



## Strategic nonviolent conflict: The Montgomery Bus Boycott

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### Abstract

Nonviolent action emerges under the conditions of recognized an unacceptable political oppression and injustice. The people, who find the situation unacceptable, develop three ways of behavior. First, they exit the situation. Second, they engage in everyday forms of resistance. Third, they participate in political action which has two aspects: institutional and non-institutional. Institutional political action comprises of the regular political activities such as voting, taking part in legislative process, and joining political parties. Non-institutional political action, on the contrary, arises as either violent action or nonviolent action. This paper examines the emergence, progress, and spread of the Montgomery Bus Boycott as one of the leading examples of the nonviolent struggles in the last century.

**Key Words:** Nonviolent, Montgomery, Boycott, Civil Rights.

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## Stratejik Pasif Direniş: Montgomery Otobüs Boykotu

### Özet

Pasif direnişler daha çok kabul edilebilirliğı olmayan politik baskı ve adaletsizliklerin olduğı durumlarda ortaya çıkar. Şartların kabul edilebilirliğinin olmadığını anlayan insanlar, kendilerine üç şekilde bir yol belirlerler. Bir, ortamı terk ederler. İki, direniş gösterirler. Üç, politik süreç içerisine girerler. Politik süreç ya kurumsal bazdaki politik hareketlerdir ki bunlar oy kullanmak, partiye üye olmak, yasal zemindeki gelişmelere katkı sağlamak gibi. Ya da kurumsal olmayan politik hareketlerdir. Bunlar ise şiddet veya pasif direniş şeklinde kendisini gösterir. Bu makalede, dünyada pasif direnişin en önemli örneklerinden birisi olan Montgomery Otobüs Boykotunun çıkışı, ilerleyişi ve neticesi ele alınmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Pasif Direnis, Montgomery, Boykot, Sivil Haklar.

## **1. Introduction**

Nonviolent action emerges under the conditions of recognized an unacceptable political oppression and injustice. The people, who find the situation unacceptable, develop three ways of behavior. First, they exit the situation. Second, they engage in everyday forms of resistance. Third, they participate in political action which has two aspects: institutional and non-institutional. Institutional political action comprises of the regular political activities such as voting, taking part in legislative process, and joining political parties. Non-institutional political action, on the contrary, arises as either violent action or nonviolent action (Schock, 2005: 13-6).

This paper examines the emergence, progress, and spread of the Montgomery Bus Boycott as one of the leading examples of the nonviolent struggles in the last century. The paper, first, assesses the socio-economic and political conditions of the Southern states from the eighteenth century to the 1950s. Second, it interprets the overall environment that the civil rights movement evolved in. Finally, it scrutinizes in detail the beginning, development, and results of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

## **2. Social, Political, and Economic Environment in the South before the 1950s**

The phenomenon of slavery extends back to the early ages of the American history. Forty percent of the population of the colonies from Maryland to Georgia was composed of slaves during the mid eighteenth century. The percentage of the slaves in the Northern colonies was relatively lower. Blacks made up twenty percent of total population during the American War of Independence in 1776. By 1790, there were 698,000 slaves in the country; and the number reached 893,000 at the end of the century. Slave importation was banned in 1807, but slave trade within the US had continued because of the economic reasons especially in the Southern states (Shawki, 2006: 24-30).

Before the Civil War, the gap between layers of the society had gotten greater. The distribution of wealth shifted in favor of Anglo-American white males. The land of native Americans and the labor force of African Americans were effortlessly purchased by the whites. The political and economic conditions had created a dual American state. On the one hand, there was a contract state, based on the rule of law that promoted the growth of a prosperous, liberal democratic society of Anglo-Americans. On the other hand, there was a predatory state that financed white liberal society through its ruthless abuse of Indian lands and African American labor (Young and Meiser, 2008: 31-2).

