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CIVIL  
RIGHTS  
*and the*  
IDEA OF  
FREEDOM

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*Richard H. King*

## **Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom**

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# CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE IDEA OF FREEDOM

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Richard H. King

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## Preface

Remembering the origins of a book is about as difficult as recapturing those early experiences that shape our lives. Indeed, Freud suggested that the crucial memories of our early years, even and especially those that seem clearest and most authentic, are often composites of fantasy and experience that never happened the way they reveal themselves to us in memory. They are what he called screen memories (*Deckerinnerungen*). Furthermore, the degree of their distortion is proportional to the conflicted nature of the memory in question.

At any rate I have two memories which help explain why this book eventually came to be written. The first concerns a meeting I attended in Jackson, Tennessee, in the summer of 1965. I was teaching summer school at Lane College but had also spent some time under the wise and shrewd guidance of the college treasurer and local civil rights activist, Albert Porter. He took me to several black churches in nearby Haywood and Fayette counties where we helped set up a couple of "freedom schools." I was from East Tennessee and the flat, swampy part of the state might as well have been another country. It seemed (and was) like the Mississippi Delta, a place name filled with mysterious and frightening resonances even for a white Southerner.

It was in this strange yet also somehow familiar background that I attended a meeting with Mr. Porter. As I remember it, the meeting was held in a recreation center in the black section of Jackson and its purpose was to organize the local group that would apply for funds from President Johnson's War on Poverty. There was nothing world-historical at work here exactly; still, the reason why that meeting lodged in my memory, and was in fact quite vivid and moving at the time, was that I observed how a group of people, in this case black Southerners, for the first time confronted the "fact" that they were a group who had a choice. They could organize themselves, elect officers, then debate what their community needed and apply for



funds. What I witnessed was a crucial part of the process of people—including myself—becoming “political,” a process which had begun several years before in Montgomery and Greensboro and then spread throughout the South.

The other experience, an intellectual one, happened about the same time, perhaps that summer. Sometime around then I read Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution*, a work which culminates with a long discussion of the way people in certain settings organize themselves relatively spontaneously into councils or *soviets* or *Räte*, there to debate and decide on new forms of political action and organization. For Arendt, the council system was the embodiment of free action in concert and the core of the revolutionary tradition she wanted to rescue from Marxist-Leninist models of or liberal-social democratic explanations for modern revolution.

I spent the 1965–66 academic year teaching at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. There I came into contact with SNCC workers who were organizing the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. Periodically, they would come to nearby Tuscaloosa for “R&R” and to escape the life-threatening tension involved in organizing in Black Belt Alabama. What struck me at the time, and since, was the way Arendt’s highly abstract meditation on revolution and politics as species of political freedom spoke so directly to what I heard from the SNCC workers and what I saw happening among the people whose political awakening the civil rights movement had been all about. Later I met a friend who had had roughly the same set of experiences—involvement in the movement in its last stages in the mid-1960s. She too had read *On Revolution* during that time and she too had been forcefully struck by its power to illuminate what she had experienced and seen happen.

The point of relating these two incidents is to suggest what compelled me some two decades later to begin work on an analysis of the civil rights movement that would be most centrally influenced by the work of Hannah Arendt. In doing so it has been far from my intention to import complex European theories into American political experience just for the sake of it. It is fair to wonder about the appropriateness of such an application. My response can only be that I have found nothing written by an American, white or black, academic or activist, which brings alive in such cogent and powerful form as does Arendt’s work what I take to be the essence of the civil rights movement—the search for freedom.

But to talk of “essence” risks transforming a movement into a static model, thus denying differences or changes within the movement during its short and at times unhappy life. More dangerously, it also risks re-creating the movement as an object of nostalgia. Thus I use Arendt and others not only to analyze the various ideas of freedom in the civil rights movement but also to trace the burgeoning splits within the movement as well as its decline and dissolution, a process that had an internal dynamic as well as external causes.

