

Justice Requires a Revolution; A Film Review of

Ava DuVernay's *Selma*

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Civil rights scholar and international icon Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had this to say to his fellow clergymen who called for a halt of civil disobedience by civil rights activists in Alabama, “Justice too long delayed, is justice denied” (King, 1963). Understood as a legal precedent today, the complex notion of revolutionary timing is still widely contested. The question as to the address of grievances is not *whether or not* an insurgency should occur, rather, it is *when* one should occur. Ava DuVernay’s 2014 historical drama, *Selma*, grapples with this question of timing and the tactics of revolution when the oppressed can no longer work within the system, but must dismantle it. Detailing the story of the Selma bridge crossing by Dr. King and his followers in protest of black disenfranchisement in the South, *Selma* presents the powerful, disturbing reality of political violence and its place within social movements.

An interesting aspect of DuVernay’s depiction of the story of Selma is its emphasis not on the strength of the enemy but the competing interests of the allied forces. A lack of shared understanding between black activists and those in positions of authority, particularly the Johnson Administration, delays justice and forces radical demonstration. Priority of grievances thus becomes the enemy of change. As Dr. King defends his movement and pleads his case for support of voting rights in the South, a pragmatic, frustrated President Johnson questions the timing of the movement’s actions. Considering his need to appeal to southern voters and representatives in order to move forward on alternative legislation, Johnson cannot fathom why voting rights of all causes is a necessary priority. King warns Johnson that the movement will move forward with their demonstrations with or without the support of the White House. The march across the bridge in Selma becomes both a protest of the white southern segregationists and the hesitation of their own supporters. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, King chooses to

address the contention between his supporters rather than the grievances of the enemy, a strategy necessary to take on the challenge with an allied force. He addresses the letter to, “my fellow clergymen” (King, 1963). In a moving plea for support, King writes, “Justice too long delayed, is justice denied” (King, 1963). King emphasizes the need for political disruption as a necessary lever of change. It is not enough, according to King, to sit back and wait for rights to be handed to the oppressed by the oppressor. If one continues to wait for a timing convenient to the oppressor, one will never find it. Thus, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and their followers come upon the decision to move forward with their demonstrations in Selma in recognition that the system will never favor change unless that change is made to happen by them.

To overcome the internal division of the movement and rally Americans to their cause, King employs the system of shared sacred values, namely Christianity and a commitment to democracy. In his letter, King compares himself and his movement to heroic biblical figures who left their communities to preach their religious convictions to the masses (King, 1963). Appealing to Christian religious doctrine, which emphasizes radical change in pursuit of justice, King presents a scathing audit of the Church’s hesitation and contribution to the evil of oppression. Within the film, DuVernay depicts this rallying cry among men and women of faith. Moved by the powerful images of peaceful black grandmothers bludgeoned in the street by white police officers on their TV screens, white allies and clergymen from across the country join the fold in Selma. Their presence shields the movement from direct assault as they make their way across the bridge, white and black, young and old, in a second attempt to march. Similarly, King and his followers use the uniquely antagonistic relationship between black disenfranchisement

and the shared American commitment to democratic ideals to enhance support for their movement. When addressing Johnson in the film, King emphasizes the need for voting rights as a primary lever of opportunity. Without the right to vote, the black community cannot participate in their civic duties nor find themselves represented on juries, in Congress, and in other positions of authority. Without the right to address grievances within the system, the movement is left with no other alternative than to break the system down.

In addition to the tactics of revolution employed by the Civil Rights Movement within the film, *Selma* draws attention to the systemic challenges to radical change. The viewer is asked the question: is it enough to work within the system or must the system be eradicated completely? In one particularly powerful scene, a black woman by the name of Annie Lee Cooper, played by a moving Oprah Winfrey, attempts to register to vote through legal means but is denied her right due to her inability to correctly name all 67 county justices in Alabama. Considering that is an almost impossible task even for the most learned voter, the audience is forced to confront one of many systemic racial barriers to civic participation. As the film makes clear, the right to vote is a right to self-determine one's own living conditions. There is no freedom without the right to do so. Hannah Arendt, a prominent Jewish political philosopher of the 1930s, argues in her lecture, *On Revolution*, that in order for a society to truly be a liberal republic as the US is so wanting, its citizenry must have the "freedom to be free" (Arendt, N.d.). This freedom is derived from the ability to participate politically and therefore, live self-determined lives. As long as individuals are subject to the inability to achieve basic needs, from shelter to civic participation, that society will remain volatile to uprisings and insecurity. A human being, according to Arendt, cannot help but to seek to be free. The impetus to rebel in a society where one is oppressed will always be

renewed (Arendt, N.d.). As King, John Lewis, Annie Lee Cooper, and many other civil rights activists make their way across the bridge a second time after facing the abuse of barbed-wire wrapped baseball bats and tear gas, that determination is clear in the set lines of their faces, the tenacity of their footsteps, and the ferocity of their gaze.

While the film operates on the assumption that the audience is aware of King's tactics of revolution as a non-violent movement, *Selma* forces the viewer to confront the utility of violence within political revolution. Given that the system must be eradicated, is violence necessary to political change? Within the film, many of King's allies urge him and his followers to halt their demonstrations on the grounds that such acts are instigations of violence and disruptive of the peace. The viewer witnesses the brutality of the police force beating people in the street, mobs shouting curses and flinging spit upon the marchers, and in a horrific event, extremists bombing a church and ending the lives of four young Sunday school girls. Yet, the movement continues. "Blame the robber" King writes to his critics, "not the robbed" (King, 1963). As the movie portrays, institutions cannot be altered without disruption and that disruption is met with a violent response as an unfortunate consequence. King and the activists use this response to their advantage. Not only can King threaten violence by means of Malcom X's more radical alternative, but play on the sympathetic nature of his movement as one abused by the violence of the oppressor. As King argues in his letter, it is not right to blame the violence on the oppressed, but root out its cause within the system of oppression (King, 1963).

Ava DuVernay's *Selma* is a powerful representation of systemic violence and the nature of political revolution. The historical events of Selma and the Civil Rights Movement remind one why social revolution is not only an active part of political life, but a necessary one.

References

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