory – which this study will make extensive use of – offers a compelling resolution to the puzzle of why social movements turn violent in certain periods and nonviolent in others. In her work on the Palestinian national movement, Pearlman (2011) proposes an organizational mediation theory of protest, which stipulates that cohesion within a movement is needed to maintain the non-use of violence (p. 217). The findings of Pearlman's (2011) study go against many widely accepted and conventional explanations about the dynamics within movements, attempting to fill this gap in the literature.

Seeing whether Pearlman's (2011) theory is applicable to another movement – in this case, the American Civil Rights Movement – is a needed research project, as it would either further prove or disprove a powerful theory. In consequence, the following research question is posed: How did cohesion within the civil rights movement impact the use of violent/nonviolent tactics and rhetoric in the period of 1960-1968?

Through an analysis guided by the abovementioned research question, the study aims to determine whether the theory and findings put forth by Pearlman (2011) can be applicable to another case. As such, a theory-testing process tracing method will be used to test the causal mechanism identified through the organizational mediation theory of protest. If the analysis were to provide evidence in support of the theory, it would only add to the hypothesis that nonviolent social movements require internal cohesion and that undesirable instances of violence can be prevented.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Limitations of conventional explanations*

What factors determine a movement's specific repertoire of contention? This has been a guiding question for a series of studies focusing on explaining the reasons for a movement's use of either violent or nonviolent forms of protest. The findings of such research point to a range of possible explanations for a movement's tactical choice.

One perspective stipulates that the choice of either using violence or nonviolence is determined by the interaction between the social movement and its adversary (DeNardo, 1985, pp. 243-244). If the movement gains the impression that the adversary is, for example,

not taking their demands seriously, this could lead to an escalation in the movement's tactics in order to obtain more attention (DeNardo, 1985, p. 244).

Furthermore, the institutional and material asymmetry present between the ruling authorities and movement supporters is a possible reason for a movement to adapt its repertoire of contention. Some movements could be compelled to turn to nonviolent protest to deny their opponents compliance and obedience, which comprise the foundation for their rule (Sharp, 1973, p. 16). Others can, however, interpret the institutional and material asymmetry as a reason for embracing violent action, since only such drastic measures are capable of compelling states to make concessions (Pearlman, 2011, p. 4).

Repression is also often cited as a viable indicator of the likelihood of a protest being violent or nonviolent. Such studies claim that state repression generates group-level pressures radicalizing the protest (Della Porta, 1995, p. 187). In addition, indiscriminate repression is found to drive movements towards adopting nonviolent tactics, as they adapt their tactics to work in their favor (Lichbach, 1996, p. 54). Such groups adopt these tactics and frame them in a manner which legitimizes and inspires further mobilization (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996, p. 5). Selective repression, on the other hand, creates more skilled resisters (Finkel, 2015, p. 340).

Scholars of tactical choice have proposed a number of possible explanations for why a movement would choose to adopt violent/nonviolent tactics and why this tactical choice would change over time. Nevertheless, a movement's tactical choice is often not a simple one-to-one correlation between any of the factors listed above. The influence of these factors can be mediated by a movement's internal organization (Pearlman, 2011, p. 2). In consequence, the conventional theories on tactical choice all point toward important factors that determine a movement's decision to either adopt violence or nonviolence. However, many of the factors themselves are shaped by the dynamics within the movement.

## *2.2. Organizational mediation theory of protest*

The dynamics and internal structure within a movement are crucial in explaining tactical choice. The organizational mediation theory of protest attempts to shed more light on this issue. The theory sets down the argument that organizational cohesion within a movement, as opposed to organizational fragmentation, explains a movement's non-use of violence as a strategy (Pearlman, 2011, p. 26). Contrary to many previous theories such as those proposed by Sharp (1973) and Tarrow (1998), Pearlman (2011) claims that the type of organization present in a movement is a causal factor in determining the type of strategic action the

movement undertakes (p. 218). Pearlman's (2011) stipulations are corroborated by the findings of an in-depth within-case study of the Palestinian national movement (p. 218).

The theory proposed by the author criticizes conventional researchers' explanations, for example that repression and the ways in which repressive mechanisms operate cause nonviolent groups to turn to violence (Tilly, 2005, pp. 224-225). Pearlman (2011) also notices how other traditional explanations are not capable of explaining why movements adopt violent tactics even though they prove to be suboptimal and even haphazard in achieving their aims (p. 5).

### *2.3. Radical flank effects*

In addition to the core organizational mediation theory of protest, the argument proposed by the radical flank effects offers a useful addition to the study on tactical choice and movement cohesion. Radical flank effects are processes involving moderate and radical factions in a social movement (Haines, 2013, p. 1048). The presence of more radical factions and wings in the movement can have positive or negative effects on the more moderate parts of the movement (Haines, 2013, pp. 1048-1049).