The process of industrialization and the World War I increased the demand for the black labor force in the beginning of the twentieth century. The black mobilization within the country and their increasing importance as a voting bloc resulted in the emergence of activist African American organizations such as Negro Fellowship League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and the National Negro Congress, and the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Those initiatives ensured the transformative egalitarian order within the society and led to the adoption of new concepts of black identity and minority movements after longstanding struggles (King and Smith, 2008: 90-3; Shawki, 2006: 9).

After the World War II, returning veterans from the war and the economic conditions in the country caused larger mobilizations which generated the civil rights movement later on (Johnson, 2008: 155; Lawson, 2003: 177-8). Shawki (2006: 152-5) argues that the roots of civil rights movement lie in the transformed conditions of the post-World War II period. When war production ended, most of the black workers had lost their jobs. The decline in job opportunities brought about the increased rates of unemployment among the African American population. More than three million African Americans had registered for the war of whom a half million served abroad. Having fought for democracy abroad, blacks returning from the war believed they should have had some rights at home. However, conditions within the country especially in the Southern states were too repressive and ruthless. There was a racial conflict and a social system of segregation which means the blacks and whites were not allowed to use the same public facilities (Kohl, 2004). Southern democrat politicians were strictly opposed to civil rights and integration legislations. They believed that integration would inevitably lead to a crime boom, and argued that riots in Detroit, public school disorders in New York, and crime in Washington, DC had been the expected outcomes of integration. They tenaciously advocated the implementation of the current segregation laws (Murakawa, 2008: 237-8). Segregation was considerably obvious in practice, as well. At the Union Station in Montgomery, for instance, blacks could not use the water fountains. They had to go to bathrooms where “Colored Only” signs were posted. Sears, officially named Sears, Roebuck and Company, stores did not have bathroom facilities for the blacks (Williams and Greenhaw, 2006: 37-8). White citizens in the Southern states thought that integration would make them preys of black criminals. After the *Brown vs. Boars of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), decision of the US Supreme Court, Southern segregationist whites formed the White Citizens’ Council (WCC). The WCC and

the politicians were precisely against the improvements in favor of civil rights and integration.

### **3. The Civil Rights Movement**

The civil rights movement was one of the major social movements of the twentieth century (Morris, 1999: 520). The question of “when did the civil rights movement begin?” may not accurately be answered. Historians generally describe the US civil rights movement as the wave of black movements in the South between 1955 and 1965. Some scholars explain the origins of the civil rights movement with the labor movements, the decline of cotton industry, urbanization of the black population, the growth of the NAACP, and the domestic impacts of the World War II during the 1930s and 1940s (Fairclough, 1996: 16-8). The research on the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s conceived of the movement as primarily a political movement that secured legislative and judicial triumphs. The studies in the 1980s questioned whether the civil rights movement could be properly understood as a coalition of national organizations. Scholars recently have begun pursuing a more interactive model, recognizing the need to connect the local with the national, the social with the political. Additionally, they begin to examine the ideological roots of the freedom struggle (Lawson, 2003: 3-5).

As mentioned earlier the civil rights movement was a reaction against the practice of democracy in the US. Veterans who had fought for civil rights and liberties abroad realized that their rights were abused in their country. A Georgian veteran expressed this situation as “peace is not the absence of war, but the presence of justice which may be obtained, first, by your becoming a citizen and registered voter” (Lawson, 2003: 97). Philip Randolph in a speech in 1942 mentions that “... Thus our feet are set in the path toward equality—economic, political, social, and racial. Equality is the heart and essence of democracy, freedom, and justice. ...there must be no dual standards of justice, no dual rights, privileges, duties or responsibilities of citizenship. No dual forms of freedom” (Gottheimer, 2003: 184). Lawson (2003: 97-8) emphasizes the historical perspective of black electoral politics and its relationship to the civil rights movement. The major motivator of the movement was black liberation. African Americans attempted to secure their basic rights, ensure justice, and guarantee a responsible government through the civil rights movement. Their goal was not to generate a change through a bloody revolution but elections. The right to vote was intimately connected to first-class citizenship. Having this right would ensure blacks gain respect, protect themselves, and feel pride in their own race. The slogan of black power (Gottheimer,

