

# MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AS DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST

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## ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on one aspect of the social thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.: his social ethics. Specifically, it poses the question whether, in what sense, and from what time it is correct to consider King a democratic socialist. The essay argues that King was in fact a democratic socialist and, contrary to the implications of some recent interpreters who have focused on transformation and radicalization in King's thought, that King's democratic socialism was rooted in his formative experience of the black religious tradition and was manifested from his student days at Crozer Theological Seminary forward. The change that may be discerned in King's later years was only a refinement, not a transformation, of his basic orientation.

*It has long been my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion (King, 1958: 91).*

*The good and just society is neither the thesis of capitalism nor the antithesis of Communism, but a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism (King, 1967c: 187).*

## I. INTRODUCTION

As Vincent Harding has noted, now that Martin Luther King, Jr., has been given an honored place within our national pantheon of heroes, he is too easily ignored, save for an annual celebratory moment. But to ignore King's actual life and work is to trivialize the man and to deprive ourselves of an opportunity to confront his persistent significance and our obligations for the future (Harding, 1988: A 19). From the beginning of the bus boycott in Montgomery in 1955 until his assassination in Memphis in 1968, King attempted to provoke American society into a radical transformation of its cultural values and institutional practices. While he is properly identified as a leader in the civil rights struggle of the sixties, he was more than that. While he is rightly recognized as a principled champion of non-

violent methods of social change, his basic political thought was far more encompassing than that. There are, indeed, many facets and dimensions to his life and thoughts, not all of which have as yet been fully explored.

In this essay, I shall focus on one aspect of King's social thought—his social ethics. More particularly, my intent is to explore the question of whether, in what sense, and beginning at what time in his tragically brief life, Martin Luther King, Jr., can be considered a democratic socialist.

If King was a democratic socialist and if, as is customarily assumed, American society is properly characterized as some form of democratic capitalism, then it is inappropriate to argue that King's intent, through his various movements (especially the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC]) and activities, was simply to integrate the black community into the mainstream of American society. Equality of treatment (e.g., in the case of public accommodations) and equality of citizenship (e.g., in the case of voting rights) were, to be sure, immediate objectives of his actions at particular times and places. But, if he was a democratic socialist, these objectives were but relatively minor, albeit vitally important, pieces of a much larger design. Moreover, if King conceived democratic socialism as ultimately the most adequate response to racial injustice, then the American citizenry in confronting the radical evil of racism is challenged more fundamentally than many have imagined.

Given the historical evidence currently available, it is difficult if not impossible to avoid the conclusion that, at least near the end of his ill-fated activist career, King himself labelled his social vision as democratic socialism. Thus, for instance, a staff member of Operation Breadbasket has reported that, at a meeting in early January, 1968, King "talked about what he called democratic socialism, and he said 'I can't say this publicly, and if you say I said it I'm not gonna admit it.' . . . and he talked about the fact that he didn't believe that capitalism as it was constructed could meet the needs of poor people, and that what we might need to look at was a kind of socialism, but a democratic kind of socialism" (qtd. in Garrow, 1986: 591–592; 709, 716–717). Again, according to David J. Garrow, King in private conversation "made it clear to close friends that economically speaking he considered himself what he termed a Marxist, largely because he believed with increasing strength that American society needed a radical redistribution of wealth and economic power to achieve even a rough form of social justice" (1981: 213–214).

However, several interpreters of King assert that he came to this conviction only in the final years of his many campaigns. Louis Lomax, for instance, declares that the turning point occurred during and after the Selma campaign in 1964. Selma "marked the end of the nonviolent civil rights era that began in Montgomery." King then "shifted both his target and his goals," determining to focus on economic oppression with the

Chicago ghettos as his immediate target (1984: 166–167). Adam Fairclough, posing the issue of whether King was a Marxist, asserts that only during the last two years of his life did King's radicalism become pronounced. Having become finally convinced that racism "was endemic in American society" and having become utterly horrified by America's atrocities in Vietnam, King, in 1966, "rejected the idea of piecemeal reform within the existing socio-economic structure" (1984: 235). Only at that time did he become persuaded that capitalism is the common determinant linking together racism, economic oppression, and militarism (238).

Again, Mary Sawyer draws a stark contrast between King's "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington in 1963 and his "A Time to Break Silence" speech at Riverside Church in 1967 as indicative of a fundamental transformation of his social orientation.

The difference between the two versions of the Dream has become pronounced. Whereas before, blacks were living "on a lonely island of poverty," now "the developed industrial nations of the world" were "secure islands of prosperity in a seething sea of poverty." King's perspective had changed drastically. In the early years, the Dream was of full and equitable participation in America; in the late years, it was of full and equitable participation in a transformed America. The early Dream was of integration and equal opportunity within the borders of the United States, which would be accomplished by way of moral appeal to the conscience of white America. The later Dream was of social, political, and economic parity within an international context, to be accomplished through structural alterations in the national and world relationships of powerless to empowered, of dispossessed to possessed. (Sawyer, 1984: 267)

Frederick L. Downing is led to assert such a change as a settled conclusion of King scholarship: "The consensus of his biographers is that the Selma campaign . . . reflects something of a watershed in his career" (1986: 250–251). Earlier, "King was more optimistic . . . and less radical"; later "he became less optimistic and more radical . . . more revolutionary" (Downing, 1986: 251).

Even during King's lifetime, there is evidence that King underwent a transformation of social perspective. David J. Garrow, King's Pulitzer Prize biographer, notes Bayard Rustin's comment that only following the Watts riots in August 1965 did King fully understand that the most profound issues confronted by the movement "were economic problems of class" (Garrow, 1986: 439). Thereafter, in November 1966, at an SCLC retreat called to reflect about the group's future, King is recorded as asserting that they must now raise "class issues," that "something is

wrong with capitalism," that, in effect, "America must move toward democratic socialism" (Garrow, 1986: 537).

The suggestion, in short, is that King became radicalized in social thought partially as he assimilated the impact and significance of the Black Power movement, partially as he encountered massive resistance to his campaigns by established political interests, especially in Chicago (Lewis, 1978: 353), and partially as he was forced to acknowledge the deep tragedy of the Vietnam War and its link with American economic structures.

On the contrary, however, I shall contend that Martin Luther King, Jr., was a democratic socialist from his student days at Crozer Theological Seminary, that the ultimate root of his democratic socialist orientation derives from the black religious tradition that formed the deepest fundament of his emotional and intellectual life, and that the change that is discerned in the final years of his life is but a refinement or, perhaps, a shift in focus of his mission, but not a transformation of his basic orientation.

