
Martin Luther King and the Black Revolutionary Tradition

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As we celebrate the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr. the system, “the white power structure” as we used and still should call it, continues its character and political assassination of his work. Dr. King rejected the myths of U.S. society. He rejected its Mad Men packaging as “the leader of the free world” to tell it like it is; that the United States is “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.” Dr. King saw “the Negro revolution” as part of a Third World and world revolution. “I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.”

In my own reading and re-reading of so many books on Black revolutionary history here a few appreciations of Dr. King’s role.

1.) Dr. King understood that the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movement was from the outset a battle against the system itself.

King understood the intersection of radical reforms and social revolution and was always working to understand the time, place, conditions and balance of forces that would shape his rhetoric and tactical plan. King was one of the greatest and most effective reformers of all and yet, in confronting the system’s intransigence his own revolutionary outlook kept evolving. King’s prominence began in 1955, in his leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the same year as the murder of Emmett Till and the Bandung Conference of Non-Aligned Nations—to begin what turned out to be “the Two Decades of the Sixties” that did not end until the defeat of the United States in Vietnam in 1975. Despite the U.S. Supreme Court decision to overturn school segregation in the case of Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, Montgomery in 1955, the great Greensboro sit-ins of 1960, the exciting work of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and Congress of Racial Equality Freedom Rides of 1961 the conditions of Black people in the United States remained at criminal levels. By 1963 white Democratic Party terror in the South and Democratic Party racism and brutality in the ghettos of the North had generated a great deal of militancy, organizing, and consciousness but little change in the system. At the great March on Washington in August 1963 King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SNCC, CORE, NAACP, Urban League, and A.

Phillip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters took place amid air of hope—but also great impatience and militancy. King's "I Have a Dream" speech (a phrase that was not in its initial draft) was in fact a revolutionary indictment of U.S. society.

"One hundred years later [after the formal abolition of slavery] the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition

"In a sense we've come to our nation's Capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

"But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check—a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism."

King is imploring, cajoling, but what his words make clear, threatening U.S. society and trying to mobilize Black rebellion. When he says "crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of segregation" he is making it clear that slavery is in fact still in place. He describes the United States as a society that offers the Negro bad checks and broken promises. When he says, "We refuse to believe the bank of justice is bankrupt" this is code for "we know you are morally bankrupt but Black people are here to demand, as the Staple Singers demanded, "When will we be paid for the work we've done."

King's formulation of "the fierce urgency of now and the tranquilizing drug of gradualism" was a frontal assault on the President Kennedy and the Democrats cry for "patience" in face of injustice. King countered with the spirit of Freedom Now—the cry of Black militants in South Africa, South Carolina and the South Bronx—and supported by a growing number of white supporters of the civil rights movement. In fact, "Now" was one of the revolutionary slogans of its time. And President Kennedy and the whole world was listening.

One of King's revolutionary observations— that is still painfully relevant today—was , "the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land."

In 1964 I was recruited by organizers of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee to join "the civil rights revolution." By the time I got to CORE in Harlem and the Northeast my mentors were staying up all night debating what exactly that revolution would look like. While the struggle focused on democratic rights and full equality many SNCC and CORE leaders were talking about some form of Black nation, Black Power, Black militancy, Black separatism—not as a way of "getting away" from the system but as part of a plan to challenge it—and for some, overthrow it. Clearly influenced by Malcolm X but also the African liberation movements people were talking about a challenge to U.S. capitalism and at least talking about some type of pro-socialist system. It was not all that clear or delineated but the concepts of full equality, full democratic rights, Black rights, self-determination, radical reform and revolution were far more interrelated than counterposed—and all of them involved Black people in the leadership of a multi-racial movement—either through integration or separation. In that context, I am not arguing that Dr. King was a Black revolutionary nationalist but he was a student of world history and was impacted by the revolutionary ideas of the times. For Dr. King, as early as 1963, to tell the president of the United States that Black people in the U.S. are "exiles in their own land" was clearly a call for some form of both full equality and Black self-determination and far away from the "more perfect union" myth that the system was selling—with few buyers.

2) King was a victim of capitalist state violence, surveillance, psychological, character, and actual assassination.