Positive radical flank effects occur when the actions or mere existence of a movement's extremists benefit the moderate factions, such as attracting public attention to previously overlooked issues (Haines, 2013, p. 1049). Negative radical flank effects occur when the radical wing's actions damage the moderates' chances of achieving their goals by framing the entire movement as equally threatening and offensive (Shock & Barrell, 2012).

Though radical flank effects are primarily studied to measure the success of a group reaching their goals, the concept has significant relevance for a study of movement cohesion as well. The presence of a radical flank would indicate that the movement is not entirely cohesive. The development of an extremist wing employing different tactics from the movement's main faction strongly suggests the fragmentation of its leadership, institutions and goals. In consequence, this would mean a diverging of the movement's tactical choice. A movement which was previously nonviolent could thus suddenly turn to violence, leading to the development of either positive or negative radical flank effects.

### *2.4. Paradox of nonviolent direct action*

The paradox of nonviolent direct action states that a movement using primarily nonviolent tactics is, in reality, heavily reliant on the violent responses it provokes (Colaiaco, 1986, p.

16). By deliberately provoking their opponent (Sharp, 1973, p. 677), the purpose of these nonviolent campaigns is to reveal the opposition's injustice and brutality (Colaiaco, 1986, p. 18). When contrasted with the violent methods of the opposition, the demands of the protesters are then seen as more legitimate. This then compels the governing body to institute change and meet the demands of the protesters (Colaiaco, 1986, p. 25).

There are numerous benefits for enacting nonviolent action. For one, there is a higher degree of the population's involvement (Dahlum, 2019, p. 294). Violent dissent is often viewed as extremist and capable of triggering extensive repression (Pearlman, 2021, p. 1791). As such, potential movement members would be more inclined to support the movement, since they would have fewer reasons to fear coming to harm by protesting peacefully. Another benefit of nonviolent forms of protest is that it provides moral high ground (Gross, 2018, p. 320). Not only does resisting in a peaceful manner make the movement seem more legitimate (Zlobina & Gonzalez Vazquez, 2018, p. 236), but it also increases the support for the movement's cause. The wider audience would feel outraged at the injustice being authorized by the governing body, which raises their sympathies and willingness to support the movement (Nimtz, 2016, p. 2). The protesters are thus able to spread their ideas from a position of moral high ground because in the face of great injustice and police brutality, individuals got together to protest in a disciplined and nonviolent manner (Nimtz, 2016, p. 2).

Given the many benefits of nonviolent protest, it is puzzling why movements or their subgroups would choose to engage in violent activities. By choosing to pursue primarily nonviolent tactics, the movement would be able to capitalize on the strengths posed by peaceful means of protesting. Provoking moral outrage from the wider public would, for example, garner more support for the movement and international recognition (Colaiaco, 1986, p. 14). The benefits of engaging in purely nonviolent forms of protest would cease to exist should the movement turn to violence.

The paradox of nonviolent direct action introduces an interesting puzzle as to why a movement would be inclined to pursue violent tactics, despite the many benefits of nonviolence. As such, it provides a needed addition to what will comprise the core theory of the study – the organizational mediation theory of protest presented by Pearlman (2011).

### **3. Theoretical framework**

#### *3.1. Theories, arguments and concepts to build on*

The approach identified in the organizational mediation theory of protest is comprised of a number of strengths. An important one is that it offers a way to examine both violent and nonviolent forms of protest within a single framework (Pearlman, 2011, p. 25). In consequence, the theory and the *longue durée* analysis of within-case variation in a movement offer a powerful tool to identify causal inference between the variables of cohesion and use of (non)violence (Pearlman, 2011, p. 23).

However, it would be beneficial for an analysis of a movement's tactics and rhetoric to examine the organizational mediation theory of protest in relation to the radical flank effects and the paradox of nonviolent direct action. The two theories pose an interesting addition to the literature. They focus on arguments which are sufficiently dissimilar to the core organizational mediation theory of protest, but are, nonetheless, closely related to it to validate their use in the analysis.

The paradox of nonviolent direct action would point towards an interesting addition to the literature on a movement's decision to make the tactical choice to adopt violence or not. It would, for example, suggest that the line between violence and nonviolence is not as clear-cut as one would expect. The approach could also imply that the front of nonviolence would attract more supporters under one unified norm or collective purpose.

The paradox is often linked to Martin Luther King, Jr. Though it would seem that King and the civil rights movement were dedicated to nonviolent means of action, some claim that the movement needed violence to sustain it (Colaiaico, 1986, p. 17). Nimitz (2016) also reaches a similar conclusion, stating that violence was an important reason for the civil rights movement to achieve its aims (p. 2).

