

## *Looking Back at Martin Luther King, Jr.: An Interview with David J. Garrow*

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Let's start with your publication *Bearing the Cross*.<sup>1</sup> Is there anything that you would add or revise about King or the movement?

**David J. Garrow:** I would highlight two things. In early 1992, Keith Miller of Arizona State University published an invaluable book titled *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources*.<sup>2</sup> Keith is a preacher's kid, a white preacher's kid originally from Texas. But being a preacher's kid, Keith had a depth of insight into Dr. King's sermons that neither myself nor even a superb theologian like my longtime friend James H. Cone had. Neither myself nor Jim nor really anyone else who had written about Dr. King at that time brought that expertise to the subject, and so the degree of insight and originality that Keith's book offered illuminated not just Dr. King's preaching and the sources of his sermons, but the very real difference between King when he was speaking in church, particularly in black southern churches, versus when he was speaking to primarily white or primarily northern audiences. I had long been very profoundly aware of how much more personal, how much more powerful King's speaking was when he was speaking in church, rather than in a political or particularly a fund-raising context, and Keith's book really explained and illuminated that to a tremendously original degree.

1. David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1986; paperback reprint ed., 2004).

2. Keith Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (New York: Free Press, 1992; paperback reprint ed. Univ. of Georgia Press, 1998).

The second thing I think that's most significant in King studies since *Bearing the Cross* first came out in 1986 is a forthcoming book which will appear in March 2018, by a young scholar named Patrick Parr, entitled *The Seminarian: Martin Luther King Jr. Comes of Age*.<sup>3</sup> Patrick's book focuses almost entirely on Dr. King's three years at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, just outside Philadelphia, from 1948 to 1951. I had done a decent amount of interviewing with King's former classmates from that time, and with a faculty member or two, but in *Bearing the Cross* I only devote six pages to King's three years there.

But Patrick, for several years now, has just burrowed into the history of Crozer, to King's time there, in an incredibly impressive way, and thanks in part to the King Papers Project volumes, Patrick is able to narrate King's academic experience at Crozer term by term. But Patrick also, thanks to incredibly diligent and thorough legwork, has unearthed all sorts of other local sources, particularly about the Chester black community.

King had an especially close relationship with Chester's Reverend J. Pius Barbour, whom I mention a number of times in *Bearing the Cross*, but Patrick's work is a tremendous extension beyond what I was able to do. Most remarkably of all, Dr. King during those years at Crozer had a very serious romantic relationship with a young woman named Betty Moitz, whom I mentioned just once in *Bearing the Cross*. I devote only a paragraph to that relationship,<sup>4</sup> and given the people search technology that was available to me in 1983, with Betty Moitz having by then married, and not knowing her new surname, I was completely unable to get any leads on finding her. Fast-forward more than thirty years after *Bearing the Cross* came out, and it turns out that Betty Moitz was and is as of today still alive.

Patrick has spoken with her, interviewed her, gone back and forth in email with her very extensively. So it's a tremendous scholarly achievement for Patrick in the year 2016 to have been able to go back and, in a firsthand way, get Betty Moitz's memories and recollections of her relationship with Dr. King from 1950.

So those are the two sort of great leaps forward in King scholarship since *Bearing the Cross*.

3. Patrick Parr, *The Seminarian: Martin Luther King Jr. Comes of Age* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2018).

4. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, pp. 40–41, 637–38n26.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Since you mentioned Reverend King's intellectual formation at Crozer, I know controversy arose years later during the examination of King's papers around plagiarism in his Boston University PhD dissertation. Eugene Genovese wrote an essay when he was reviewing the second volume of the King Papers and described the plagiarism.<sup>5</sup> Genovese also felt that King's professors perhaps didn't train him well enough in terms of some dialectical thought and Hegelianism and other things, and that perhaps King would have done well even to look to the southern tradition, the southern white theological tradition, some of the Calvinism of the older Southern Baptists and that sort of thing. In terms of your research, obviously it would appear that King sat in classes, wrote papers, did other things. So the question is, was he really absorbing the intellectual milieu that he was in, either at Crozer or at Boston University, or was he just phoning it in? What is your sense of that?