Prior to the development of the substance of this contention, three preliminary points must be explained. First, King was not and never claimed to be a systematic social theorist or philosopher (King, 1968: 3). Thus when I argue that King was a democratic socialist, I intend but to affirm that democratic socialism was a fundamental orientation of his mind as he engaged in diverse efforts at social transformation. He did not develop a carefully considered and finely nuanced doctrine of democratic socialism in any of his writings. Yet he was, if I may adapt a term from Antonio Gramsci, an organic intellectual: beginning with the Montgomery campaign, his intellectual reflections and his social practice were inextricably intertwined, and both arose out of and were directed toward the social condition of the people, more immediately the black community, but ultimately the human community. As an organic intellectual, King was a democratic socialist.

Second, the historical evidence is clear that King's speeches, articles, and books were not always composed directly by him. Others, e.g., Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison, often prepared lengthy sections of his texts (Garrow, 1986: 73, 92–93, 105, 111, 299–300, 312, 544, 649; Downing, 1986: 21–22). Yet I am assuming that even passages composed by others represented the direction of King's mind, else he would not have approved them, and, more importantly, that the consistency of certain patterns of thought throughout his career might properly be ascribed to his own manner of thinking.

Third, to specify the sense in which King's social thought was a form of democratic socialism, several distinctions must be made. First, I would distinguish between liberal democracy and social democracy. The former is individualistic and atomistic in its social ontology. It promotes a politics of self-interest. Its doctrine of rights is fundamentally negative: one's

rights are to be left alone, to be free from imposition and encroachment by others. The latter, on the other hand, is solidaristic and relational in its basic social theory. It promotes a politics of participation. Its doctrine of rights is affirmative: one's rights are to be empowered or enabled to find fulfillment within an encompassing community of fellow citizens. In their respective doctrines of rights, the former is primarily concerned with freedom of speech and association, whereas the latter is concerned, as well, with education, meaningful employment, and housing. King's orientation is with the latter, that of social democracy.

Second, I would distinguish between state socialism and participatory socialism. Both are opposed to strictly private ownership and control of the means of production. But the former espouses a concentration of the control of productive and distributive processes in a centralized state bureaucracy and/or party organization. The latter, in contrast, opts for diverse forms of public control, including producer cooperatives and regional enterprise.

Again, on an ontological level, I would distinguish between a materialist socialism and an idealist socialism. The former is represented in Friedrich Engels' "dialectics of nature" within which mind is a function of matter and its intrinsic principles of motion. The latter is expressed in various forms of religious socialism, e.g., Frederick Denison Maurice and Paul Tillich, within which configurations of the material structure of social existence are expressive of mind. King, as we shall note, had severe reservations about state socialism and he vigorously opposed historical materialism. His socialism was idealist and pluralist, grounded ultimately in religious commitment.

Moreover, we should note that socialism as a *social theory*, whatever its precise form, contains at least three dimensions. In *social diagnosis*, its key interpretive category is alienation or contradiction. In its theory of *social change*, it acknowledges the necessity of struggle between opposing forces, oppressor and oppressed, and identifies the oppressed as the primary agent of change. In classical Marxist socialism, that agent is the proletariat. In other forms of socialism, that role might be occupied by other classes of the oppressed, e.g., racial or sexual. Finally, in its *social telos*, it is directed toward the overcoming of alienation, toward the reconciliation of estranged groups, toward the formation of a new society of genuine mutuality permeating all its political and economic processes. In all three dimensions, economic relations are a dominant, though not necessarily sole, focus of attention.

More profoundly, socialism as a *cosmology* assumes a principle of internal relations according to which individuals are never merely such, but find their significance in diverse forms of interaction with all other individuals.

Each of these dimensions of socialist theory is manifest in King's work. In social diagnosis, for instance, he labels American society as schizophrenic; in social change, he repeatedly insists on the special agency of the black community, although often allies that community with the entire class of the poverty-stricken; in social telos, his constant theme is the "beloved community." Moreover, throughout all these dimensions, he identifies the economic factor as vital to, though not strictly determinative of, the dynamics of these relations. And permeating his writings, as an expression of his deepest religious-philosophical commitment, is his unwavering insistence on interrelatedness of all peoples and communities. In short, in social theory and in cosmology, King's work manifests all the marks of a socialist orientation.

## II. FORMATIVE YEARS (1929–1944)

I have contended that the ultimate root of King's democratic socialist orientation derives from the black religious tradition that formed the deepest fundament of his emotional and intellectual life. What he inherits from this tradition is two-sided: a keen understanding of the agonies of oppression and an intense yearning for liberation. The tradition captures and conveys these themes through Biblical narrative and in sermon and song. Through these means the ordinary experiences of the black community are provided with a framework of interpretation lending cosmic significance to their lives.

James H. Cone has convincingly argued that interpreters of the sources of King's thought turn too quickly to his theological mentors in college and theological school, neglecting his more formative origins: "While I do not deny the influence of his seminary and university professors, I think the influence of the black church was much more decisive in shaping his theological perspective" (1984: 409).

Subsequently, Albert J. Raboteau and Frederick L. Downing have supported the same proposition. Raboteau locates King's life and work within the particular tradition of American black religious protest. He reports that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, blacks were constant and unrelenting in their religiously inspired critiques of American society. In 1888, for instance, T. G. Stewart, an A. M. E. cleric, charged that Americans "practice Anglo-Saxonism, not Christianity." Given its militarism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and materialism, Stewart predicted that Western civilization would soon collapse in an act of utter self-destruction, but that a new age—raceless, classless, weaponless—would emerge (Raboteau, n.d.: 11–12). In sum, Raboteau, like Cone, suggests that the dominant motifs of the black religious tradition in

America are, in its negative expression, judgment and condemnation, but in its positive side, liberation and hope.

As Downing interprets the black religious tradition in America, it diverged appreciably from the white tradition at its beginnings in the seventeenth century. Whereas white Protestantism was “continuity-oriented,” black Protestantism was “change-oriented” (Downing, 1986: 90). Moreover, as the black church appropriated the Biblical heritage as its “master story,” it constructed that heritage in keeping with its own experience and expectations, combining, in particular, principles of liberation and love. Thus “eventually Martin Luther King, Jr., joined a long line of black ministers who date at least to the eighteenth century and many of whom attempted in their preaching and ‘narratizing’ to combine the liberation ethic of Exodus and the love ethic of Jesus” (Downing, 1986:91).