This approach – and the fact that King, as one of the most influential personas of the civil rights movement, is most associated with this approach – is an important one, and must be taken into account when conducting research into tactical choice. Moreover, it is puzzling why a movement would turn toward more extremist forms of tactical choice given the benefits of nonviolent protest and King's dedication to and propagation of nonviolence (Colaiaico, 1986, p. 16),

Even though the successes of the civil rights movement were not a result of King's singlehanded effort, the political activist had a significant impact on the movement and became one of the symbols of the struggle against racial inequality (Reed, 2005, pp. 2-3). As a result, many scholars have devoted their research to analyzing King's contributions to the movement, often in contrast to the rhetoric and actions taken by Malcolm X (Nimitz, 2016, p. 2). As argued by some, the violent rhetoric promoted by Malcolm X was beneficial for the

civil rights movement (Haines, 1988, p. 98). By deliberately or unintentionally framing himself as a threatening figure of the movement's subgroup, Malcolm X aided King and the more moderate subgroups to appear as a favorable alternative to the more violent groups (Haines, 1988, p. 127).

The work on radical flank effects is a valuable contribution to the proposed study (Haines, 2013, p. 1049). The civil rights movement is often viewed as a purely nonviolent social movement, partly due to the influence of King's philosophy (Baldwin & Al-Hadid, 2002, p. 287). However, the presence of more radical groups – such as the Black Panther Party and the Organization of Afro-American Unity – could point to the fact that the movement was not entirely nonviolent (Harper, 1971, p. 394). Furthermore, if the presence of radical flank effects was to be identified in the movement, the effects' very presence would suggest that the movement was not entirely cohesive. This would further support the findings of Pearlman (2011).

### *3.2. Arguments and causal pathway*

Pearlman's (2011) argument consists of two parts. The first is that in order for a movement to make use of nonviolent protest, it must be cohesive (Pearlman, 2011, p. 11). The second part states that movements with fragmented organizations are more likely to use violence as a means to achieve their aims than movements with cohesive organizations (Pearlman, 2011, p. 11). Building upon the work done by Pearlman (2011), the following analysis investigates the potential causal relation between cohesion and the use of violent or nonviolent tactics and rhetoric in the American Civil Rights Movement.

The movement represented a number of ideas and, as a result, it was made up of smaller subgroups such as King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), and the Black Panther Party (PBS, n.d.).

Given that the movement had such a high number of different ideas and subgroups, the study aims to determine whether the movement was able to achieve the level of cohesion – which would, according to Pearlman's (2011) theory, lead to the use of nonviolent tactics – or whether the fragmentation introduced by the presence of so many different subgroups within the movement would create conditions for the movement to develop violent tendencies. In short, the analysis attempts to determine if the causal mechanism proposed by

Pearlman (2011) functions as theorized. In consequence, the following causal pathway is proposed: When movements are cohesive, the use of nonviolent tactics prevails.

## **4. Methods**

### *4.1. Research design*

The following sections analyze and discuss the arguments in relation to the American Civil Rights Movement. The arguments will be applied to the case of the civil rights movement through the research methodology of theory-centric process tracing. This technique examines the histories behind outcomes and is guided more extensively by theory (Hall, 2003, p. 395). Since the research aims to establish whether the causal mechanism is present and functions as theorized, the process tracing will be theory-testing (Ulriksen & Dadalauri, 2016, p. 228).

Theory-testing process tracing defines the context and causal mechanism from theory (Collier, 2011, p. 824). The concept of causal mechanisms is especially important to process tracing (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 493). A causal mechanism is a set of interacting parts or elements which produce an effect on a variable (Ulriksen & Dadalauri, 2016, p. 225). Pearlman (2011) identifies movement cohesion as the causal mechanism responsible for determining the movement's tactical choice to either engage in violence or nonviolence (p. 23).

The research will apply the causal mechanism and test the proposed causal pathway to the case of the American Civil Rights Movement. Since the cohesion and/or fragmentation within the movement will be analyzed, it is necessary to look at the movement's actions over time and over the movement's most prominent subgroups. In this way, it will be possible to determine if the differences in the movement's organization – whether it is cohesive or fragmented – have an impact on the development of the movement's tactics and attitudes towards the use of violence or nonviolence. As a result, the study will be a single within-case analysis. The research will also be of a qualitative nature, as the contexts, events and actors will be investigated to identify the extent of the movement's cohesion and fragmentation. The impact the movement's internal dynamics have on the tactical choice to use violence or nonviolence will then be studied.