**David J. Garrow:** I would start by highlighting how Dr. King was only fifteen years old when he began his undergraduate education at Morehouse College in Atlanta, thanks to the fact that he'd actually skipped two grades during his twelve years of earlier schooling. During his four years at Morehouse, King is still a teenager, and he's living at home, commuting from Auburn Avenue on the east side of downtown Atlanta, over to Morehouse, part of the west side black community.

I frankly do not think that Morehouse, apart from President Benjamin E. Mays, had a particularly deep or profound intellectual impact on King. Above and beyond Mays, King's own father, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., and the Reverend William Holmes Borders, from Wheat Street Baptist Church, also located in the Auburn Avenue neighborhood, were the two preachers and pastors who had the greatest impact on the young King. By the time that King is nineteen years old, the three greatest influences upon him have been his father, Reverend Borders, and President Mays. That highlights very profoundly how King, as a young man, was first and foremost a product of the black church and the black preaching tradition.

I think people almost always have to be reminded that the primary source for Dr. King's thinking, without exception, was the Bible, and that

5. Eugene D. Genovese, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Theology, Politics, Scholarship," review of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 2, *Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951–November 1955*, ed. Clayborne Carson et al., *Reviews in American History* 23, no. 1 (March 1995): 1–12.

being a pastor, being a preacher, being a minister, that was and always remained the core of his identity. Going to Crozer for three years of seminary starting in 1948 represents both leaving Atlanta, leaving his father and the family cocoon, and it also very consciously on King's part is a desire to attain an intellectual grounding and an intellectual breadth that his father as a preacher simply had never been exposed to.

Both Keith Miller's book and Patrick Parr's book, in very careful and very reliable ways, explore the problem of King's plagiarism at Crozer. Crozer had a very small, almost tiny, student body, and while there is some copying and lack of attribution in King's writings at Crozer, it's not occurring on a particularly large scale. Patrick Parr's work certainly suggests that the intimacy of the educational setting at Crozer meant that King was taking pretty good care in his coursework.

In contrast, when King goes to Boston University to begin his doctoral work, I think that most of the coursework to which King was exposed at BU did not necessarily resonate as deeply or as personally with him as had much of his experience at Crozer.

A number of us wrote essays in the *Journal of American History*, in a special issue in June of 1991,<sup>6</sup> on the question of King's plagiarism, and even then I was very profoundly influenced by Keith Miller's work and insight. If I can summarize this in an accurate, reliable way, within the preaching tradition—and this is in no way exclusively or primarily an African American tradition—within the preaching tradition Keith had highlighted already by that time in a number of journal articles preceding his book, how there's really no such thing as a wholly original sermon. Preachers are used to adopting and adapting previous orations, previous sermons by others, so that “copying” is both an inherent and an inescapable part of the oral tradition of preaching, and I think it's accurate to say that both Keith and myself back in that 1991–1992 context, basically emphasized how, in his work at Crozer and then especially at BU, King was not trained or didn't make the effort to draw a clear distinction between his academic coursework writing and the oral tradition of preaching.<sup>7</sup> I think much of King's coursework at Crozer was indeed quite meaningful to him. But at Boston, with the exception of a number of his short papers,

6. David J. Garrow, “King's Plagiarism: Imitation, Insecurity, and Transformation,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1991): 86–92.

7. Keith D. Miller, “Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Folk Pulpit,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1991): 120–23.

much of it, to me, suggested a graduate student who was very dutifully going through the motions of reciting to his professors what he believed they wanted to hear.

The King Papers Project volume really details the extent of King's plagiarism, in that much of that BU coursework is paragraph after paragraph after paragraph of largely copied material. I think anyone who's ever taken the time to even just page through Dr. King's PhD dissertation would be immediately struck by what a wholly impersonal document it is. It may be instructive to highlight that Dr. King's dissertation has never been published in book form, and if it were to be published, I think it would attract an extremely modest readership, because it gives you, frankly, next to zero insight into its author.