King himself gives testimony to the governing influence of black religion, but combined, as it must be, with his own experience as a black in American society. In “An Autobiography of Religious Development,” for instance, composed in about 1950 (Oates, 1982: 37; Downing, 1986: 17, 39), King concludes:

At present I still feel the effects of the noble moral ideals that I grew up under. They have been real and precious to me and even in moments of theological doubt I could never turn away from them. Even though I have never had an abrupt conversion experience, religion has been real to me and closely knitted to my life. In fact the two cannot be separated. Religion for me is life. (King, 1950?: 7)

Intriguingly, the brief autobiography, although it recounts King’s early experiences of racial injustice, begins instead with an experience of economic deprivation. He was born, he notes, “on the verge of the great depression.” He recalls querying his parents at the age of five about the crowds standing in bread lines. His comment: “I can see the effects of this early childhood experience on my present anti-capitalist feelings” (King, 1950?:1).

In a later autobiographical statement, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” published in his first book (1958: 90–107), King is more expansive about his early experience of injustice: “I had grown up abhorring not only segregation but also the oppressive and barbarous acts that grew out of it”—lynchings, KKK demonstrations, police brutality, white supremacy in the courts. But he learned also “that the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice.” While working in a plant during the summers, he reports, “I saw economic injustice firsthand, and realized that the poor white was exploited as much as the Negro” (1958: 90).

In his indignant response to unjust conditions, Martin Luther King, Jr., was but emulating his own father, Daddy King, and the long protest

tradition of the Ebenezer Church of which Daddy King was pastor. In 1935, for instance, Daddy King organized and conducted a major voter rights campaign in Atlanta (King, Sr., 1980: 98–102), and in 1936 he led a campaign for income equity for black teachers in the community (1980: 104–107).

But the indignation at injustice—political and economic—arose from a religious vision, a vision of life as it is meant to be lived because of the character of ultimate reality, the reality of God. The black religious tradition affirms that the character of ultimate reality is love, and therein is comprised the most fundamental cosmological principle underlying King's social theory—the principle of internal relations. As Raboteau remarks (n.d.: 26):

With King, as with earlier black protest leaders, reflection on black destiny in America seemed inevitably to push beyond the boundaries of America. In part this was due to his concept of nonviolent love. Love recognized the interrelatedness of all people and impelled one to break down all barriers to community.

The central substance of the black religious tradition is, in Cone's phrasing (1984:419), "the eschatological hope of freedom." But freedom, in this context (and, as I shall note later, in King's work) is not the negative freedom of liberal democracy, a freedom to be left alone. There may be merit to that kind of freedom. Certainly there is from the perspective of the black experience of lynching, harassment, enslavement, and rape. But, within the black religious tradition, freedom has a more critical social connotation. It connotes a freedom found in association, in a community of mutual respect, support, interaction. That is the point of Wilson Carey McWilliams' affirmation that the black community, within American history, represents a stark alternative to the mainstream of American political and social culture. It is representative of the sometimes cherished, but generally suppressed, idea of fraternity:

Fraternity is, in fact, central. It is a repeated, insistent cry through all of black history in America, and Carmichael and Hamilton are right to comment that "black communities are the only large segments of this society where people refer to each other as brother." The whole character and structure of black life in America teaches the need for fraternity, for the ability to overcome, in some sphere of life at least, the bleak antithesis between inner and outer "selves," to find some social space in which expression and aspiration can be allies. (McWilliams, 1973: 578)

Fraternity, the beloved community, the interrelatedness of all life—through these phrases is expressed a principle of internal relations that is



belied in the overwhelming American economic and political tradition of liberal democracy and laissez-faire economics. This is the reason Ralph Ellison, in a critical review of Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma*, insists that black protest should not be construed to mean that blacks necessarily want simply to be accepted into American society in its given pathological condition. The protest is profounder and more far-reaching than that. It is a protest that reaches to the foundations of the American experience and envisions a more radical alternative (Ellison, 1964: 303–317).

What I am suggesting is that the black religious tradition informed King's mind—through its history of protest and proclamation, its critique of injustice and envisionment of divine reality, its sense of suffering and hope for the beloved community—in such a way to as prepare him to accept the language and concepts of democratic socialism. The ultimate root of his social theory is in this tradition; the intellectual categories he learned later, but took to readily because of a long and informative time of preparation through the black church.

### III. STUDENT YEARS (1944–1954)

Martin Luther King, Jr., I have suggested, was a democratic socialist from the time of his student days at Crozer Theological Seminary. Yet, during his undergraduate career at Morehouse College, he was already introduced to a critique of capitalism and informed that capitalism and racism were intimately related. His major was sociology. His major adviser was Walter Chivers, who, according to King's biographers, "taught that capitalism exploited black people, pointing out that 'Money is not only the root of evil; it is also the root of this particular evil—racism'" (Oates, 1982:18; Lewis, 1978: 19, 21).

However, during his first year at Crozer Theological Seminary, under the instruction of George W. Davis (from whom King took over one quarter of his academic work), King discovered in the works of Walter Rauschenbusch a theological social ethics which, with some later modification, remained influential in this thought throughout the remainder of his life. According to Kenneth Smith, one of King's professors (and friends), "Rauschenbusch was King's favorite author in the field of ethics." King "read and pondered all of his [Rauschenbusch's] major works" (Ansbro, 1984: 313). In King's own judgment, "I came early to Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, which left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up in me as a result of my early experiences" (King, 1958: 91). *Christianity and the Social Crisis* is one of

the two books most often mentioned explicitly throughout all of King's published works (Smith & Zepp, 1974: 71, 146).

Rauschenbusch's alliance of the Christian principle with the movement of democratic socialism is explicitly, indeed boldly, stated in this text. Thus, for example, he writes:

It would seem, therefore, that one of the greatest services which Christianity could render to humanity in the throes of the present transition would be to aid those social forces which are making for the increase of communism. The church should help public opinion to understand clearly the difference between the moral qualities of the competitive and the communistic principle, and enlist religious enthusiasm on behalf of what is essentially Christian. Christian individuals should strengthen and protect the communistic institutions already in existence in society and help them to extend their functions. (Rauschenbusch, 1907: 398)

Rauschenbusch, prior to this passage, sketched a shrewd argument to the effect that home, church, and school are communal associations in the sense that the materials of these associations are communally controlled and used and that their inner spirit and culture are, in principle at least, cooperative and solidaristic. As such, home, church, and school constitute a model for all sectors of social life.