It is also important to conceptualize and define the main concepts of the research. In this study, violent tactics are perceived as acts of aggression towards individuals, physical structures or ideals (Bosi & Malthaner, 2015, p. 439). These can be measured in the number of instances when the movement's members engage in violent acts against other persons or

property. Violent rhetoric is conceptualized as an exhortation to commit the abovementioned acts conveyed by a movement's leadership (Bone, Griffin & Scholz, 2008, p. 435). Such rhetoric can be measured, for example, by analyzing the movement members' – especially the leaders' – speeches, and investigating if they contain any urgings or mentions of violence.

Furthermore, the study deals extensively with the concept of cohesion. Movement cohesion is defined as “the cooperation among individuals that enables unified action” (Pearlman, 2011, p. 9). In order to measure the cohesion present within a movement, Pearlman (2011) makes use of three measurements (pp. 9-10). These are leadership (whether the movement has one unified leadership or many), institutions (the norms governing members' behavior), and collective purpose (if the commitment to the movement's objectives is strong). As the following study tests the applicability and validity of Pearlman's (2011) research, these measurements will be applied to the case of the American Civil Rights Movement.

#### *4.2. Case selection*

The research focuses on the American Civil Rights Movement. Given the extensive debate regarding the use of violence and nonviolence in the movement, the movement poses an interesting case to study in terms of tactical choice. Furthermore, the movement was made up of many subgroups as well as two clear sides advocating for nonviolence and violence (exemplified by King and Malcolm X). As such, the movement's internal cohesion had cause to be thoroughly tested. The civil rights movement would thus provide a suitable case to analyze and determine whether cohesion has an impact on tactical choice.

Prior to conducting the analysis, it was also necessary to establish whether the civil rights movement would fall under the scope conditions of Pearlman's (2011) theory. The theory proposed by the author applies to self-determination movements, which are struggles for autonomy, legitimacy, and rights by national or ethnic groups (Pearlman, 2011, p. 2). In consequence, the civil rights movement falls under the universe of cases to which the author's theory can apply to.

Choosing the appropriate time frame was also needed for case selection. As movement cohesion can shift over time, the movement will be analyzed over a series of years. The study focuses on the civil rights movement between the years 1960 and 1968, and this time frame was chosen for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the 1960s saw a series of pivotal moments in the history of the civil rights movement. These moments, such as the 1963 March on Washington, the passing of the 1964

Civil Rights Act, and Malcolm X's assassination in 1965, all impacted the movement in fundamental ways, often testing the movement's cohesion. Secondly, the following analysis studies change in the movement over time. As a result, it is essential to analyze the groups and their activities for a number of years for the purposes of determining the suspected causal relation between the movement's level of cohesion and the use of either violent or nonviolent tactics. Thirdly, due to the extensive number of sources available on the topic of the civil rights movement and its tactics and rhetoric, it was necessary to choose a specific time period to make the study feasible.

The American Civil Rights Movement in the time period of 1960-1968 was deemed the most relevant for the analysis and for the purposes of the study. As such, the data gathered would yield the most results to be analyzed.

#### *4.3. Data collection*

Since the study is of a qualitative nature, the empirical analysis makes use of a range of sources such as speeches, witness statements, memoirs, newspapers, and archival evidence. From these sources, it would be expected to obtain in-depth insights into the nature of the movement's internal structure and their tactical choice. Given the importance of leadership, the speeches and writings of prominent leaders would be especially useful in shedding light on the issue. If the data gathered illustrates that instances of deep division within the movement were followed by an increase in the use of violent tactics while instances of cohesion were characterized by nonviolence, this would provide evidence for the constraining nature of movement cohesion on the use of violence. With this kind of information, it would be possible to investigate and draw a conclusion regarding the mechanism of cohesion as outlined by Pearlman (2011).

In order to collect the data, academic articles and books were used to provide a broader overview of the internal structure present in the civil rights movement. It was then possible to trace the data which the academic literature used in its analysis back to the original piece of information, and study it in its entirety.

When conducting qualitative research, many of the outcomes can be open to interpretation. It can then be difficult not to introduce biases or omit factors which could explain the outcome of the study, and to determine whether the results of the analysis are correct. To ensure that the ensuing study is as accurate as possible, the data will be collected from a range of sources detailing the different opinions and views regarding the inner structure and organization of the movement. The analysis then is not one-sided or biased, as

the range and number of sources used would attempt to cover all of the necessary information.

## **5. Analysis**

The analysis investigates how cohesion impacted the tactical choice of the American Civil Rights Movement. A background information section will provide an overview of some of the key events which shaped the movement. The use of violence and nonviolence will then be discussed, followed by an investigation of the movement's cohesion in relation to its tactical choice.

### *5.1. Background information*

Largely regarded as one of the most successful nonviolent movements in history, the American Civil Rights Movement was able to break the pattern of racially segregated public facilities through the application of nonviolent protest action (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998). Starting with the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, the movement was able to confront the Jim Crow laws which enforced racial segregation (Nimtz, 2016, p. 3).