If there is a coherent view of history at work here, it might loosely be called republican; in Nietzschean terms, monumental. I am deeply suspicious of this form of historical consciousness which at worst combines nostalgia with the uncritical apotheosizing of individuals and groups, one of the ingredients in the poisonous brew known as fascism. A more salutary function of this form of historical awareness is to call us back not literally to first principles and institutions so much as to a contemplation of what was central to the movement and what might be retained or revitalized from it. Moreover, events over the last three years in China, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe suggest that the kind of politics, the sort of freedom, and the nature of political authority which Arendt so powerfully defined in her work show that neither a reading of Arendt nor of the civil rights movement through Arendtian spectacles is merely an academic exercise or an exercise in sentimentality. If it remains such after reading this book, either the reader or I—or both of us—has failed.

As usual writing a book incurs many debts for which mere thanks is inadequate. Though this book must travel, I suppose, under the aegis of intellectual history, I have done some archival research in its preparation. The civil rights movement is perhaps the first historical movement to be so extensively documented through oral history and captured on film. Besides the several excellent published compilations of interviews with participants in the movement, there remains much unpublished material to be used. Particularly valuable is a collection of transcribed interviews with a vast array of participants and observers of the movement that is found in the Civil Rights Documentation Project at Howard University in Washington, D.C. The head of the Oral History Department of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Dr. Elinor D. Sinnette, was particularly helpful in facilitating my research there. Louise Cook granted access to the King Library and Archives at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center in

Atlanta, Georgia; and Diane Ware, research assistant, offered friendly aid when I consulted some of their manuscript collections having to do with Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964 as well as newspapers such as *Southern Courier* and *Southern Patriot* and several important pieces of academic research dealing with Martin Luther King. Finally, Howard Gotlieb of the Mugar Memorial Library of Boston University made available various documents dealing with Martin Luther King. I thank him as well.

In addition, I made an effort to view as much film footage of the movement as possible in order to recapture the mood of the movement and the times that escapes embodiment in print. In the summer of 1985, I spent several days at the National Archives in Washington looking at newsreels and special network programs on the civil rights movement from the 1950s and 1960s. My special thanks go to Patrick Sheehan and Sarah Rouse of the Library of Congress Film Division who helped me track down several television specials on the movement from the 1960s as well as Elie Landau's four-hour documentary film *King: From Montgomery to Memphis*. Finally, of course, every student of the civil rights movement, as well as every American citizen, is deeply indebted to the superlative documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, produced by Henry Hampton.

Without a certain amount of financial support for travel and research, a book such as this becomes even more difficult since the archives are in the United States and I live in Britain. The Research Fund of the University of Nottingham helped make a two-month research trip to America possible in the summer of 1985, and the British Academy provided travel money to come to the States in the spring of 1987 for a few weeks. While still living in America, a summer stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities allowed me to begin work in earnest on this project. Most important, I participated in an NEH Summer Seminar in 1982 led by Professor Richard Flathman of Johns Hopkins University on the topic "Political Freedom." It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this seminar in providing the background in political theory that informs my book. Suffice it to say that Dick Flathman was a fascinating and exemplary teacher-leader-theoretician and my colleagues in the seminar were as congenial and intellectually stimulating a group as I have ever had the privilege to be a member of.

Over the last several years I have presented papers on the topic of civil rights to various groups in Britain and America. In England,