As the King Papers Project has documented line by line, the amount of unoriginal work in the dissertation is such that had it been discovered during King's lifetime, it very likely would have led to a revocation of his degree. Again, certainly when we look at King's life from 1955 forward, the amount of emphasis that should be placed on his coursework and dissertation experience at Boston University, I would argue, should be quite modest indeed.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Let me ask a follow-up to that. One of the interesting questions that continues to swirl in terms of King's intellectual formation was the role of Boston Personalism, a philosophy that was at Boston University. The dean there, Walter Muelder, was the last living exponent of that philosophy, which basically focused on the dignity of the human person. Is it right to say that Personalism mediated through Boston University had an influence on King, if King perhaps was not applying himself with rigor to his academics?

Did King get the idea and run with it, or was it the case that it didn't have a whole lot of influence on him? Maybe he took the ideas from his own black tradition and especially the traditions of his father and Dr. Mays and others? John Ansbro's book *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind*<sup>8</sup> implied that at least some of the curriculum at BU actually did have an influence on King, although I think at the time of Ansbro's book the plagiarism was not fully known.

**David J. Garrow:** Correct, the John Ansbro book came out prior to *Bearing the Cross* and prior to the publication of any of Keith Miller's

8. John Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

work. Even at Crozer, thanks to a professor named George W. Davis, King had been exposed at least somewhat to the work of Edgar S. Brightman, who was the senior figure in Boston Personalism, but who, due to his health, King had only had a brief exposure to early on in his time in Boston. My view, back in *Bearing the Cross* and one I still hold now, is that Boston Personalism and the essence of its emphasis on the dignity and worth of all human personality was a teaching that deeply appealed to King because of what he already thought about racial inequality and racial discrimination. The fact that Boston Personalism intellectually reflected a belief in basic human equality, that's what made it attractive and appealing to King. I said this in print back in an article I had in the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* in 1986 as well.<sup>9</sup> Whenever King adopted and relied upon non-black writers and theorists and thinkers, whether it be Henry David Thoreau or Mohandas Gandhi, what appealed to him from all these different thinkers were principles and teachings that he felt echoed values and beliefs he already had acquired from the black southern church tradition.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** So you might say that King was an eclectic user of different philosophies. For example you mentioned Mohandas Gandhi, and I know that at least in the popular imagination, King is presented as an indiscriminate user of Gandhism, especially the nonviolence strategy. And of course, his father also had been attracted to it, as had a number of other figures like Benjamin Mays and Howard Thurman among others. But at the same time, maybe no one knew, Gandhi didn't like black Africans very much.

**David J. Garrow:** Right.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Because in South Africa, Gandhi says look, we don't want to be associated with those black folks. And we want to stand up for the rights of Indians.<sup>10</sup> And maybe he changed his mind by the '40s when people caught up with him. Most certainly it seems that King was an improviser. He would take what was useful to him, combine it with his own native black church tradition, and then run with it.

**David J. Garrow:** Right.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Would that be a good assessment?

9. David J. Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40, no. 4 (January 1986): 5–20.

10. As discussed in Ashwin Desai and Goolem Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2015).

**David J. Garrow:** Yes. Patrick Parr's book does a very nice job also of highlighting how during his time at Crozer, Dr. King was exposed to a lecture by Mordecai Johnson, the president of Howard University, who had just recently been in India, and that was perhaps very likely King's first exposure to the Gandhian tradition. But with Gandhi, as with Thoreau, early in the Montgomery bus boycott when both Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley came down from the North to Montgomery to try to help the local Montgomery movement, both Bayard and Glenn were very profoundly grounded in the teachings of nonviolence. Without exception, what appealed about the entire nonviolent tradition to King was that it echoed and reflected a basic Christian biblical doctrine of love.