Rauschenbusch admits (1907: 396) that modern Protestantism has been allied with capitalism and the business class; as such it "has been individualistic in its theories of Christian society." But individualism and the competitiveness among persons and groups that it incites have had a devastating effect on the common life of humankind (see 1907: 211–286). Rauschenbusch thus ponders

how quickly Christian thought will realize that individualism is coming to be an inadequate and antiquated form of social organization which must give place to a higher form of communistic organization, and how thoroughly it will comprehend that this new communism will afford a far nobler social basis for the spiritual temple of Christianity. For there cannot really be any doubt that the spirit of Christianity has more affinity for a social system based on solidarity and human fraternity than one based on selfishness and mutual antagonism. (Rauschenbusch, 1907: 396–397)

Throughout his text Rauschenbusch acknowledges the deep rift that divides the propertied class from the working class in contemporary industrial capitalism, and the unequal struggle in which they are engaged against each other (1907: 250–253, 400–411). It is hopeless, he avers, to expect the propertied class to give up its privileged position voluntarily. But the possibility of moving toward a communal society depends on "the firm support of a solid class whose economic future is staked on the

success of that ideal” (1907: 409). That can only be the working class. Thus “the new Christian principle of brotherly association must ally itself with the working class if both are to conquer” (1907: 409).

King’s captivation with Rauschenbusch’s social gospel and its version of democratic socialism was a subject of lengthy conversation during his Crozer years with J. Pius Barbour, a Baptist cleric and longtime family friend, who reports that King “thought the capitalist system was predicated on exploitation, prejudice, poverty,” and he “believed that Marx has analyzed the economic side of capitalism right” (Garrow, 1986: 43; Lewis, 1978: 26–31, 354).

Yet, following a study of several of Marx’s works in 1949, King pronounced a severe critique of Marxist philosophy, contrasting it with his Christian perspective. The critique is three-fold (King, 1958: 92–95; 1981: 96–105). First, he contrasts the atheist materialism of Marxism with the theist idealism of Christianity. Second, he opposes the ethical relativism of the Marxist tradition with the immutable moral principles—in particular, the law of love—of Christian doctrine. Thirdly, he sets apart the political absolutism of communism from the principle of human rights derived from Christianity’s dogma of the dignity of the human person. King’s critique, first presented in a sermon delivered in 1950 (Garrow, 1986: 41; Oates, 1982: 28, 506), subsequently delivered in other versions, is obviously directed toward but one kind of socialism—a centralized socialism developed on the basis of historical materialism. His critique of Marxism, however, does not entail a total rejection of all that Marxism symbolizes. In its judgment against the harsh inequities of capitalism and in its vision of a classless society beyond all barriers of caste and color, Marxism is a call to take up the cause of social justice. Thus, I would insist, King’s critique of Marxism in no way implies a rejection of the kind of democratic socialism represented in Rauschenbusch’s social gospel.

During his final year at Crozer, under the tutelage of Kenneth Smith, King was exposed to the works of Reinhold Niebuhr and Niebuhr’s incisive critique of theological and moral liberalism (Smith & Zepp, 1974: 71–97; Ansbro, 1984: 151–160). Niebuhr’s theological ethics had a continuing influence on King’s mind. The book he mentions most often in his writings is Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Initially, it seemed that Niebuhr’s method and position might totally replace those of Rauschenbusch. In King’s recollection, “The prophetic and realistic elements in Niebuhr’s passionate style and profound thought were appealing to me, and I became so enamored of his social ethics that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything he wrote” (King, 1958: 97). In the course of time, however, King distanced himself from Niebuhr, particularly Niebuhr’s understanding and rejection of pacifism. Yet he assimilated two dimensions of Niebuhr’s anthropology which led him, in turn, to

modify his theological liberalism. First, King acknowledged Niebuhr's refutation of "the false optimism characteristic of a great segment of Protestant liberalism." Second, he affirmed Niebuhr's "extraordinary insight into human nature, especially the behavior of nations and social groups. He is keenly aware of the complexity of human motives and of the relation between morality and power." In sum, Niebuhr's anthropology "is a persistent reminder of the reality of sin on every level of man's existence" (King, 1958: 99). This new understanding of the dogged intransigence of evil in human life, individual and collective, led him to charge Rauschenbusch with a "superficial optimism concerning man's nature" (King, 1958: 91), but it did not lead him to reject the analytic and constructive principles of democratic socialism.

Indeed, at Boston University, during his doctoral studies (1951–1954), King submitted a paper on "Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism," in which he appropriated ideas from some of Niebuhr's early, pro-socialist, texts. Thus, in identifying the central character of the social injustices of modern times, he cited Niebuhr's judgment that economic power is the determinative factor in injustice because "the private ownership of the productive processes and the increased centralization of the resultant power in the hands of a few make inevitably for irresponsibility (quoted in Ansbro, 1984: 152). The only solution to social injustice, Niebuhr had argued, is some form of class conflict: "The real problem cannot be solved by increasing social intelligence and humanitarian judgments, but 'only by setting the power of the exploited against the exploiters'" (Ansbro, 1984: 152). King appears to accept Niebuhr's diagnosis. But, in contrast to Niebuhr, King appeals to Walter Muelder's idea of "prophetic meliorism" to postulate the genuine possibility of radical change in the social and economic structures of human life and to propose the potentiality of the power of love in effectuating that change (Ansbro, 1984: 158). In Garrow's interpretation (1986: 46), King argues in this paper "that one must adopt *both* the ethical love emphasis of Rauschenbusch *and* the realists' stress upon political power."

In his doctoral studies at Boston University, Martin Luther King, Jr., discovered the fundamental philosophical and theological system within which he incorporated the social ethics he derived from Rauschenbusch and the Christian realism he found in Niebuhr, namely, personalism: "the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality." Personalism provided King with two basic convictions: a "philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and . . . a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality" (King, 1958: 100). But personalism, it must be stressed, is not individualistic, at least not in the classic, atomistic sense of that term. Rather, in Edgar Brightman's

version, it conjoins individualism with altruism (Ansbro, 1984: 84–85). Personalism, that is, is essentially communitarian in its anthropology.

Moreover, through the personalists among his professors, King was brought to an intensive study of Hegel's philosophy. King repudiated Hegel's metaphysics—his absolute idealism—"because it tended to swallow up the many in the one." But he was entranced by Hegel's dialectical method, through his understanding of which King was brought to the conviction that "truth is the whole" and "growth comes through struggle" (King, 1958: 100–101). Throughout King's writings, albeit sometimes in unsophisticated ways, he employs Hegel's dialectical categories of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis to render his comprehension of the oppositional interplay of ideas and social forces. In a revealing anecdote, Peter Bertocci reports how, in a seminar on Hegel, King "almost took over the class" when he understood Hegel's argument "that the master is dependent on the slave for his consciousness of himself as master" (Ansbro, 1984: 298; Garrow, 1986: 46; Smith & Zepp, 1974: 115). Through Hegel, I would suggest, King refined his socialist perspective—in its social diagnosis and in its theory of social change. He was enabled to discern, in a profounder way than before, the inextricable interrelationship of black and white in racist society and of owner and worker in a capitalist system. To be sure, King's democratic socialism was not Marxist in the classical or orthodox sense of that movement; it was instead a democratic socialism derived through the social gospel of Rauschenbusch, modified by the Christian realism of Niebuhr, and governed by the basic philosophical categories of personalist idealism. More deeply, it was inspired by the sensibilities and spirit of the black religious tradition. But it was firmly fixed in his mind and informed his thought and practice as he moved into his career as Baptist preacher and social activist.