groups at the British Association of American Studies (B.A.A.S.), the University of East Anglia, the University of Sussex, and Oxford University have listened and criticized. I presented part of the material on Martin Luther King at the symposium "We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr.—The Leader and the Legacy," in Washington, D.C., in October 1986. Vincent Harding and Mary Berry offered useful comments on my paper at that time. In America, invitations to present aspects of my study at Brandeis University and the University of Virginia have been much appreciated. In particular Thaddious Davis, Ralph Luker, and J. Mills Thornton commented on aspects of my study at the Southern Intellectual History Group meeting at Chapel Hill in March 1990. Finally, my year at the University of Mississippi (1989–90) and association with the History department and particularly the Center for the Study of Southern Culture was invaluable in bringing my work to completion in a congenial setting. The center has a large collection of videos, dealing not only with Southern literature and culture but also with Southern politics, in particular the video transcriptions of two major conferences sponsored by the center dealing with "The Media and Civil Rights" and "The Law and Civil Rights." The staff at the center, especially Associate Director Ann Abadie, were helpful beyond any reasonable expectation and made my time there a genuine pleasure. That Mississippi is not "now" what it was "then" can be attributed to many factors, forces, and people. One of them certainly is the Center for the Study of Southern Culture under Bill Farris's direction.

I have been extremely lucky in teaching in such a congenial setting as the American Studies department at Nottingham. In particular, colleagues such as Pete Messent, Dave Murray, and Douglas Tallack have provided intellectual encouragement (and challenges) to what they see as a quaintly liberal approach to political and social change, despite my protestations that Europeans don't know how many mansions there are in the house of American liberalism. Critical theorists take a dim view of my approach here but my colleagues in the School of Critical Theory at Nottingham have created an atmosphere of theoretical excitement and vitality that exemplifies the intellectual value of Marxism and post-structuralism, both of which are coming under demagogic attacks of late from people who should know better.

Homage should also be paid to the extraordinary work of scholars who have written on the civil rights movement in the 1980s and

particularly to journalists such as Pat Watters whose reactions to and thoughts on the movement have influenced me quite a bit. Ray Arsenault and Paul Gaston have both been good friends and valuable sources of information about the South and the movement over the years. Three friends—Larry Friedman, Steve Whitfield, and Jim Turner—read the entire manuscript and offered needed encouragement and/or stern warnings about difficulties. Jim Turner was particularly helpful at one juncture when I had begun to wonder if I was making sense to anyone at all. Larry and Steve have become regulars at this and I thank them once again for their intellectual companionship as well as personal friendship. Over the years, Sheldon Meyer of Oxford University Press has provided encouragement and Rebecca Schneider's close attention to sense and syntax along with her insightful questions about vagaries in the text have even made the process of responding to copyediting enjoyable.

The most profoundly felt gratitude is perhaps the hardest to express in a straightforward way in such a public setting. But my book is dedicated to my wife, Charlotte Fallenius, whose presence has made all the difference.

*Nottingham*  
*September 1991*

R. H. K.

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# Contents

Introduction 3

1. The Repertory of Freedom 12
2. The Experience of Politics 39
3. Self-interest and Self-respect 62
4. Martin Luther King and the Meanings of Freedom 87
5. Martin Luther King: Authorship and Ideas 108
6. SNCC, Participatory Politics, and the People 138
7. Violence and Self-respect: Fanon and Black Radicalism 172

Conclusion 201

Notes 213

Index 255

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the Idea of Freedom**



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# Introduction

Where the civil rights movement in the United States once seemed to herald an historical “break” of major proportions, the 1980s saw the appearance of several works in black intellectual and cultural history identifying what V. P. Franklin has called a tradition of “core values”—freedom, resistance, self-determination, and education—which formed during slavery and upon which the movement of the 1950s and 1960s drew for intellectual sustenance. Moreover, historically oriented sociological studies have reconstructed the dense institutional matrix of Southern black colleges and churches, NAACP chapters, and “movement centers” staffed by independent white and black activists from which the civil rights movement emerged and by which it was sustained. Even before the bus boycott in Montgomery in 1955/56, there had been a mass campaign against bus segregation in Baton Rouge in 1953. And as Taylor Branch points out in his 1988 book *Parting the Waters*, the Greensboro sit-ins of February 1960, which touched off the direct action phase of the movement in earnest, had been preceded by “similar demonstrations in at least 16 other cities” in the “previous three years.”<sup>1</sup>