So it's crucial to always emphasize how that belief in an intellectual and I daresay political view of love was so deeply central to King. Never allow, I'm roughly paraphrasing here, never allow anyone to drag you so low as to hate, for hate destroys the hater. King would always make a distinction between the evil deed and the evildoer.

Especially in our current political context, I believe it cannot be emphasized enough that the real core of Martin Luther King's political theology was the avoidance, the utter and complete avoidance, of a politics of hate.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Based on your reading of King, he had a bit of a brush with the identity politics of his day. He had to deal with Malcolm X. He had to deal with an emergent Black Power movement, Stokely Carmichael and others. What lessons could King's approach teach us in regard to current identity politics? Is this something that could be instructive? And I don't wish to discard or discount folks who are involved with identity politics, they obviously have some legitimate concerns. But at the same time it seems to have a very different flavor around the question of either hate or outrage or other various things. There seems to be a different spirit, let's put it that way.

**David J. Garrow:** Yes, yes. King profoundly, deeply believed in racial equality. I think one of the interesting impacts of Patrick Parr's book when it comes out in the spring of 2018 will be the degree to which people reflect upon how King's early, deep romantic attachment with Betty Moitz, who was white, at a time when King was barely twenty-one years old, how centrally did that relationship inform his understanding of human racial equality.

Come 1966, when Black Power, capital B, capital P, as a phrase emerges, King was very intent upon not simply dismissing or attacking it. King very much liked Stokely Carmichael as a person, and Stokely, before

he passed away, was always very much wanting to correctly emphasize that he and King always had a very warm personal relationship. King found Black Power very difficult to deal with as a political issue in 1966 and 1967, both because of how Carmichael never made the effort to specify what the phrase meant and what the phrase did not mean. That's a question I've written on several times.<sup>11</sup> King also found it difficult because the reaction to Black Power in the elite white press, particularly the *New York Times*, was so critical, so negative.

King did not want the black freedom struggle to come apart over the issue of Black Power. He had been deeply hopeful, prior to Malcolm X's assassination in February 1965, of how Malcolm's dramatic evolution after leaving the Nation of Islam, his "reinvention" as Manning Marable rightly termed it in his excellent book,<sup>12</sup> suggested that Malcolm might work in close conjunction with the southern black freedom struggle, going forward.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Let's review current historiography and popular presentations. Some have said that King has become an almost secular figure with the religious part left out. And this is both in terms of popular presentations of King, as well as some of the historiography. Would you agree with that assessment?

**David J. Garrow:** I'm afraid that that does seem to have become the case. Just a few weeks ago—here we are speaking in December 2017—I spoke to a room full of young community organizers, and I stressed, as I have earlier in our conversation here, how deeply rooted King was in a doctrine and an ethic of Christian love.

Those young organizers were very askance, very querulous even, about that message. Their understanding, perhaps based on relatively little, if any, reading, was that King's only interest in nonviolence was purely as a utilitarian tactic. I came away from that conversation with that group thinking that here these are progressive people, actively working in different communities around the country, but they did not know that King was, first and foremost, grounded in the Christian tradition, grounded in the church, grounded in the Bible. That did not appear to be something

11. David J. Garrow, "A Revolutionary in the Spotlight and in Exile," *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 2004, p. 6; and Garrow, "The Tragedy of Stokely Carmichael," *Reviews in American History* 43, no. 3 (September 2015): 564–70.

12. Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011); David J. Garrow, "A Revisionist's History," *Wilson Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 90–93.

they had been at all exposed to, even though their organizing network focuses upon church-based organizing.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** One of the other challenges is helping current organizers, including those who have some connection to a faith tradition, to try to recover the history. And oftentimes they didn't learn about King's religious background when they were in college, and if they even darkened the door of a church, or other congregational arrangement, they didn't get the training there. And so, in some sense, it's not that these people are hostile to King's religious background for hostility's sake, it's that they didn't know because they never were taught. And I think this is one of the elements of this *Telos* special issue. It will be a teaching moment.