2003: 296) emerged as a response for the division within the movement over justice and injustice, war and peace, violence and nonviolence, and integration and segregation. The movement began with the feeling of the participants that they could determine their destiny. They affected the white-based decision-making processes as lawyers and lobbyist through their local and national organizations. They won legislative battles against discrimination in education, transportation, and suffrage. Practicing nonviolent direct action campaigns and civil disobedience the blacks gained grassroots support among the blacks and even the whites (Lawson, 2003: 136-7; Gottheimer, 2003: 193-4).

Martin Luther King, Jr. has been accepted as the leader of the civil rights movement. He was viewed as a translator and communicator of ideas during the movement. Meier (Lawson, 2003: 136) attributed much of the influence of King to his “combination of militancy with conservatism and caution, of righteousness with respectability.” Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15, 1929. He graduated from Morehouse College in 1948, took the Bachelor of Divinity degree at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, and was awarded the Ph.D. degree in systematic theology at the Graduate School of Theology at Boston University in 1955 (Lincoln, 1984: 17). Martin Luther King, Jr. and some of his friends were the principle actors of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The members of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), elected Martin Luther King, Jr. president, and organized the boycott upon the arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955. For over a year (381 days) fifty thousand black people in Montgomery had walked and car-pooled to their jobs, schools, and homes. On December 21, 1956 Montgomery buses were integrated after one of the major nonviolent events of the century (King, 1983: 7-9).

#### **4. The Montgomery Bus Boycott**

Montgomery, the largest city and the capital of Alabama, sits on the Alabama River in the middle of the Black Belt, the region in the South-east characterized by a high percentage of black population, a land with rich soil, a heritage of plentiful cotton crops, and a legacy of slavery. Increase in cotton production and trade transformed most of former slaves to the cotton ranchers. The transition to industrialization and urbanization in Montgomery was more slowly compared to the other cities thanks to the intensive agricultural activities. The social and economic structure of the city depended mostly on the affordable labor force of African Americans. The inadequacy of industrial job opportunities limited the average

household income. The median income for an African American family in Montgomery was \$908 in 1949, while it was \$1,609 in Birmingham.

Racial segregation rose to a peak in the Southern states after the World War II. Most cities in the South divided bus seating by race with whites in the front and blacks in the rear. Montgomery was one of those cities. There were race plates (a letter C to indicate colored people) next to names of African Americans in the Montgomery telephone directory. There was police brutality against African Americans. Hilliard Brooks, a World War II veteran, was intoxicated and not allowed to board by a bus driver. He refused to get off the bus, and the driver called the police. An officer arrived on the scene, pushed Brooks to the ground, and fired a fatal shot when he tried to get up (Jackson, 2008:10-3).

The police arrested a fifteen-year-old African American student on March 2, 1955. Claudette Colvin got on the bus and sat. She was not in one of the “reserved” seats. The first five rows (ten seats) of the buses were reserved for the white passengers only. In many instances, there were one or two white people occupied seats, but thirty or forty black riders jammed the aisles where men and women, old and young over those empty seats, dared not sit down. Claudette was not in one of those reserved seats. Black and white riders crowded in, and there were no more seats available. The aisle was jammed with many blacks but a few white riders. The driver stopped the bus and ordered blacks to leave their seats for the standing whites. Most of the standing blacks left the bus apprehensively and walked away because bus arrests were common in those days. The driver stood over Claudette and repeated his order. Claudette looked around, saw no empty seats, and remained seated neglectfully. She knew that she was not in the restricted area. A pregnant black woman sitting next to her got up. A black man on the last row of the bus gave the pregnant woman his seat and left the bus. Claudette was occupying two seats alone because a white and a black could not sit in the same row according to the law. The driver called the police. Two officers dragged her off the bus, handcuffed and arrested her (Williams and Greenhaw, 2006: 48-9; Garrow, 1987: 37-43; Garrow, 1989: 110).