#### *IV. FROM MONTGOMERY TO WASHINGTON (1955–1963)*

In the final year of his life, prior to the Poor People's Campaign scheduled for the Summer of 1968 in Washington, King sketched what appears to be a triadic periodization of his activist history, concentrating on Birmingham, Selma and Washington as key moments.

When we were in Birmingham, we were dealing with the question of the right to have access to public accommodations. . . . In Selma we were dealing with the question of the right to vote. . . . Now we are dealing with the problem that is probably the most . . . crucial problem of the Negro community, namely, economic deprivation. (King, 1968: 6)

This retrospective interpretation of the development of the civil rights struggle, whatever its significance, should not, I would argue, be construed to mean that King was driven by the force of events to move from social to political and, ultimately, to economic issues, thereby becoming more radical or socialist in his orientation in the final period of his activist career. To the degree that there was a change, it was only a shift in strategy and concentration, partially dictated by circumstance, but not, I would contend, a fundamental transformation of social orientation. There is ample evidence that his orientation as a democratic socialist in the sense indicated above remains constant throughout all three periods.

The first period begins with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and culminates in the March of Washington in 1963 with King's "I Have a Dream" speech. From a narrow perspective, the boycott in Montgomery was a localized, single issue campaign. But from King's perspective, it was part of a global revolution.

In his keynote address at the first Annual Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change in December 1956, King places the boycott within the context of "one of the most momentous periods in human history"—"an age in which a new social order is being born" (Washington, 1986: 135). He notes the liberation movements afoot throughout the world through which the peoples of Asia and Africa are repudiating structures of colonialism and imperialism—in short, the structures of international capitalism. There comes a time, he warns, when a people becomes utterly intolerant of oppression and exploitation, a time when they "rise up and protest against injustice." Through such protests, millions of "the colored peoples of the world" have gained their independence of colonial powers (Washington 1986: 136). Approving such protests, King, invoking the names of Heraclitus and Hegel, asserts there is no growth without struggle. He identifies the black movement in the United States, including the Montgomery boycott, with the global struggle for liberation.

King affirms this identification in *Stride Toward Freedom*, his rendition of "the Montgomery story":

This determination of Negro Americans to win freedom from all forms of oppression springs from the same deep longing that motivates oppressed peoples all over the world. The rumblings of discontent in Asia and Africa are expressions of a quest for freedom and human dignity by peoples who have long been the victims of colonialism and imperialism. So in a real sense the racial crisis in America is part of the larger world crisis. (King, 1958: 191)

This theme that the black movement in America is part of a global struggle for liberation is a settled conclusion of King's, echoing throughout his speeches and writings.

In *Stride Toward Freedom*, other themes indicative of King's funda-

mental social orientation can be found as well. Thus, for example, in *social diagnosis*, King employs the psychoanalytic concept of schizophrenia to designate a structural contradiction resident within American society since its inception. From its beginning, King asserts, "America has manifested a schizophrenic personality on the question of race. She has been torn between selves—a self in which she has proudly professed democracy and a self in which she has sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy" (King, 1958: 190; cf. King, 1967c: 68; Washington, 1986: 208). Thus, the civil rights movement is not itself creating a crisis: it is making explicit a crisis that has been present deep within the American character for centuries: "When a subject people moves toward freedom, they are not creating a cleavage, but are revealing the cleavage which apologists of the old order have sought to conceal. . . . The depth of the cleavage that existed . . . is being revealed by the resistance to integration" (King, 1958: 193–194). In the absence of open struggle, the crisis often remains concealed, hidden by the forces of what Gramsci has termed cultural hegemony when the oppressed, to cope, "resign themselves to their doom," when "they tacitly adjust themselves to oppression, and thereby become conditioned to it" (King, 1958: 211).

Thus, in his theory of *social change*, King lauds the emergence of a "New Negro" in America (e.g., Washington, 1986: 76, 101, 108, 137, 145–146). Black consciousness is a critical factor in the genesis and the sustenance of a struggle for racial justice. In effect, black consciousness is necessary for the formation of a counter-hegemonic force in American society. But, King insists, the black movement is not simply self-serving: "all he [the black] seeks is justice, *for both himself and for the white man*" (1958: 215, italics in the original). Racial oppression in its structural implications and place within the dynamics of American society affects more than the black community; it affects the marginalized people of whatever race: "Poor white men, women, and children, bearing the scars of ignorance, deprivation, and poverty, are evidence of the fact that harm to one is injury to all. Segregation has placed the whole South socially, educationally, and economically behind the rest of the nation" (King, 1958: 200–201).

Thus King conjoins, although he does not identify, racial injustice with economic injustice, and racial oppression with class subjection.

Both Negro and white workers are equally oppressed. For both, the living standards need to be raised to levels consistent with our national resources. Not logic but a hollow social distinction has separated the races. The economically depressed white accepts his poverty by telling himself that, if in no other respect, at least socially he is above the Negro. For this empty pride in a racial myth he has paid the crushing price of insecurity, hunger,

ignorance, and hopelessness for himself and his children. (King, 1958: 203–204)

Acknowledging that discrimination is rampant throughout the labor union movement, King nonetheless argues that the interests of the black community and the working class are identical: “decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community” (Washington, 1986: 203; cf. King, 1958: 202–205). He urges a political alliance between labor and the black community to struggle against the resistance of capital to new patterns of production and distribution, to “extend the frontiers of democracy for the whole nation” (Washington, 1986: 206).

At the moment, America confronts two alternatives for the future, “democracy’s fulfillment or fascism’s triumph” (King, 1958: 196). Of the two, the former is the more appropriate *social telos* that should determine our actions and govern our institutions, for the former, as a representation of the “beloved community” conforms to the inner law of the universe: “He who works against community is working against the whole of creation” (King, 1958: 106). Moreover, those who work against community do an injustice to themselves because, in King’s basic philosophical and theological judgment, “all life is interrelated”; injustice distorts the character and conditions of both oppressor and oppressed. Thus the beloved community is in the deepest interests of all peoples—black and white, rich and poor. In the absence of the beloved community, all are deficient and suffer though they know it not.