Another example of this tendency to push the origins of the movement back in time, inevitably lessening the significance of the events of the 1950s and 1960s, can be seen in a recent article in the *Journal of American History* which has suggested the early 1940s rather than the mid-1950s as the true inception of the civil rights struggle.<sup>2</sup> According to this argument, during the World War years the black population in the South and North entered for certain into the processes of urbanization and industrialization. In plants all over the country black workers were organized by CIO unions around issues of working conditions, wages, and hours, while membership in traditional civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League increased, as did black participation in politics at all levels. Such a focus implies that the later direct action campaigns, most prominently Greensboro and Nashville, Albany and

Birmingham, the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign in Mississippi and the grand finale of the Selma to Montgomery march in early 1965, duplicated the efforts made two decades earlier or, more startlingly, that they failed to address social and economic issues which union campaigns of the 1940s had made central.

This recent emphasis on the movement's ideological and institutional continuity with the past tends, wrongly I think, to minimize what was different, even unique, about the civil rights movement of the 1954–68 period. Paradoxically, what began as an effort to explain the emergence of a “new” historical phenomenon ends by undermining its novelty. No doubt the civil rights movement did not emerge *de novo*. Antecedents to intellectual and cultural aspects of the movement there certainly were and most of Chapter 1 will be spent examining them. But with all that said, the freshness, even inexplicability, of the movement should not be underplayed for the sake of an historical pedigree; nor should we succumb to the temptation to erase the distinction between priority and effective causality, what logicians name the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*.

With this we arrive at the issue which is one of the main concerns of this book. The position I will be challenging has been expressed most succinctly by J. Mills Thornton when he writes:

From the perspective of the ideal of individual liberty, the Civil Rights Movement ended because, with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and finally the Fair Housing Act of 1968, the movement had achieved its goal.<sup>3</sup>

I will be arguing, however, that what was unique about the civil rights movement was not *just* the attainment of individual liberty through the dismantling of the Jim Crow system, though this was, as Thornton has suggested, the most readily identifiable goal of the movement. Rather, first tracing out the *various* meanings of individual and collective freedom as they turned up in the rhetoric and thinking of movement participants and leaders, I will then focus upon what I take to be the other important goal of the movement—the effort to create or make evident a new sense of individual and collective identity, even self-respect, among Southern black people through political mobilization. This is not to claim that the civil rights movement invented self-respect and pride or that it was uniquely successful in securing such a self-conception. Rather that for the first

time—or for the first time in a long time—such ideas took on a collective, political meaning.

By extension, I want also to suggest that the differences in the goals of the Southern civil rights movement and the (largely) Northern- and Western-based black pride and black consciousness movements which appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s have been over-emphasized. Differences there most certainly were—in strategy and tactics, informing vision and ideological emphasis and, of course, goals. But what united the two phases of the black insurgency, what Martin Luther King and Malcolm X did share, was the goal of constructing a new sense of self and of black culture. And what was first a political goal became, in the 1970s and 1980s, the impetus for the academic and intellectual rediscovery and reinterpretation of the Afro-American cultural and historical experience.

At the base of this project is my effort to understand the experience of political involvement undergone by movement participants. How did participants talk about their experience of sitting-in at a lunch counter or trying to register to vote in Selma or attending mass meetings in churches in rural West Tennessee or in the Delta? What terms did they use most often? If such experiences are neglected, it becomes easy to view the civil rights movement as a kind of mopping-up operation, one which changed nothing fundamental, however important it may have been in fulfilling the nation's ideals and securing the rights of its black citizens. Ironically this latter view of the movement tends to be shared by those who stress the purely legal and mainstream political goals of the movement, such as Thornton, and the black power/consciousness movement that followed upon the successes—and failures—of the civil rights movement. Under the relentless, even scornful scrutiny of figures such as Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver, marches, mass meetings, freedom songs, non-violence, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Martin Luther King seemed at best quaint and at worst part of the problem not the solution. From this “radical” perspective, the religious, participatory democratic and liberal dimensions of the movement seemed hopelessly reformist or bourgeois or “white”—and usually all three together.