Similarly, the police arrested another African American woman on December 1, 1955. It was an unseasonably warm December day. Tired from work, Rosa Parks boarded the Bus numbered 2857. She paid her dime and took a seat in the first row of the black section. There were some vacant reserved seats. Then, more white and black riders boarded the bus and all reserved seats were occupied. There was only one white man standing. The driver gestured toward the first black row and ordered four black passengers to move. That was the

law; no blacks were allowed to sit on the same row with a white, even though the row was beyond the reserved five rows. Two black women across the aisle left their seats, and the black man next to Rosa Parks also got up and moved forward in the aisle. Rosa Parks kept sitting. The driver looked at her and repeated his order. He asked her if she was going to stand up. Rosa Parks firmly said “No.” The driver told her that he would have her arrested. She said, “You may do that.” In a few minutes the police arrived, arrested Rosa Parks, and took her to jail (Lincoln, 1984: 11-2; Garrow, 1987: 43-4; Williams and Greenhaw, 2006: 45-7; Jackson, 2008: 85; Reddick, 1989: 70; Berkhalter, 2006). Rosa Parks’s arrest was different from the other bus incidents of the 1950s. It triggered one of the most effective social movements of the century. Edward Daniel Nixon stated after the arrest that “Mrs. Parks’s case is a case that we can use to break down segregation on the bus” (Williams and Greenhaw, 2006: 51). Hence, the arrest can be classified as a transformative event. Hess and Martin define the transformative event as “a crucial turning point for a social movement that dramatically increases or decreases the level of mobilization” (Hess and Martin, 2006: 253). The Montgomery Bus Boycott was organized upon the arrest of Rosa Parks, who is known as the mother of the civil rights movement (Morris, 1999: 523), on Thursday, December 1, 1955. Martin Luther King, Jr., the president of the MIA, Edward Daniel Nixon, the president of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP, Clifford Durr, a white lawyer, and his wife Virginia Durr, lawyer Fred Gray, a friend of King and Nixon, Ralph David Abernathy, and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, the president of the Women’s Political Council (WPC) had rapidly organized the boycott. Early on Friday morning, members of the WPC wrote a message for the black community of Montgomery. The boycott would begin on Monday, December 5, 1955. They had to reach bus riders as much as possible. Jo Ann Robinson and members of the WPC prepared and distributed 52,500 leaflets during the weekend. The following text was written on the leaflets (Garrow, 1987: 45-6; Jackson, 2008: 86):

Another negro woman has arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down. It is the second time since the Claudette Colvin case that a negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be stopped. Negroes have rights, too, for if negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother. This woman’s case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don’t ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday. You can



afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus. You can also afford to stay out of the town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grown-ups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off of all buses Monday.

Early Monday the buses went out for the regular morning's pickup. People ordinarily used to scramble for the vacant seats, but that morning very few people, who were merely whites, took buses. All others walked, took cabs or private cars. There were no black late-risers that morning. Since the vast majority of bus riders were blacks, all buses were operated for a few white passengers for all day. One of the bus drivers confessed that he could take only \$6.30 for a six-hour-run on Monday, December 5, 1955 (Garrow, 1987: 56). At the end of the first day of the boycott, six thousand black people came together in Holt Street Baptist Church and decided to continue on boycott. The MIA pledged to protect, defend, encourage, enlighten, and assist the members of the black community against unfair treatment, and unacceptable subordination. Martin Luther King, Jr. was elected as the president and the spokesperson of the boycott. Reverend Roy Bennett was the first vice president, and Moses W. Jones was the second vice president. Edward Daniel Nixon was elected as the treasurer of the organization. The leaders reiterated that the nonviolent legal format of the boycott would be pursued until the adoption of legislative actions against segregation. Joe Azbell, city editor of *The Montgomery Advertiser*, stated that there was discipline among negroes which whites were not aware of (Garrow, 1987: 62-4). The announcement after the meeting declared that the boycott would continue until the adoption of three proposals: more courteous treatment of negro passengers, seating on a first come first served basis, and assignment of negro bus drivers to the predominantly negro neighborhoods (Thrasher, 1989: 61).