In sum, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was but a single event within a broad historical, even cosmic, drama. Its dynamics, as interpreted by King, contain all the dimensions of a democratic socialist orientation.

If this contention has any merit, then King’s projection in his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963 was not, as has been alleged, “a modest dream, a simple dream of a world where ‘white only’ signs did not exist” (Sawyer, 1984: 261). Taken in isolation King’s speech may seem to have that character, but placed within the context of King’s total social orientation, its meaning and implications are far from modest. It indicates a desperate need for a kind of social democracy within which fundamental social institutions and cultural systems would be transformed by considerations of justice and, ultimately, love.

Thus, for instance, in a prior address on “The American Dream” in 1961, King envisions a “new age” in which the interrelated evils of racism, economic injustice, and militarism are defeated. Within the conditions of the prevailing social order, he is, he declares, a “maladjusted” person:



I never did intend to adjust to the evils of segregation and discrimination. . . . I never did intend to adjust . . . to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never did intend to adjust . . . to the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence (Washington, 1986: 216; 89; 14–15; cf. King, 1981: 24, 61–62, 132).

Repeatedly, during this first period of his activist career, King links racial and economic injustice: “I had . . . learned that the inseparable twin of racial injustice is economic injustice. I saw how the systems of segregation ended up in the exploitation of the Negro as well as the poor whites” (Washington, 1986: 37). Furthermore, in response to critics who charged the civil rights movement with disrupting the peace, King again and again distinguished between a negative peace (the mere absence of social tension) and a positive peace (the realization of justice and community) (Washington, 1986: 6, 50–51, 295).

Moreover, when King writes explicitly about democracy, he rejects current forms of “anemic democracy” which tolerate and perpetuate patterns of racism. Full democracy, in contrast, entails more than desegregation; it entails integration, which King defines as “welcomed participation . . . into the total range of human activities.” As such, integration constitutes a three-fold demand: it demands full respect for “the dignity and worth of personality”; it demands freedom as the empowerment to engage in responsible decision-making; and it demands solidarity or “community,” that is, “the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of man to assume a semblance of responsibility for his brother” (Washington, 1986: 117–125).

Again, it must be remembered that the March on Washington in 1963 was contrived as a centennial celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation. But King’s critique of the Emancipation Proclamation was its failure to provide the economic foundation necessary for effective liberation.

Since emancipation the Negro American has continued to suffer under an essentially unreconstructed economy. He was freed without land or legal protection, and was made an outcast entitled only to the most menial jobs. Even the federal government that set him free failed to work out any long-range policy that would guarantee economic resources to a previously enslaved people—as much entitled to the land they had worked as were their former owners. The exploitation of the Negro population persisted through the Reconstruction period and continues down to the present day (King, 1958: 202, italics added; cf. 1967c: 79; Washington, 1986: 270).

The freedom that King invokes as the central category in his “I Have a Dream” speech is, I would conclude, not the negative freedom of liberal

democracy (King later calls this “abstract freedom” [1967c: 79]), but the freedom of a democratic socialist orientation. This judgment conforms with Michael Harrington’s observations following lengthy discussion with King at the National Democratic Convention in Los Angeles in 1960:

In our conversations . . . it seemed clear to me that he understood the need for a thoroughgoing democratization of the economy and the political structure of society. He understood that full civil rights for an exploited and hungry mass of black Americans constituted only a first step in the transformation of the intolerable conditions under which they lived. He therefore struck me as having a socialist orientation, and I had the feeling that had I—or someone closer to King like Bayard—pushed that point he would have agreed. (Harrington, 1973: 114–15)

#### V. FROM WASHINGTON TO SELMA (1963–1965)

In his March 1964 annual report in the *Nation* on the civil rights struggle, King asserts that throughout 1963, the movement “elevated jobs and other economic issues to the summit, where earlier it had placed discrimination and suffrage. It thereby forged episodic social protest into the hammer of social revolution” (Washington, 1986: 169).

This assertion articulates the central theme of King’s book on the Birmingham Movement, *Why We Can’t Wait*, and is indicative, I would contend, of King’s persistent democratic socialist orientation. The Birmingham Movement, he declares, marked the beginning of “America’s Third Revolution,” a social revolution in which “a submerged social group, propelled by a burning need for justice. . . . moving with determination,” created “an uprising” intended to shake “a huge society from its comfortable base” (King, 1964b: 15–16, 114, 117–122). The book concludes with a dramatic proposal, later to be presented to the Democratic National Convention, for a “Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged” (King, 1964b: 134–141). The primary focus of the Bill of Rights is on economic issues, particularly the issue of structural poverty.

Although the bulk of *Why We Can’t Wait* is given to a description and interpretation of the Birmingham Movement itself, permeating the text is a theory of human rights displaying basic characteristics of King’s democratic socialism. We must note, to be fair, that at an SCLC staff retreat in May 1967, King, reflecting about “where we are in the Civil Rights Movement,” affirms: “it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights” (King, 1967a: 2). But, there is ample textual evidence to conclude that King often, throughout all of his activist career and not just in his later years, appealed beyond civil (more precisely constitutional) rights to basic human rights

grounded on his philosophical and theological commitments (see, e.g., Washington, 1986: 208, 22; King, 1958: 69–70). Such an appeal is clearly manifest in 1963 and 1964.

King's theory of rights is, I would aver, intimately correlated with his theory of law whose outline is sketched in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," written in April 1963 (King, 1964b: 76–95; Washington, 1986: 289–302). Pressed by his opponents with the question, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?," King responds by distinguishing between just and unjust laws. The formal criterion of distinction between the two is whether a given law conforms or does not conform to "the moral law or the law of God." The material criterion is the effect of the positive law on human personality: "Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust" (King, 1964b: 82). There are other, more procedural criteria King invokes in explicating his distinction, but the effect of positive law on human personality is the most elemental test of differentiation (Sturm, 1984), and is derivative from his fundamental personalist philosophy.

I would suggest that King's theory of rights, in turn, is a function of the same principle: rights are grounded on human personality. They constitute those conditions requisite to the development and fulfillment of human personality. In King's judgment, I would argue, the rights guaranteed in the American Constitution including its Preamble, the Bill of Rights, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments are contributory to, but insufficient for, the full development of human personality (King, 1964b:25). They constitute a beginning, but not an end, of the claims any person or group of persons may properly and legitimately make on a social system.