The story of J. Edgar Hoover's campaign to destroy ML King and force him into a nervous breakdown and suicide

is not tangential but central to King's revolutionary history—and the surveillance and police state we live under today. And yet, another element of the revolutionary history of Dr. King that is being whitewashed is his actual assassination was by the system itself. Part of this cover-up is to destroy the memory of the work of Coretta Scott King in exposing the actual assassination of Dr. King.

In his “I’ve Been to the Mountain Top” speech the very night before he was murdered Dr. King was very aware of what he felt was his possible and imminent assassination.

“Like anybody, I would like to live – a long life; longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*”

And while his words are brave, every time I hear that talk I hear a mortal man not fully at peace, nor should he have been, with his mortality—but trying to comfort and reassure Black people that “we as a people” will find liberation—rather than asking them to protect him—which he knew they could not.

On December 8, 1999, (21 years after his death) after the King family and allies presented 70 witnesses in a civil trial, twelve jurors in Memphis, Tennessee reached a unanimous verdict after about an hour of deliberations that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.

In a press statement held the following day in Atlanta, Mrs. Coretta Scott King welcomed the verdict.

“There is abundant evidence of a major high level conspiracy in the assassination of my husband, Martin Luther King, Jr. And the civil court’s unanimous verdict has validated our belief. I wholeheartedly applaud the verdict of the jury and I feel that justice has been well served in their deliberations. This verdict is not only a great victory for my family, but also a great victory for America. It is a great victory for truth itself. It is important to know that this was a SWIFT verdict, delivered after about an hour of jury deliberation. The jury was clearly convinced by the extensive evidence that was presented during the trial that, in addition to Mr. Jowers, the conspiracy of the Mafia, local, state and federal government agencies, were deeply involved in the assassination of my husband. The jury also affirmed overwhelming evidence that identified someone else, not James Earl Ray, as the shooter, and that Mr. Ray was set up to take the blame. I want to make it clear that my family has no interest in retribution. Instead, our sole concern has been that the full truth of the assassination has been revealed and adjudicated in a court of law... My husband once said, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” To-day, almost 32 years after my husband and the father of my four children was assassinated, I feel that the jury’s verdict clearly affirms this principle. With this faith, we can begin the 21st century and the new millennium with a new spirit of hope and healing.”

Sadly, the police/surveillance/counter-insurgency state is stronger than ever—but at least there is growing public challenge to its hegemony. Understanding the revolutionary story of Dr. King and the system’s decision to bring him down is essential if we want to understand and make history in the present.

3) King was from the outset a Black militant and revolutionary who advocated non-violent direct action but saw “the Negro revolution” as the overriding objective.

While he strongly argued for non-violence as both a tactical and ethical perspective King supported the right of Black people to armed self-defense and allied with the advocates of armed self-defense and even armed struggle in the Black movement.

At a time of the most rampant and systematic police violence the system’s armed requirement that Black people are “non-violent” is intellectually and morally lethal. It flies in the face of the long-standing tradition of armed self-defense in the Black community and the urgency to defend that tradition today. Worse, to use Dr. King against that basic right is the height of cynicism and historical distortion.

Clay Carson’s [*In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*](#), helps shed light on this complex relationship. While many young organizers were critical of Dr. King SNCC’s Stokely Carmichael explained best their appreciation of his profound impact on the Black masses.

"People loved King..I've seen people in the South climb over each other just to say, "I touched him, I touched him." I'm even talking about the young...These were the people we were working with and I had to follow in his footsteps when I went in there. The people didn't know what was SNCC. They just said, "You one of Dr. King's men?" "Yes, Ma'am I am."

Carson explains the pivotal role of "militant and self-reliant local black residents who...owned weapons and were willing to defend themselves when attacked. Black rallies in the county were often protected by armed guards sometimes affiliated with the Louisiana-based Deacons for Defense and Justice"

Many SNCC organizers, in disagreeing with King's focus on non-violence, explained, "We are not King or SCLC. They don't do the work the kind of work that we do nor do they live in the areas we live in. They don't drive the highways at night"...Carmichael recalled that the discussion ended when he asked those carrying weapons to place them on the table. Nearly all the black organizers working in the deep South were armed.

But again the system wants to act like the battle between King and SNCC and the Black militants was a morality play or an ideological war. But it wasn't. It was an intellectual, strategic, and yes, ethical struggle among equals and King was both open minded and introspective about the limits of his non-violent advocacy--and as such, people had respect for his own principles and rationale.