**David J. Garrow:** I would say very bluntly, very forcefully, that my fear, very much informed by that conversation with those organizers, is that the Trump presidency has fostered a politics of hate that has infected much of the progressive community, and I think Dr. King would be deeply saddened and upset by that.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Well, let me go forward to another question, slightly different. In terms of your own historiography and just being around King and his legacy for so long, do you have any sense of how foreign countries, including those in the Soviet bloc, perceived King and the civil rights movement?

**David J. Garrow:** I don't really have anything to say to it, because one would have to read publications from those countries in their languages. Ironically, most of what I've seen that is relevant to that question is actually in Central Intelligence Agency reporting that has again been documented in some of the recent "data dumps" by the National Archives that have taken place across the latter half of 2017. The Agency abroad, like the FBI at home, was, to use the British verb, very purposely using the British verb, "hoovering" up all sorts of information, and so there'd be these CIA cables back to Langley headquarters about what's the coverage in the Italian media, particularly the "left" Italian media, about King for example visiting Rome. But I am unaware of any real scholarship that's comprehensively responsive to that question.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Then let me then get back to domestic questions. You had reported in *Bearing the Cross*, and others also have reported, that King had a very tough time with white ethnics and desegregation in Chicago. Do you think that the current political tensions and the rise of President Trump are in any way related to the cultural disjunction

between white urban and suburban ethnics, and blacks, whether they're in the urban areas, or in rural areas, north or south, that manifested itself then in Chicago? In other words, are some of the current tensions really unresolved tensions that go back that far?

**David J. Garrow:** Come the summer of 1966, as I cover in *Bearing the Cross*, and as Alan Anderson and George Pickering's very valuable book on the Chicago Freedom Movement also details,<sup>13</sup> the Chicago Freedom Movement made a very calculated decision to shift from a community-organizing orientation, whereby SCLC staffers had essentially tried to adopt the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] view of organizing and apply it in very poor communities in Chicago. Because the Chicago Freedom Movement had had very little success at organizing rental tenants in heavily exploited neighborhoods like Lawn-dale, they instead shifted to a much more provocative, open housing strategy of targeting racially segregated white residential neighborhoods, and the expressly discriminatory real estate offices that implemented and championed that racial discrimination.

I parenthetically want to highlight how the number one book I always recommend to people is Beryl Satter's remarkably powerful, incredibly original *Family Properties*,<sup>14</sup> about racist real estate exploitation in Chicago. Yet come that summer of 1966, the Chicago Freedom Movement, not having had really much success at all in organizing black poor people in the worst-off Chicago neighborhoods, radically changed strategies, and white ethnic communities in Chicago reacted with violence when Chicago Freedom Movement marchers turned up to protest outside these discriminatory real estate offices. That degree of open violence, I believe, really did not come as a surprise to anyone who knew Chicago at that time.

That violence rather quickly led to Mayor Richard J. Daley enforcing a negotiated settlement on both the white real estate industry in the city and on King and local black leaders, including the late Al Raby, a settlement that they reluctantly signed onto. Most of the commentary then and since viewed that Chicago effort as a failure on King's part. I think that

13. Alan B. Anderson and George W. Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1987).

14. Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: How the Struggle over Race and Real Estate Transformed Chicago and Urban America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009); David J. Garrow, "How American Ghettos Were Made," *Washington Post Book World*, March 15, 2009, p. B7.

is overstated to a degree, but there's no avoiding the fact that in Chicago, King found that the local political context, both in black communities and in white communities, was even more challenging than anything he had encountered in Montgomery, Albany, Birmingham, or Selma.