The boycott was maintained successfully. The black population of Montgomery was encouraged to come together and take black-operated cabs. Car pooling was another part of the boycott. Black doctors, lawyers, and businessmen picked up walking people. One of the boycotters who had walked halfway across town reported that "... my body may be a bit tired, but for many years now my soul has been tired. Now my soul is resting. So I don't mind if my body is tired, because my soul is free" (Garrow, 1987: 60).

Following days and weeks of the boycott brought about several economic results in Montgomery. Since the black population stopped using buses for transportation, they limited their regular daily activities. They boycotted the buses intentionally, but the boycott

unintentionally expanded to the other markets and businesses. According to Garrow, (1987: 97-8) Montgomery's stores took in \$2 million less during the 1955 Christmas than the previous Christmas season. Several stores placed closed signs because of lack of business. Additionally, the city bus company faced considerable economic problems and announced to stop bus services on any lines in the city or county in the area from December 22 to the end of Christmas holiday season. In fact, the bus service in the city had never failed to run for more than twenty years. It had barely survived for the last seventeen days, between December 5 and December 22. Eight lines were completely discontinued. Thirty nine bus drivers were laid off, many buses parked in a parking lot since there was no need for them. The black population of Montgomery had severely internalized the boycott. An old black woman was hardly walking with a cane. A bus stopped at the bus stop, and a black passenger got out of the bus. The old woman began to walk faster as if she was trying to catch the bus. The driver saw her through the mirror of the bus. When the woman arrived at the door of the bus, the driver friendly told her that "Don't hurt yourself auntie, I'll wait for you." He wanted to show how courteous he was to the black people if they would only ride again. The woman scornfully called up to him "In the first place, I ain't your auntie. In the second place, I ain't rushing to get on your bus. I'm just trying to catch up with that nigger who just got off, so I can hit him with this here stick" (Garrow, 1987: 99; <http://www.watson.org/~lisa/blackhistory/civilrights-55-65/montbus.html> ).

As the boycott progressed successfully with no indication of solution from the city officials and the bus company, a white reaction against the blacks emerged. The WCC began to impress the members of the city council. The police put a "get tough" policy into effect. Stops, searches, tickets, and arrests against black drivers dramatically increased. Garrow (1987: 116) maintains that within a two-week-period sixty four black drivers had been arrested for minor traffic violations. Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested for driving thirty miles an hour in a twenty five miles zone. It was not the only case that Martin Luther King, Jr. was accused of. He and ninety three African Americans charged with illegally boycotting the Montgomery City Lines, the bus company of Montgomery. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the leaders of the boycott were put into cells. King was convicted on a charge of violating the state's anti-boycott law and was fined \$500 and court costs, the equivalent of 386 days at hard labor in the County of Montgomery. In addition to the official repression against the boycotters, there was a hate campaign against the black people on the street. White pedestrians stopped and looked wryly into the crowded black cars. They called the walking

blacks “Walk, nigger, walk.” White teenagers drove upon the walking blacks and squirt water to them. Then, the water was changed to urine. The black families began to receive threat calls. The leaders of the boycott especially could not sleep nights for the ringing phones. Many of them had to change their numbers or leave the telephone receivers off the hooks at night to be able to sleep. However, for Martin Luther King, Jr. all these efforts would not deter them to keep boycotting until a final solution. He stated that “If all I have to pay is going to jail a few times and getting about twenty threatening calls a day, I think it is a very small price to pay for what we are fighting for.” While he was making this speech in the First Baptist Church on January 30, 1956, a bomb exploded at the front porch of his home. There were King’s wife Coretta and their two-month-old daughter Yolanda at home, but neither of them was injured. The next day Edward Daniel Nixon’s home was bombed, as well. However, the police could not find the suspects of the both bombings. Repression and campaigns against boycotting blacks had persisted for months. (Walton, 1989: 14; Garrow, 1987: 101-33; Jackson, 2008: 110-6).