Indeed the historiography of the movement has generally neglected much, if any, discussion of the “new” notion of politics the movement seemed to embody. Most histories of the movement, as well as works analyzing the legal and constitutional issues that

emerged with and from the movement, assume that it can best be understood from within the institutional and conceptual confines of post-war liberal pluralism with its emphasis upon the pursuit of interests and defense of political and legal rights as the *raison d'être* of politics. The great merit of works such as Pat Watters and Reese Cleghorn's *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* (1967), Watters's *Down to Now* (1971), Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's *Black Power* (1967), and David Garrow's *Protest at Selma* (1978) is that for them the pursuit of rights and assertion of interests do not exhaust the definition of what politics involves or might be.<sup>4</sup> Much of what follows in this study is devoted to exploring the experience of the "political" in the civil rights movement and the way that experience failed to fit comfortably, if at all, within the confines of conventional liberal politics.

The larger point here is that the politics of pluralism assumes that politics centers appropriately on power, narrowly conceived in terms of control and domination, working one's will against the resistance of others or assuring a way toward co-existence with others. On this definition mainstream liberals, hard-boiled realists, and radicals are in essential agreement. As Willie Ricks, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field worker who coined the phrase "black power," explained in 1966 during the first flush of the black power movement: "We had moved to the level of verbalizing our drive for power—not merely for the vote, not for some vague kind of freedom, not for legal rights, but the basic force in any society—power."<sup>5</sup> The problem with this view of politics is that it either implies that "after the revolution" politics will still be about power, in which case the revolution will have been in vain, *or* that some mysterious transformation in human nature will cause the reign of domination to fade away. In either case, when political opposition does appear after a revolution, the justification exists to suppress it as traitorous rather than treat it as normal.<sup>6</sup> And the emphasis upon securing rights as the main aim of political or legal action may lead, as has been pointed out, to the position where rights and politics will be seen as mutually exclusive, causing a kind of depoliticalization to set in.<sup>7</sup>

What then was the conception of politics at work in movement activities? The "new" politics of the 1960s has been characterized by Wini Breines as "prefigurative" rather than "strategic," by Jane Mansbridge as "unitary" as opposed to "adversary."<sup>8</sup> But the paradox

is that though this new politics seems unique and utopian when set beside the pluralist theory/practice of mainstream American politics, it bears a certain family resemblance to pre-modern civic humanist or republican impulses recast in decidedly modern democratic and even communitarian anarchist terms. In this respect the political culture set in motion by the civil rights movement fell outside the hegemony of the "liberal" tradition so strongly argued by Louis Hartz.<sup>9</sup>

In the process of political involvement, to which I will return in Chapter 2, many participants in the movement arrived at a new sense of themselves as neither beleaguered, isolated individuals nor as oppressed masses but as newly empowered citizens who were part of a collective, public process of deliberation and action. They no longer felt so dependent upon the benevolence of white Northern friends nor so fearful of the hostility of their white Southern enemies. And they embraced the specifically political meaning of taking responsibility for their own lives, a meaning which had little or nothing to do with the economic or moral individualism so endemic in the dominant culture. Indeed this assumption of responsibility might be seen as the modern democratic form of political virtue.

This is not to claim that participants in the movement were unconcerned with gaining their rights or defending their interests. Nor is it to claim that participants in the movement were better or more moral people than their adversaries or temporizing allies. In some cases this was so; but not always. Indeed my purpose here is not to emphasize the "moral" nature of politics in the civil rights movement as opposed to the corrupt and compromised politics of mainstream America or of Southern segregationists. Rather I want to stress the "political" nature of the politics of the civil rights movement. For the strategies and goals of the movement, of various campaigns, and especially of grass-roots efforts at community organizing were often arrived at through extended political discussion, argumentation, and persuasion and carried out with considerable participation by people other than those belonging to the movement elite. When this process worked at its best, not only were individual participants' senses of selfhood enlarged as the goals of the group coincided with the most democratic traditions in the political culture of the United States, but, more importantly, the movement forced the polity to act on its own best impulses and original principles, that is, for the common good or in the public interest.