To the second part of your question, during the last two years I've come to think that the most fundamental cultural divide we face in the United States is really an urban/rural one. Now of course one cannot boil anything down to just one factor, but without question, the book that has most deeply influenced my thinking about U.S. politics the last few years, and particularly regarding the success of Donald Trump, is a book by a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin, Katherine Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*,<sup>15</sup> published in the spring of 2016. Cramer's book is a superb piece of work. She traveled around Wisconsin for several years, interviewing numbers of people in a significant number of different communities, and what her book powerfully highlights is the intense cultural gulf that separates many rural white people, not only from a big city like Milwaukee, but even more deeply from a university community like Madison. There was this cultural resentment that she found, and this was all years before anyone thought of Donald Trump as anything other than a reality TV personality. I think Cramer's work illuminates why Scott Walker, as a divisive, somewhat angry, state-level politician who has run successfully several times in Wisconsin, really shows how what we have in the United States is not basically in any way about Donald Trump individually.

Rather, it's about how a very significant percentage of white people outside of major metropolitan areas feel looked down upon by the bi-coastal elite and the educational or university elites in state after state. That same pattern has manifested itself in Missouri and North Carolina, among other states, and there indeed is a politics of resentment that preceded and allowed for the successful rise of Donald Trump.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Let's move back to King for a moment. Do you see another Martin Luther King on the rise, and if so, who might that be? And do we need another King?

**David J. Garrow:** Very simply, no, I do not see one. And speaking as a white boy, I do not have any present-day sense that black America is searching for or eager for a King-like figure. Indeed, based on my

15. Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016).

relatively modest level of understanding regarding Black Lives Matter, I've repeatedly been struck by how the Black Lives Matter movement has almost completely avoided highlighting, or in any way pushing forward, any particular individual leaders as public figures or symbolic spokesmen. King himself was always intensely aware, right from the first few weeks in Montgomery all the way through the 1960s, that he was a symbol of the movement, a representative of the movement, a trustee, as he emphasized in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture. King was never under any illusion, as some of the people working with him at times were, that he was the capital-L "leader" of the movement.

King understood very well how the mainstream media found it convenient to select someone as a symbol of this new black civic activism across the South. King always privately believed that it was something of a happenstance that he, rather than say Ralph Abernathy or Fred Shuttlesworth, for example, had emerged as this sort of cover-of-*Time*-magazine symbolic leader.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** And in this regard then, in *Bearing the Cross*, you do imply that the movement made King just as much as King made the movement. And as new efforts, either around community organizing and political mobilization occur, on all sides in the U.S. political spectrum, do you see a similar dialectic underway in grassroots movements? Or is it movements making persons, and persons making movements, and if so, what movements do you think might be active in doing that? And does this type of transformation always occur, or only under certain conditions and personalities?

**David J. Garrow:** I emphasize very strongly on the final page of *Bearing the Cross*, quoting the late Ella Baker, that indeed, most people in the southern black freedom struggle were always of the view that "the movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement."<sup>16</sup> And King himself profoundly believed that too, for he felt that he had been really drafted, called, to take up a public role. King was never someone who wanted to be a celebrity, and King was never terribly comfortable in the public eye. He viewed this as a role that he had been drafted into taking, and even very early on in Montgomery, he had a very consciously self-sacrificial understanding of what his calling entailed. So he never gloried in his press clips, and it's ironic that in the FBI wiretap transcripts,

16. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 625.

that those secret recordings, again and again, document how humble and oftentimes intensely self-critical King was. That's what makes King so remarkable, so almost utterly unique as a famous political "leader," because King was the very rare person who had not sought out the public stage in any egocentric fashion.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Let's move on to the question of economic class. Some current movements of identity politics seem to have forgotten the concept of economic class. And meanwhile, some current scholarship states that King was an economic socialist as opposed to a political socialist. Did you find evidence of socialism, including economic socialism, in King's thought? And do you believe that King's appeal to economic class issues in the Poor People's Campaign would be instructive to today's younger identity politics activists?