On November 13, 1956, the US Supreme Court affirmed that the segregated bus laws in Montgomery and in the state of Alabama were unconstitutional. The Supreme Court’s decision reached Montgomery on December 20. The boycott, which had begun 381 days ago, ended on December 21, 1956 and the first black riders took seats just behind the driver. However, campaigns against the blacks had not stopped. On January 10, 1957 the city was shocked by six bombings which were against four black churches and two pastor’s homes (Walton, 1989: 37-44; Jackson, 2008: 143).

The bus boycott started in Montgomery, but resulted in a national level of civil rights awareness. Tarrow and McAdam (2004: 125) argue that the Montgomery Bus Boycott generated the diffusion of the civil rights movement from the South to the North in the 1960s. Therefore, a scale shift existed during the overall development of the civil rights movement. Scale shift, according to Tarrow and McAdam, is “a change in the number and level of coordinated contentious actions leading to broader contention involving a wider range of actors and bridging their claims and identities” (Tarrow and McAdam, 2004: 125). They view the Montgomery Bus Boycott as the beginning of the mass movement phase of the civil rights struggle. Then, sit-in demonstrations began and spread in Greensboro, North Carolina; Hampton, Virginia; Rock Hill, South Carolina; Nashville, Tennessee; and Tallahassee, Florida. In the early 1960s civil rights campaigns jumped to Northern cities. Tarrow and McAdam (2004: 127) explain the interactions among different groups with the

emergence of relational diffusion, which is transfer of information along established lines of interaction; non-relational diffusion, which is information transfer via impersonal carriers; and brokerage, which is information transfer between previously unconnected social sites. Thus, the spread of demonstrations and campaigns from the South to the North indicates the existence of these connections throughout the country.

## **5. Conclusion**

Boycotts constitute the largest part of Gene Sharp's chapter: *The Methods of Nonviolent Action* (Sharp, 1973). He takes the boycotts as a method of economic non-cooperation. In fact, the Montgomery Bus Boycott had an enormous effect on the economic conditions of Montgomery. As can be concluded from the research; the impact of the Montgomery Bus Boycott on the racial determinants of the US civil rights movement was of prominent importance. As a nonviolent struggle the boycott emerged under the extreme repressive conditions of the South during the post World War II years. There was a racial conflict between the whites and the blacks; and segregation against the black community of Montgomery. The white authorities of Montgomery, as well as the most of the Southern states, had limited the rights of black citizens. Increasing repression and injustice, especially unreasonable arrests of black bus riders, forced those people to take action against this situation. They utilized the power of nonviolence against the repression they faced; and decided to boycott the bus company of Montgomery for unfair practices of drivers and police against them. However, as the previous examples of nonviolent struggle disclosed, this action brought about more repression such as arrests and hate campaigns. Yet, the boycotters did not give up, and after a year-long struggle they achieved their goals.

Consequently, the Montgomery Bus Boycott has been standing for a typical example of nonviolent action for the last sixty years. The boycott can be considered as the turning point of the US civil rights movement and a milestone for the nonviolent struggle studies. It reflects most of the aspects of the process of nonviolent struggle. The cooperation among the boycotters and their organizational mobilization have introduced the world to the irresistible power of protests. The Montgomery Bus Boycott has shown that although pressure and hatred of repressors engender minor gains; strong solidarity, faithful organization, and disciplined action of the nonviolent group help them to reach an ultimate goal of justice and equity.

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