The civil rights movement originated in the South, as most slave revolts occurred there and the protest tradition was firmly entrenched in the area (Morris, 1984, p. xi). However, the north of the country also played a crucial role in furthering the goals of the movement (Finley, Lafayette, Ralph & Smith, 2016, p. 7). In the early stages of the movement, the New York-based National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was the dominant black protest organization (Morris, 1984, p. 12). Its critical legal victories culminated in the overturning of the "separate but equal" doctrine, under which racial segregation was legally sanctioned (Fairclough, 1987, p. 2). The organization's legal victories, coupled with their intellectual backing, kept protesting alive in the black community (Morris, 1984, p. 14).

Once the NAACP came under sustained attack, the church functioned as an alternative base of operations (Bloom, 2019, p. 16). It often educated students who would initiate various sit-ins, and even figured prominently in organizing such confrontations (Bloom, 2019, p. 16). These sit-ins were pivotal for the movement. Sit-ins in Greensboro, Nashville and North Carolina challenged the Jim Crow system (Nimtz, 2016, p. 6), as well as saw the movement gain nation-wide attention (Turner, 2010, pp. 6, 44). The church also gave rise to another crucial organization within the movement, the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference (SCLC). Headed by King, the SCLC's campaigns in Birmingham and Selma in 1965 were landmarks in exerting pressure on the federal government (Fairclough, 1987, p. 2). Through such instances of nonviolent direct action, the SCLC aided in achieving the movement's aims.

The landmark March on Washington in 1963 saw the various organizations of the movement – such as the SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) – join forces to end racial segregation and ensure equal opportunities for education, affordable housing, and jobs (Jones, 2013, pp. ix, xii). One of the goals of the March on Washington was the establishment of a federal Civil Rights Act, which would bar discrimination based on race, color or religion in public facilities (Wright, 2006, p. 6). This was realized in 1964 and, together with the passing of the Voting Rights Bill in 1965, made up one of the major political achievements of the civil rights movement (Cone, 2001, p. 177).

## *5.2. Use of violence/nonviolence*

The dependent variable of this study is the civil rights movement's use of violent or nonviolent tactics and rhetoric. The following section seeks to explain whether the civil rights movement was overall primarily violent or nonviolent. The outcome of this investigation is necessary for the subsequent analysis of the movement's tactical choice in relation to its level of cohesion.

The rhetoric used and the tactics promoted by one of the most prominent figures of the civil rights movement and advocates for nonviolent political struggle, Martin Luther King, Jr. (Colaiaco, 1986, p. 17), saw the movement gain nation-wide attention and global recognition (Reed, 2005, p. 3). King conveyed his ideas about a nonviolent and peaceful struggle through speeches which inspired and led a mass following (Colaiaco, 1988, pp. 1-2). As an ardent supporter of the nonviolent tactic, King denounced the use of any form of violence in the movement: “The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness” (King, 1957, p. 3).

King was arguably one of the most influential Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cone, 2001, p. 173). As such, his views and ideals were taken to heart by millions struggling against an oppressive system (Cone, 2001, 173). Boycotts, sit-ins and marches made up the majority of the tactics employed by the movement, and became signature actions of the struggle against racial segregation and discrimination (Blair & Michel, 2000, pp. 33-34). Some have even portrayed the civil rights movement as a biblical struggle and compared King to Christ (Garrow, 1986, p. 58).

Others, however, do not share such idealistic depictions of the movement (Bermanzohn, 2000, p. 32). The tactics and rhetoric promoted by prominent Black Power leader and civil rights activist, Malcolm X, inspired many activists and the movement's subgroups to adopt violence as a means to an end (McWhorter, 2001, p. 419). As the founder of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), Malcolm X was able to spread his views and advocacy for Pan-Africanism (Baldwin & Al-Hadid, 2002, p. 3). At the founding rally of the OAAU, Malcolm X delivered one of his most well-known speeches in which he urged protesters to fight for freedom, justice and equality "by any means necessary" (X, 1965a, p. 40). Though Malcolm X would not consider such rhetoric violent (Cone, 2001, p. 180), it ushered in a new stage of the movement – one in which violent acts committed by the opposition were met with violence committed by movement members (Austin, 2007, p. 8).

The two most influential leaders of the movement represented very diverging attitudes about the use of violence or nonviolence (Cone, 2001, p. 173). While King's actions and speeches preached nonviolent struggle, Malcolm X advocated for the necessity of using violence in self-defense and to confront racial segregation.