**David J. Garrow:** There's no question whatsoever that as of 1966 to 1968, King very consciously thought of himself as a democratic socialist. It's very possible that that self-understanding first came into being in the early 1950s, and that he very intentionally always avoided giving any public voice or indication of that for the next fifteen years. Indeed, virtually every time in the final two or three years of his life when King does articulate his socialist identity, he's doing so in the quasi-private setting of SCLC staff retreats that were not open to the media, but that were being tape-recorded. So that's a context in which King was more relaxed, more comfortable in being more personally forthcoming, in these quasi-private settings, than he was on the public stage.

Based on that limited corpus of remarks where King does self-identify as a socialist, I think that he was thinking in terms of economic socialism as distinct from political socialism. I think that's an entirely valid conclusion to draw. I think that's pretty much in line with, indeed, how he hoped and envisioned the Poor People's Campaign would play out and why he found the sanitation workers strike in Memphis to be such an attractive, inspirational local movement. Keep in mind, King likewise was at pains to stress that he wanted the Poor People's Campaign to be a multiethnic movement: a Mexican-American component, a whites-from-rural-Appalachia component. So King by 1968 without question was thinking in terms of class inequalities as being much more fundamental to the problems of American life than racial or ethnic identity politics.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** I'm aware that when the Martin Luther King holiday was being considered by Congress, and created in 1983, there were

certain records, presumably from the FBI, and perhaps other government agencies, that some conservatives felt incriminated King as endorsing Communism. Based on your research, is there any evidence that King was a Communist, or loyal to Mao's China or to the Soviet Union? Is there any indication that he endorsed Communism?

**David J. Garrow:** I think I'm pretty much very close to 100 percent aware of everything that's in the FBI records, even the material that remains under court seal until at least 2027, and any quotations in all of those documents in which agents are telling each other that King identifies as a Marxist, without exception, *all* of those statements or supposed quotations are coming at least third-hand from FBI informants who believed they had heard that from someone who'd heard it from someone close to King. That's the level of reliability that one so often sees in supposedly top secret intelligence documents, whether they're about Dr. King, or whether they're the Christopher Steele "dodgy dossier" about President Trump. More often than not, intelligence agencies are trafficking in BS. King, without a doubt, was never, ever a Communist. This context is one in which one can draw a very bright, hard line between Communism and Marxism on the one hand, and what I would call Christian socialism or democratic socialism on the other.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Much of your research has had access to government surveillance documents and the COINTELPRO operation that tracked King's activities. Now that the FBI has created a new category of "Black Identity Extremists," do you think that current activists like those associated with Black Lives Matter should have cause to fear government surveillance and disruption?

**David J. Garrow:** Thanks to several really great journalists at *Foreign Policy* magazine in October of 2017,<sup>17</sup> I was one of the very first people to read that FBI report on so-called "Black Identity Extremists," and I found it to be a classic example of how domestic intelligence agencies like the FBI are always searching for an ideological explanation for human behavior. We can trace this in FBI history going back truly to the World War I era. This pattern, again across all these decades, is particularly pronounced when it comes to black America, because whether in 1918 or

17. Jana Winter and Sharon Weinberger, "The FBI's New U.S. Terrorist Threat: 'Black Identity Extremists,'" *Foreign Policy*, October 6, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/06/the-fbi-has-identified-a-new-domestic-terrorist-threat-and-its-black-identity-extremists/>.

1955 or 1968 or 2017, it's a recurring feature of the FBI's domestic intelligence mentality, one that has clearly survived J. Edgar Hoover himself: black people are somehow viewed by the FBI as more deeply vulnerable to ideological manipulation or infection than white people. I think that this mentality, whether with regard to Dr. King in the 1960s or this recent 2017 document, reflects a recurring racial paternalism on the part of the FBI. Now I would nonetheless very strongly emphasize, as I have a number of times in print, that people on the left often erroneously have exaggerated fears of agencies like the FBI and the CIA, because we are wrongly attributing to them a degree of competence and ability that they quite fundamentally simply lack.<sup>18</sup> I think people fundamentally err in thinking that whether it's the FBI, the CIA, or the KGB, that just because an organization is top secret that it has a higher than average level of professional competence. Everything I've seen for over thirty-five years now in following the FBI is that time and again, the FBI's basic competence level is well below average. So I would tell people that they do not have to fear the FBI.