Finally the most politically innovative thing about the movement was the way that, faced with the intolerably restricted and occluded nature of the public realm in the South, the movement reilluminated and then expanded that realm. Put another way, the movement revived the potentially subversive idea that the “State” was not always or necessarily identical with the political realm and that *raison d'état* was not synonymous with the *res publica*. In this it served notice that conventional understandings of politics and the political had become seriously atrophied and were in need of radical rejuvenation.

Observant readers will have noticed that I have gradually moved from issues of historiography to matters basic to political theory and political culture. While further analyzing the limits of what historians have said about the political culture of the movement, I want to discuss how the movement both generated and deployed political ideas, most importantly the idea of freedom, and how, in turn, the uses of freedom within the movement fit with—or expanded upon—the conventional understandings of freedom in contemporary political culture and thought. From this perspective, I will suggest some ways in which a movement such as the civil rights movement can serve as a valuable resource for contemporary political theorists who have devoted surprisingly little attention to it. For as Don Herzog has suggested, political theorists “need to exploit the considerable resources of history and social theory” much more than they have up to now.<sup>10</sup>

Such suggestions imply a judgment upon much recent American political thought, one which mirrors my criticism of the historiography of the civil rights movement for its indifference to political ideas. First, recent academic political thought, particularly the influential and rich liberal political theory, as exemplified in the work of John Rawls especially, is unconcerned with historical context or concrete historical specification. Symptomatic of this problem, perceptive critics of liberal political philosophy such as Michael Sandel and Ian Shapiro themselves fail to ventilate their works with very much historical “reality,” preferring to engage in a purely “internalist” argument.<sup>11</sup> For instance, most critics of liberalism, particularly from the Left, fail to account for the persistent appeal of liberal modes of thinking, particularly the contemporary prevalence of “rights” talk everywhere. Musty claims that liberalism’s appeal is a misunder-

standing because of its original dependence on individualistic conceptions of the self or that it is just an ideological cover for capitalist conceptions of the market fail to confront the fact that contemporary liberalism's willingness to take rights seriously has been practically the only ideological/conceptual bulwark against totalitarian concepts of the State and Party, whether on the Left or Right, in the nearly half century since World War II.

Moreover, critics of liberalism fail to acknowledge that though rights in liberal theory are assumed to bear exclusively on the individual, rights-talk and claims have been taken up by groups of all sorts in protest against social exclusion and political/legal oppression. One need only point to the women's movement, now in many respects a world-wide movement, to dissident popular movements such as Solidarity in Poland and those in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe generally, and of course to the on-going struggle in South Africa to see the necessity, if not the sufficiency, of liberalism in the contemporary world.

A related shortcoming of recent political thinking in general, not just of liberal political thought, has been the tendency to focus on static conceptual states—rights, justice, equality, and freedom—while neglecting the experiences that make up actual political involvement. Observing that “Political theorists seldom capture spontaneous responses to the experience of political life,” Nancy Rosenblum contends that it is a “perfectly reasonable expectation that political theory mirror [participants'] experience of political life, including affective ones.”<sup>12</sup> I concur heartily with Rosenblum's observation and thus focus my ensuing discussion of the experience of politics in the civil rights movement around such constitutive experiences as the risk of life involved in much of the political action undertaken by participants in the movement, the emergence of feelings of self-respect and self-determination, the growth of a sense of solidarity, the capacity for making political judgments, and finally the experience of what Hannah Arendt has called “public happiness” within the civil rights movement.<sup>13</sup>

More generally, to “do” political theory without understanding the experience of political action is akin to trying to appreciate an opera by studying the libretto without listening to the music. Extensive documentation of that experience in the South exists in the form of published and unpublished interviews and oral history collections.<sup>14</sup> Such a source presents a tremendous opportunity for us to under-



stand more about what was existentially involved in the rhetoric and ideas of freedom—freedom not just as a concept or status, but as an experience with a history.