What needs to be mentioned is that violence and nonviolence cannot always be thought of as existing in separate worlds (Barak, 2003, p. 6). The spheres of the two seemingly dichotomous tactics are often overlapping and interconnected (Barak, 2003, p. 7). The paradox of nonviolent direct action exemplifies this blurred line between violence and nonviolence. The paradox stipulates that a movement primarily promoting nonviolence is, to a large extent, reliant on violence (Colaiaco, 1986, p. 16). Nonviolence as a tactic gains in strength by provoking violent reactions from the movement's opponents (Colaiaco, 1986, pp. 17-18). During the Selma campaign, King himself articulated the following strategy for a successful nonviolent campaign (King, 1965, p. 16):

1. "Nonviolent demonstrators go into the streets to exercise their constitutional rights
2. Racists resist by unleashing violence against them
3. Americans of conscience in the name of decency demand federal intervention and legislation
4. The administration, under mass pressure, initiates measures of immediate intervention and remedial legislation."

According to some, King's propagation of the use of nonviolent tactics was influenced less by altruistic ideals and more by practical strategy (Bermanzohn, 2000, p. 32). The nonviolent strategy was used extensively due to its effectiveness and the fact that it was the most practical method to counter racist violence (Bermanzohn, 2000, p. 44). Even though the movement is perceived of as being dedicated to nonviolent means of action, the movement needed violence to sustain its existence (Colaiaco, 1986, p. 17). Many of the campaigns depended upon the provocation of violence, police brutality and the violent essence of the supporters of the racist system (Meyer, 1965, p. 327).

Whether for idealistic or strategic reasons, the civil rights movement overall maintained nonviolent tactics. While a radical minority employing violent tactics and rhetoric was present, the moderate majority's use of nonviolence prevailed. This outcome is a necessary step in testing the organizational mediation theory of protest proposed by Pearlman (2011).

### *5.3 Movement cohesion and how it relates to the use of violence/nonviolence*

In order to analyze the cohesion present within the movement and how it impacted the movement's use of violent or nonviolent tactics, three factors will be used to qualitatively measure the variable. The first factor along which cohesion will be measured is leadership, the second institutions, and the third collective purpose. These factors facilitate cooperation among the individuals present in the movement and enable unified action (Pearlman, 2011, p. 9). As a result, they pose as a good indicator of whether a movement is cohesive or fragmented.

#### *5.3.1. Leadership*

Leadership is the ability of a single individual to persuade a larger group to pursue objectives (Gardner, 1993, p. 1). It also contributes to a cohesive organizational structure by guiding members to behave in a certain manner, motivating them to continue protesting, and clarifying the movement's goals (Pearlman, 2011, p. 9). Assessing whether a movement has a unified form of leadership is essential for a study of movement cohesion.

The civil rights movement was made up of a variety of established subgroups, which inherently resulted in a decentralized movement structure (Andrews & Gaby, 2015, p. 514). As a result, it also boasted a number of important personas. These included, for example, establishment-oriented leaders – such as James Farmer, Daisy Bates, Joseph Lowery, Ella Baker and Roy Wilkins – that acted as chief executive officers or prominent members in the

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, or the SCLC (Barnett, 1993, p. 178). H. Rap Brown, Huey P. Newton and Kathleen Cleaver were also prominent figures as members of the more extremist organizations, such as the Black Panther Party (Barnett, 1993, p. 178).

However, of the leaders present in the civil rights movement, none was more central to it than Martin Luther King, Jr. (Barnett, 1993, p. 164). Given the potential for intra-movement disputes due to inherent decentralization, it suited the SCLC and the movement in general to frame its image around its central leader (Fairclough, 1987, p. 3). It was thus in the movement's interest to present a unified form of leadership not only despite the movement's many subgroups but also because of them. Given the decentralization inherent in the civil rights movement, it was necessary to provide a figure for the members and potential members to rally behind. King's support of and insistence on nonviolent direct action found many supporters and cemented his position as a leading figure in the civil rights movement (Cone, 2001, p. 173).

Contrary to King's vehement opposition of movement members using any forms of violence, Malcolm X viewed self-defense and the use of violent tactics as essential (Cone, 2001, p. 180). This attitude was illustrated well in Malcolm X's collection of speeches and statements: "A black man has the right to do whatever is necessary to get his freedom that other human beings have done to get their freed" (X, 1965b, pp. 197-198). Malcolm X's ideas unified those holding more radical ideas, creating a radical flank (Haines, 1988, p. 57). His use of provocative language inspired movement members to use "any means necessary" in order to achieve their freedoms and to warn the opposition to prepare for "reciprocal bleeding" (Cone, 2001, p. 180). Following his assassination in 1965, Malcolm X's ideas gave rise to the Black Panther Party (Harper, 1971, p. 400).