The rights guaranteed in those constitutional documents are thus human rights, but do not embrace the full range of human rights to which all are entitled by virtue of their humanity. This is the reason King often phrases the claims of the black community in the civil rights struggle in a two-fold way, e.g., "We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional *and* God-given rights" (King, 1964b: 81, italics added); despite some advances, blacks are not yet attributed those "basic rights [they] ought to have inherited automatically, centuries ago, by virtue of [their] membership in the human family *and* [their] American birthright" (King, 1964b; 32, italics added). King's ultimate appeal is not merely to constitutional rights as such, but to human rights.

In that connection, King, in effect, takes a stand on a current controversy over the scope and grounds of human rights. Proponents of liberal democracy argue that human rights include only political and civil rights, e.g., the right to life, liberty, fair trial (Cranston, 1973). They assume an individualistic social ontology. Democratic socialists, on the other hand,

profess that political and civil rights without social and economic rights—e.g. the right to employment, a living wage, education—are virtually ineffective (Campbell, 1983). They presuppose a communal social ontology. A democratic socialist version of human rights therefore conjoins political and civil together with economic and social rights. That is King's position. Repeatedly, he asserts that

Negroes are still at the bottom of the economic ladder. They live within two concentric circles of segregation. One imprisons them on the basis of color, while the other confines them within a separate culture of poverty. (King, 1964b: 23)

Many white liberals, King notes (1964b: 24), deplore outright discrimination and prejudice, but wholly ignore economic injustice: "But the Negro knows that these two evils have a malignant kinship." The black revolution therefore extends beyond a demand for civil rights narrowly construed to include a demand for economic rights. And it extends beyond a claim on behalf of blacks only to a claim on behalf of all persons living under conditions of poverty. These are the implications of King's declaration of a "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged." He entwines without wholly confusing the causes of race and class.

While Negroes form the vast majority of America's disadvantaged, there are millions of white poor who would also benefit from such a bill. . . . Many poor whites . . . were the derivative victims of slavery. As long as labor was cheapened by the involuntary servitude of the black men, the freedom of white labor, especially in the South, was little more than a myth. . . . They [the white poor] are chained by the weight of discrimination, though its badge of degradation does not mark them. It corrupts their lives, frustrates their opportunities and withers their education. In one sense it is more evil for them, because it has confused so many by prejudice that they have supported their own oppressors. (King, 1964b: 138; 1964a: 13)

Such a Bill of Rights, benefitting the entire lower socio-economic class—black and white—"could mark the rise of a new era, in which the full resources of the society would be used to attack the tenacious poverty which so paradoxically exists in the midst of plenty" (King, 1964b: 138–139).

In King's statement before the Platform Committee of the Democratic National Committee in August 1964, he urged, first, that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 be vigorously enforced and, secondly, that the Federal Government use its vast powers and authority to ensure the voting rights of blacks. But most of the statement is given to his Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged as a response to the question: "What can be done to make freedom real and substantial for our Negro citizens, and for millions of

white citizens afflicted with poverty?" (King, 1964a: 7). The heart of King's proposal was a guaranteed annual income for all families, pegged at the prevailing federal definition of the threshold of poverty. In addition, King proposed an effective policy of full employment; he affirmed a right to quality vocational, professional, and academic education for people of all ages; he asserted a need for free health care for disadvantaged families; and he enunciated a right to decent and affordable housing. Finally, he insisted that special attention be given to the rural poor. King estimated a cost of fifty billion dollars to implement the Bill of Rights over a ten year period.

King's plea was for naught: "The Democratic party . . . politely rejected his plan" (Oates, 1982: 310). But his proposal was a logical extension of his kind of democratic socialist orientation. Without suppressing the special case of racial alienation in America, the proposal coalesced that issue with class alienation, thereby focusing on the question of economic injustice. In its concentration on economic and social rights, it manifested a commitment beyond the boundaries of liberal democracy. While it was silent on the question of the explicit ownership of the means of production, it legitimized the need for a structural redistribution of wealth and assumed the propriety of democratic control over that process. Many of these themes recur in King's famous *Playboy* interview, given in October 1964, published in January 1965 (Washington, 1986: 353, 360, 365–368, 375).

King, I would therefore suggest, was most serious when, at a Norwegian press conference on the occasion of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1964, he affirmed: "We feel we have much to learn from Scandanavia's democratic socialist tradition and from the manner in which you have overcome many of the social and economic problems that still plague a far more powerful and affluent nation" (Garrow, 1986: 364). A month later, while in jail in Selma, King is reported to have reasserted that judgment: "If we are going to achieve real equality, the United States will have to adopt a modified form of socialism" (Garrow, 1986: 382). Thus, prior to the March from Selma to Montgomery, King was asserting the centrality of the economic issue and propounding a socialist theory of human rights, which should be understandable assuming, as I have argued, that democratic socialism was his consistent orientation from his days at Crozer.

## VI. FROM SELMA TO MEMPHIS (1965–1968)

In the initial section of this essay, I noted the thesis that King's social thought underwent a radicalization during the final years of his activist

career. There is evidence to support such a thesis, but, I have contended, it is more plausible to interpret the change as a shift in strategy and tactics rather than a fundamental transformation in King's social ethics orientation which, I have argued, has been democratic socialist throughout his career, beginning with his student days at Crozer Theological Seminary.

As evidence to support the thesis of radicalization, King's own testimony can be cited. Repeatedly, during the final years of King's life, he announced that the civil rights movement has entered on a new phase. Thus, in 1968, he wrote, "We have left the realm of constitutional rights and we are entering the area of human rights. The Constitution assured the right to vote, but there is no such assurance of the right to adequate housing, or the right to an adequate income" (Washington, 1986: 58). In 1967, he stated, "With Selma and the Voting Rights Act one phase of development in the civil rights revolution came to an end. A new phase opened" (King, 1967c: 3). In the same text, he interprets the change as a movement from issues of dignity to issues of economic equality:

From issues of personal dignity they [the black] are now advancing to programs that impinge upon the basic system of social and economic control. At this level Negro programs go beyond race and deal with economic inequality, wherever it exists. In the pursuit of these goals, the white poor become involved. (King, 1967c: 17)

In an article prepared in 1968, published posthumously, King wrote, "Just as we dealt with the social problem of segregation through massive demonstrations, and we dealt with the political problem—the denial of the right to vote—through massive demonstrations, we are now trying to deal with the economic problems—the right to live, to have a job and income—through massive protests" (Washington, 1986: 65). One may ask, however, whether such developmental statements enunciate a profound change in King's own mind or, as is more likely, a change in the focus and concentration of the civil rights movement.