### **A Note on the Nature of the Text**

As things stand now, the literature of the civil rights movement includes plenty of first-rate general histories of the movement; exhaustive studies of major civil rights organizations such as SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); fascinating analyses of campaigns in towns and cities of the South, ranging from Chapel Hill, North Carolina to Tuskegee, Alabama; and biographies of and autobiographical reminiscences by leaders of the movement. What is missing so far is anything approaching an intellectual history of the movement, specifically a political-theoretical analysis of its rhetoric and thinking.

Attempting to fill this gap, what follows will not depend on a narrative line to move it along, though the book is arranged in roughly chronological order. My organizing image is rather the triptych viewed from a vantage point directly in front of it. Chapter 1 will provide that vantage point by unpacking and analyzing four basic meanings of freedom in Western political thought, illustrating them with examples from United States and specifically Afro-American history and thought. Chapters 2 and 3 belong together as one “panel” of the triptych. They address the general experience of politics in the civil rights movement, moving on to more abstract reflections upon the relationship between self-interest and self-respect in political thought and action. Chapters 4 and 5 make up the middle panel and are devoted to the way Martin Luther King’s life and thought embody the four previous meanings of freedom previously identified; Chapter 4 being the more descriptive and its successor more analytical. The final panel, comprised of Chapters 6 and 7, traces the shift in thought and rhetoric undergone by workers in SNCC which involved a narrowing of the meaning of freedom and the radicalization of its meaning. Here the influence of Frantz Fanon will be especially of interest, since Fanon’s position represents the ultimate destination of the drive for self-respect in the movement. In the conclusion, I move away from the close focus on the civil rights movement and look

briefly at the fate of freedom and political action in the contemporary world.

Finally, I should say that my focus upon political ideas does not imply that I assign ultimate causal force to them. It does attest to my firm belief that neither individual nor collective political action can be properly understood without taking into account the way ideas (i.e., values, beliefs, ideologies) shape, guide, and occasionally determine what people want and how they go about getting it. It also assumes that the “goods” that people attempt to gain through politics are not exclusively material ones and that the ideas they deploy in the process of attaining these goods are neither mere “smokescreens” behind which lurk so-called “real” interests nor products of “false consciousness.”

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Repertory of Freedom

Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!

Martin Luther King, March on Washington, August 1963

Freedom in its various guises has been a central theme in Western thought. At any particular place and time, the dominant meaning of freedom and its sphere of primary relevance (sacred or secular, personal or collective; economic, social, cultural, or political) will vary. The set of ways of defining and applying freedom in the political thought and culture of the West is what I will call the “repertory” of freedom.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, freedom, as much or more than most political concepts, is “essentially contested.”<sup>2</sup> Thinkers over the centuries have argued about the relationship of free will to political and social freedom, questioned whether freedom is a unitary concept at all, and, if not, sought to enumerate various types of freedom. Even at a popular level, usage of the term has ranged widely. When individuals and groups refer to themselves as “free,” they usually mean more than that they are not legally enslaved or that they have legal protections and entitlements as citizens. A person can be a slave, yet possess what some would call a kind of autonomy or “mental” freedom, while a legally free person can be a slave to drugs or alcohol.

Of course the term freedom can be subject to Orwellian distortions or pressed into the service of suspect causes. At one time the “free world” included several nations ruled by highly repressive regimes, while the mechanisms of the “free” market may severely restrict my comings and goings. The infamous Rousseauian claim that we may “force people to be free” has bothered more than just conservatives. Closer to the theme of freedom in the civil rights movement, a perfectly acceptable liberal principle—“freedom of choice”—be-

came a way for white Southerners to avoid sending their children to integrated schools in the 1960s.