Though Malcolm X's ideas were met with fervor, they appealed to a minority of the movement, as the majority was in support of King's vision of nonviolent peaceful protest (Finley et al., 2016, p. 13). This meant that the movement's leadership was cohesive, as King's role as the movement's central leader remained unchallenged.

### *5.3.2. Institutions*

Institutions are the structures within a movement governing the interactions and behavior of individuals and groups (North, 1990, p. 6). They also embody the norms of the movement and, along with key leadership, guide movement members to act in accordance with those norms (Pearlman, 2011, p. 10).

As previously mentioned, the civil rights movement was comprised of many subgroups, meaning the movement was decentralized (Fredrickson, 1995, p. 271). The movement's decentralized structures presented a challenge to the overall cohesion and invited division. With the Freedom Summer campaign, tensions within the movement became apparent (Dawidowicz, 1965, p. 174). Members in the SNCC became concerned that white activists from the North were taking over the movement by being more involved (Cohen, 2013, p. 7). This fueled internal dissent about the strategies the movement as a whole should pursue, its overall goals, and the tactics which should be employed (Dawidowicz, 1965, p. 191). Furthermore, the friction between the subgroups resulted in considerable segments of the movement developing radical thoughts (Dawidowicz, 1965, p. 191). This is closely related to the radical flank effects.

The phenomenon was first systematically studied by Haines (1988) in relation to the American Black Power movements. In his study, Haines (1988) analyzed black radicalism present in the civil rights movement (p. 2). When Malcolm X joined the movement, his radical ideas found supporters among those who felt dissatisfied with the institutional structures which were in place (McWhorter, 2001, p. 419). With his death in 1965, Malcolm X's ideas and speeches provided the basis for a new wave of black activism and Black Power itself (Harper, 1971, p. 400). The Black Panther Party (BPP), founded in 1966, began following Malcolm X's more radical approach and stressed racial pride (Haines, 1988, p. 63). This resulted in the more frequent use of violence (Dawidowicz, 1965, p. 184).

Haines (1988) finds the presence of both positive and negative radical flank effects in the movement, further finding that these effects peaked in the period of 1964-1966 (p. 167). The presence of a radical flank demonstrates that the movement experienced an ideological and tactical split (Haines, 1988, p. 57). In 1966, a member of the SNCC stated that idealistic ideas were giving way to a "new generation who believed that nonviolence did not work" (Carson, 1981, p. 237).

Though the presence of an extremist wing – exemplified by the OAAU and the BPP – would indicate that the movement was prone to experiencing deep divisions, the majority of the subgroups' institutions were unified under the tactic of nonviolence (Barnett, 1993, p. 178). The numerous subgroups advocating for nonviolence were capable of overpowering the radical flank's violent tendencies.

Contrary to what would be expected, the civil rights movement was able to use the plurality of their institutions and subgroups to its advantage. By boasting a series of insurgent subgroups, the movement was able to exert pressure on their opponents from multiple

sources (McAdam, 2010, p. 155). Due to its decentralized nature, the movement was harder to repress than if it were centralized (Fredrickson, 1995, p. 271). As a result, the costs of containing or defeating the movement increased significantly due to the multiple sources of pressure (McAdam, 2010, p. 155). Rather than acting as isolated units, the civil rights movement's subgroups were capable of functioning as a collective force. Though the number of subgroups meant the movement would be more decentralized, it was able to rally behind a common purpose. The movement was thus able to convert a potential source of fragmentation into a source of cohesion, keeping in check the less numerous violent subgroups.

### *5.3.3. Collective purpose*

A collective purpose is the extent to which the members agree on the movement's objectives (Pearlman, 2011, p. 10). It is also the ultimate indicator of whether a movement is cohesive or not, as a shared purpose is the very reason for the existence of any movement (Pearlman, 2011, p. 10).

Amid intra-movement tensions and increased repression from the side of the white supremacists in the late 1960s, the movement's core beliefs and values came under intense scrutiny. The tensions were visible even in the local chapters of the most prominent civil rights subgroups. As head of one of the NAACP chapters, Robert Williams began to argue for the right to retaliatory violence and armed self-defense (Nimtz, 2016, pp. 4-5). This provoked a debate across the entirety of the civil rights movement about the viability of nonviolent direct action (Nimtz, 2016, pp. 4-5).

Even though such a national debate regarding one of the core ideas of the movement was an important occasion of fragmentation, it was an isolated event (Nimtz, 2016, pp. 4-5). The majority of the movement viewed the use of nonviolence to achieve the movement's goals as a necessity (Clayton, 2018, p. 452). This unified conception of nonviolent direct action as the key to realizing the movement's objectives was crucial in holding the civil rights movement together due to the sheer number of subgroups present (Andrews & Gaby, 2015, p. 514). Since the movement was able to amass a large following and consisted of a number of subgroups, a common purpose was necessary to unify the members and ensure the movement would continue in its effort to tackle racial segregation and discrimination.