In 1965, James Farmer, the director of CORE, a truly dedicated pacifist, told a group of us at a mass meeting, "I am completely non-violent but I want to thank our brothers from the Deacons for Defense (who were both standing guard and yes, getting a standing ovation from the organizers) whose arms allow me to be non-violent." My read of history is King felt similarly.

And even more importantly, King well understood that his "non-violence" could be used by the system as a justification for state violence and of course the system's need to destroy the Black united front. In his speech, "Beyond Vietnam" on April 4, 1967 King addressed frontally his most principled conversations with the angry youth of the urban ghettos. He stated,

"As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problem. I have tried to offer my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through non-violent action. But they asked, and rightfully so, "What about Vietnam?"..Their questions hit home and I knew I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government."

Note that King does not try to raise a moral critique of those who would use Molotov cocktails and rifles in response to the economic and armed violence of the state. And by making clear he considered its advocates "the oppressed" he supported the morality, if not the tactics, of their cause. Instead, he simply argued that he did not feel it would "solve their problem" and even then qualified his own advocacy of non-violence to make the case that "social change comes *most meaningfully*" but not exclusively from non-violence. He admitted it was a legitimate debate.

Martin Luther King Jr., SNCC, CORE, and Malcolm X represented at the time the "left" of the Black united front and worked to find strategic and tactical unity with the NAACP and Urban League—which made the March on Washington, the Civil Rights Bill, and the Voting Rights Bill possible. While King had many contradictions with the young Black militants he understood them and they him as strategic allies against a system of white supremacist capitalism.

4) SNCC, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and M.L. King were on the frontlines of the movement against the U.S. war of aggression in Vietnam.

While SNCC and Malcolm were among the first to speak out frontally against the war as early as 1965, by April 1967 both King and Muhammad Ali took enormous risks to frontally challenge the war on moral grounds and to argue that Black people in particular had no interest in supporting the war.

In his monumental "Beyond Vietnam" speech he argued in support of Vietnamese self-determination and rejected the view that the U.S. had any legitimate interests in Vietnam.

Reading primary documents is essential for the revolutionary historian/strategist/tactician and organizer. In reading and re-reading *Beyond Vietnam* I still hang on its every word.

* *King called out U.S. war crimes against the Vietnamese* people making the analogy that the United States feared the most—comparisons with Nazi Germany. He asked, what do the Vietnamese people “think when we test our latest weapons on them just as the Germans tested out new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe.”

* *King praised the integrity and legitimacy of the National Liberation Front of Vietnam including the communists who he argued were the legitimate political leaders of the Vietnamese people’s struggle.*

“They were led by Ho Chi Minh” and were creating “a revolutionary government seeking self-determination.” He describes Ho as saved only by “his sense of humor and irony... when he hears the most powerful nation in the world speaking of aggression as it drops thousands bombs on a nation eight thousand miles from its shores.” (Communists with a sense of humor and irony—perhaps the most revolutionary insight of all.)

**King focused on demand development. In the end movements are unified by ideas, people, organizations and demands.*

* End all bombing in North and South Vietnam

* Declare a unilateral cease fire

* Curtail the U.S. build up in Thailand and Laos

* Recognize the role of The National Liberation Front in any future Vietnam government

* Remove all foreign—that is, U.S. troops from Vietnam

* Make reparations for the damage

This was tantamount to calling for immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. It recognized the victory of the National Liberation Front and argued for what would later become a critical component of Black people’s demands against the U.S. government — “reparations.”

The story of the system’s attacks on Dr. King once he spoke out against the war in Vietnam and his courage in the face of this assault is another chapter of Dr. King’s revolutionary contribution to U.S. and world history. One important version of that story is Tavis Smiley’s documentary, “Death of a King: Dr. Martin Luther King’s Final Year.”

Dr. King brought a powerful and frontal indictment of the system of white supremacist, racist, capitalism. He appreciated the ideas of others and worked to build a Black and multi-racial united front against what he called “racism, poverty, and militarism.” He was willing to confront “the cowardice” inside his own bosom and modeled how all of us have to put our bodies, souls and lives on the line. He rejected gradualism and demanded “Freedom Now.” He advocated non-violence but defended the right of those who disagreed with him to armed self-defense. He rejected a U.S. chauvinism, called for a militant internationalism, and challenged the U.S. empire at home and abroad. He was independent of and yes, willing to challenge and confront the Democratic Party. He was and is a great contributor to the endless struggle for human and planetary liberation.