In this chapter I will delineate what I see as the four basic meanings of freedom in Western and American political thinking and see how they relate to Afro-American thinking about and experience of freedom. In doing this I hope to establish the repertory of freedom, the traditions of freedom-talk which the civil rights movement was both conscious of and, at times, unconscious heir to, and explore the ways the movement revitalized and enriched those traditions.

The rhetoric of freedom permeated the movement from the beginning. Martin Luther King's first book, written out of his experience as leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, was named *Stride Toward Freedom* and he ended his now famous "I Have a Dream" speech in late summer 1963 with the words of "the old Negro spiritual—free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" "Freedom songs," a new type of music different from spirituals, gospel, blues, or protest songs, were first made part of movement activities in Albany, Georgia in 1961–62. The Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, spearheaded by SNCC but carried out under the aegis of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), was known as "Freedom Summer." Out of that effort came the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) which made an unsuccessful bid to be seated at the Democratic convention in Atlantic City in August of that same year. Informal schools set up by volunteers to teach basic literacy and impart the rudiments of black history and political education were known as "freedom schools," while the "freedom house" was the name of movement headquarters in various Mississippi towns. Indeed the rallying cry of the civil rights movement until the mid-1960s was "Freedom Now!"

It is tempting to dismiss such freedom-talk as a species of sloganeering and little more. Indeed one participant in the movement remembered that "none of us knew exactly what it meant, but we were saying freedom."<sup>3</sup> Still, easy skepticism on the topic begs the question of why the rhetoric of freedom resonated so powerfully with the aspirations of Southern blacks and occasionally Southern whites. And to minimize the importance of the rhetoric of freedom fails to take seriously how participants in the movement themselves articulated what concerned them and assumes that "we" somehow know better. More generally we should reject the notion that interests not

words are what really move people to political action and question the related assumption that to be concerned with political rhetoric and ideas is to be unreasonably high-minded. Political acts of cruelty are as often motivated by ideas as by interests. But before unpacking the various meanings or dimensions of freedom, we need to ask what the "logic" of freedom-talk was.

There was surprisingly little explicit talk about equality as such in the civil rights movement. Indeed, it may be that equality concerned whites more than blacks since the argument about racial equality was (and essentially is) an argument among white people. Black people assume equality to be the case, by and large; and perhaps the relative paucity of references to the term among movement participants or leaders may have derived from the sense that it was demeaning for black people to argue the case at all. In addition, freedom itself could be understood to subsume equality in so far as a sense of self-respect and pride, characteristics of a new, free self, implied an assertion of equality. Finally, when terms such as "equal rights" or "equal protection of the laws" were deployed, they did not refer to the capacities of black people but to their relationship to the law, whatever their capacities. That is, neither individual nor group capacity is relevant to the question of equal rights.

But the link between rights-talk and freedom-talk is both closer and more complicated. Dominated as the legal and political culture of the United States has been by rights-talk, it comes as a surprise to note the relative infrequency of reference to rights within movement rhetoric. One reason may be that rights are legal/constitutional entities, more the concern of lawyers and judges than of grass-roots movements. Furthermore, an individual may be said to "possess" a right. But it is not a disposition or state of mind; a "right" has no psychological dimension and denotes an external relationship to state power or social pressure. For that reason to be a rights-bearer lacks the emotional resonance of the claim to be a "free" man or woman. Finally, demanding, exercising, or protecting rights is sometimes close in meaning to what political theorists call "negative" freedom. Thus some sorts of rights-talk can also be seen as freedom-talk, particularly when rights are thought of as privileges (a black person should have the right to apply to the University of Alabama) or immunities (black people should not be hindered from sitting anywhere on a public conveyance). Rights, in other words, are particular specifications on and codifications of freedom in general.<sup>4</sup>