The concept of a collective purpose is also closely tied to a movement's leadership. By virtue of their role as the centerpiece of a movement, leaders can invoke ideas capable of resonating with members and bolstering unity (Pearlman, 2011, p. 10). This is especially

important for nonviolent movements. Since mass nonviolence tends to be rooted in the culture of a community, movement leaders' opinions influence – and are influenced by – the beliefs and values of the masses (Fredrickson, 1995, p. 230). King's emphasis on nonviolence affected the community's values, dissuading members from more extreme views and rallying them behind the collective purpose of enacting change through nonviolent means (Nimtz, 2016, p. 9). Without a common purpose, the movement would have been prone to more instances of division.

Though in times of fragmentation movement members would believe that violence is necessary to achieve the movement's aims, the emphasis remained on nonviolence and peaceful means of protesting (Austin, 2007, p. 3). The subgroups' common aim served as a unifying factor, allowing the movement to remain largely nonviolent despite periods of fragmentation and decentralization.

## **6. Discussion**

The findings of the study established that the American Civil Rights Movement was predominantly nonviolent and that a high level of cohesion within the movement was needed to maintain this tactical choice. This is, in part, because nonviolent demonstrations and sustained social movements require coordination, clear strategic direction and discipline, and only a cohesive movement can fulfill those requirements. A shared sense of community and being part of a unified whole are a needed precondition for the success of strikes and boycotts that were integral to the civil rights movement.

In addition, unity within the social movement aided its members to construct and implement effective strategies. By presenting a unified front even when the movement was made up of a series of subgroups, the civil rights movement was able to develop multiple sources of pressure through which they could achieve their goals and make persecution more difficult. However, this could have only been achieved because of the movement's collective purpose and leadership. Though the movement boasted many prominent figures within the SNCC, NAACP, SCLC and CORE, King's leadership occupied a central position (Barnett, 1993, p. 164). As a result, he provided a focal point in the movement for members to rally behind.

When the movement lacked cohesion due to intra-movement tensions, its ability to constrain the use of violent tactics was weaker. More militant subgroups such as the BPP and OAAU would emerge to advocate for and engage in violence. However, the movement was

able to overcome the challenges posed by these subgroups, and contain further disruptive dissent.

Cohesion within the movement also propagated the majority of the subgroups' vision, which was the use of nonviolence (Barnett, 1993, p. 178). Though the extent to which this tactical choice was a result of purely idealistic means or strategic ones is a matter of debate (Nimtz, 2016, p. 16), it was, nonetheless, a result of the cohesion of the movement's leadership, institutions, and collective purpose.

## **7. Conclusion**

### *7.1. Summary*

The study set out to answer the research question: How did cohesion within the civil rights movement impact the use of violent/nonviolent tactics and rhetoric in the period of 1960-1968? Building upon the work of Pearlman (2011) and in contrast to conventional explanations on tactical choice proposed by authors such as Della Porta (1995) and Sharp (1973), this study finds that cohesion is necessary for a movement to maintain nonviolent tactics. Despite encountering challenges in the form of Malcolm X and the BPP, the more radical subgroups did not manage to overtake the movement's purpose, which was to enact change through nonviolent direct action. The overall cohesion present within the leadership, institutions and collective purpose functioned to discipline the movement, holding it back from engaging in violence.

The causal pathway initially proposed was that when movements are cohesive, the use of nonviolent tactics prevails. The analysis demonstrated that there is substantial evidence in support of this causal pathway, as the study found that the movement's organizational structure had a fundamental impact on the strategies it used. In consequence, the organizational mediation theory of protest is applicable to another case, further proving the relevance of the theory.

### *7.2. Limitations and further research*

Despite the success of the study in providing evidence for the theory it set out to explain, the study is not without limitations. One such limitation of the research is that it was often necessary to rely on only secondary sources of information. Though these sources would often take the form of oral histories – which stem from interviews with movement participants – they were, nonetheless, presented in a certain manner by a previous researcher.

The original piece of data (such as a witness statement) would already be interpreted, and the data's validity could suffer from the previous researcher's biases.

As a result, conducting research into movement cohesion and its impact on tactical choice using mostly primary sources could provide a useful angle for future research, especially if the study aimed to analyze a more recent social movement. It could be interesting to see whether the organizational mediation theory of protest is also applicable to transnational movements. Seeing whether a movement which transcends national boundaries is capable of achieving the level of cohesion needed to constrain its more radical members could be an interesting area of future research. In this way, the theory would further enrich the academic understanding of how organizational structure and internal unity affect tactical choice.

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