Nonetheless, commentators, even during King's lifetime, claim to discern a substantial turn in King's social thought during this period. I have already cited Garrow's report of Bayard Rustin's comment about King's initial reaction to the devastation of the Watts' riots in 1965:

Rustin had been telling King for nearly two years that the most serious issues facing the movement were economic problems of class rather than race, but on this evening Rustin sensed that the day's experiences had convinced King of the truth of that analysis. "That struck Martin very, very deeply," Rustin explained, "I think it was the first time he really understood" (Garrow, 1986: 439).

Again, David Halberstam, after spending several days with King in the Spring of 1967, asserted that “King admits he is becoming a more radical critic of the society and that the idea of ‘domestic colonialism’ represents his view of the North” (Halberstam, 1984: 201). He quotes King as saying: “For years . . . I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the society. . . . Now I feel quite differently. I think you’ve got to have reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values” (Halberstam, 1984: 202). In particular, according to Halberstam, King mentioned nationalization of some industry, guaranteed income, public review of foreign investment, and urban renewal. On the other hand, King affirmed his conviction at least a decade earlier that “the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice” and that “the poor white was exploited just as much as the Negro” (King, 1958: 90).

However, three moves initiated by King in 1965 and 1966 may give some credence to the thesis that a significant transformation had occurred in his social critique: his opposition to the Vietnam War, the Chicago Movement, and the Poor People’s Campaign.

King’s first public condemnation of the war in Vietnam occurred in March, 1965, a few days preceding the Selma March (Garrow, 1986: 394). Later that year, following the passage of the Voting Rights Act, King, arguing that racial injustice, poverty and the Vietnam War were inextricably linked, urged direct negotiation among all parties, including the National Liberation Front, to end the war (Oates, 1982: 375–376). On the strong advice of his colleagues, however, who presumed such a position would damage the civil rights movement, King subdued his public opposition to the war until the early months of 1967, when his deepest convictions stimulated by the atrocities of the war compelled him to “break silence.” In his most well-known address on the Vietnam War, he declared that the war “is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit.” He asserted that America is “on the wrong side of a world revolution,” and that to get on the right side, “we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.” He in effect condemned capitalism with its principles of property rights and profit motive as obstacles to resolving “the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism” (Washington, 1986: 240). King’s opposition to the Vietnam War was hence not the result of a narrowly construed pacifist principle. His basic appeal was to a revolutionary form of social democracy whose ontological ground is the beloved community (Washington, 1986: 242–243; cf. King, 1967b: 21–34, 67–78). Given that express appeal, I would contend that King’s opposition to the Vietnam War does not display a radical change in his social thought. It is instead the logical extension of an enduring democratic socialist orientation of which King’s philosophy of nonviolence was a part.

King's concern about the conditions of the black community in Northern metropolitan areas was expressed in the Spring prior to the Watts riot (Oates, 1982: 367). The Chicago Movement was born of that concern. According to Oates (1982: 380), in declaring the Chicago project, King asserted that "poverty was the fundamental problem of Negroes in this country. 'The nonviolent movement must be as much directed against the violence of poverty, which destroys the souls of people, as against the violence of segregation.'" King, together with the SCLC staff, construed black slums as a form of "internal colonialism."

"The Chicago problem," the final draft [of the SCLC position paper] stated, "is simply a matter of economic exploitation. Every condition exists simply because someone profits by its existence. This economic exploitation is crystalized in the SLUM," which was "a system of internal colonialism." Each specific ill—inferior education, discriminatory housing practices, and racial exclusion from skilled trades—stemmed from that common cause (Garrow, 1986: 456).

King's critique of urban power structures and economic interests as entrenched forces creating and sustaining the slums—the ghettos—is unqualified (Washington, 1986: 189–194). But change is not impossible. A new world—"where men and women can live together, where each has his own job and house and where all children receive as much education as their minds can absorb"—may be accomplished "by rejecting the racism, materialism and violence that has characterized Western civilization" (Washington, 1986: 61). Ineffective in its ultimate objectives, the Chicago Movement gave witness to the deep intransigence of established power and the dominant cultural hegemony governing American culture. But neither in its aims nor in its failures did it indicate any transformation of King's social orientation. His Niebuhrian realism may have been intensified, but, in a sense, his democratic socialist vision was reinforced as well. Thus, in November 1966, at an SCLC retreat, King is recorded as asserting, "something is wrong with capitalism. . . . Maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism" (quoted in Garrow, 1986: 537).

At about the same time, King conceived the idea of the Poor People's Campaign, a march on Washington by thousands of the poor where they would "sit down if necessary in the middle of the street and say, 'we are here; we are poor; we don't have any money; you have made us this way; you keep us down this way; and we've come to stay until you do something about it'" (quoted in Garrow, 1986: 535). The campaign would be a "genuine class movement" cutting across all racial and ethnic lines—Indians, Hispanics, poor white, blacks—and addressing fundamental economic issues (Oates, 1982: 449–452). This "nonviolent army"—or "'freedom church' of the poor" (King, 1967b: 60)—would engage in massive



forms of civil disobedience until the legislature was compelled to act. The group would be seeking nothing more than “their right to jobs or income—jobs, income, the demolition of slums, and the rebuilding by the people who live there of new communities in their place; in fact, a new economic deal for the poor” (King, 1967b: 61). In addition, King asserted that, in the long haul, the campaign must become international because “the problem, the crisis we face is international in scope”:

We in the West must bear in mind that the poor countries are poor primarily because we have exploited them through political and economic colonialism. Americans in particular must help their nation repent of her modern economic imperialism. (King, 1976b: 62)

As King wrote almost a decade earlier (1958: 191), “the racial crisis in America is a part of the larger world crisis.”

In a sermon delivered the Sunday before his assassination, King announced the intent of the campaign: “to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty” and therefore to make effective the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, because “if a man doesn’t have a job or income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness” (Washington, 1986: 274). The Poor People’s Campaign was, in one sense, a change in strategy and tactics in the civil rights movement, directing a massive nonviolent army to force the federal government through civil disobedience to establish a new deal for the poor. But in another sense, it was an obvious extension of the social ethics and social ontology to which King had been committed from his early years. As Oates remarks (1982: 462), “Certainly the projected campaign reflected King’s unhappiness with capitalism, an unhappiness that had begun in his youth, even before he had studied Rauschenbusch’s impassioned denunciations of it.”

In sum, Martin Luther King, Jr., was, I contend, a democratic socialist throughout his professional life. That commitment was sustained by the black religious tradition, informed by the Social Gospel, and expressed in diverse ways during his tragically brief career. If we would honor the man, we must acknowledge his dream—an America that never has been, but yet should be.

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