Indeed, what the history of the 1960s teaches us very profoundly is that when movements focus too much on whether they are being surveilled, people then develop a paranoia about their colleagues. They ask, "Who's the informant?"<sup>19</sup> Too much of a focus on "Are we being surveilled?" distracts people from more valuable work. It's worth emphasizing too that in Dr. King's case, and similarly with the Nation of Islam, there was extensive electronic surveillance that targeted them. Other than those two instances, most of what J. Edgar Hoover's FBI relied upon was a huge population of *human* informants, and back in that day it was the human informant presence, not the electronic surveillance, that was the relevant factor for movements in the 1960s.<sup>20</sup>

18. See David J. Garrow, "Intelligence Tests," review of Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, and Amy Zegart, *Spying Blind*, *Wilson Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 89–92; Garrow, "Meet the Burglars Who Outsmarted Hoover's FBI," review of Betty Medsger, *The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI*, *Washington Post*, January 26, 2014, p. B1; and Garrow, "The Intel Chiefs Did to Trump What Hoover Did to MLK," *Washington Post*, January 18, 2017.

19. David J. Garrow, "FBI Political Harassment and FBI Historiography: Analyzing Informants and Measuring the Effects," *Public Historian* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1988): 5–18.

20. See, e.g., Marc Perrusquia, *A Spy in Canaan: How the FBI Used a Famous Photographer to Infiltrate the Civil Rights Movement* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2018).

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** You recently wrote a very long book about President Barack Obama.<sup>21</sup> Some have attempted to link President Obama to Reverend King's legacy. Do you think there is any linkage? And how would you compare and/or contrast the moral vision of King and Obama?

**David J. Garrow:** I quite frankly would make almost no linkage whatsoever between Dr. King and Barack Obama. President Obama, on a number of occasions, sought to wrap himself in the history of the black freedom struggle. But prior to his presidency, Barack Obama was someone whose recreational reading was usually fiction. Barack Obama during the 1980s often envisioned himself perhaps having a future as a writer instead of or in addition to being a politician. So in all honesty, having written this incredibly thorough, comprehensive Obama biography, I don't think Barack Obama ever really exposed himself, much beyond *Bearing the Cross* and a very few other books, to the historiography of the black freedom struggle.<sup>22</sup> When you ask with regard to moral vision, there's no question that Martin Luther King, Jr., had a very profound, very expansive, very inclusive moral vision. But I would argue that there is an incredibly fundamental difference between a prophetic social thinker like Dr. King and any electoral politician, and I quite fundamentally would argue that we should not expect any electoral politician to have a moral vision, because whether it's a Barack Obama, whether it's a John F. Kennedy, whether it's a Ronald Reagan, a politician is always calculating as to what will best advance their own individual career. With Barack Obama, we can look at gay marriage, we can look at campaign finance reform, we can look at the U.S. Patriot Act, at Guantánamo, at the whole roster of national surveillance practices, and see how profoundly the Obama presidency differed from the positions that Barack Obama had articulated back in Illinois in 1995, 1998, 2001. I think it's one of the great values of my big Obama book that, in quite extensive detail, it very gently, very quietly highlights how dramatically different Obama as president was from whom he put himself forward as, years earlier, back in Illinois.

With Dr. King, it's crucial to emphasize, both in terms of the economic inequality issues in his final years of life, and also, most visibly, with regard to the war in Vietnam, that King's attitude, those last three years of his life, was that his role was to speak the truth as he understood it, irrespective

21. David J. Garrow, *Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama* (New York: William Morrow, 2017).

22. See *ibid.*, p. 451.

of the political consequences. He knew full well, especially with regard to Vietnam, that when he spoke out harshly against the war, that that would do significant damage to his personal reputation because this was a time when even most Democrats still supported the Johnson administration's stance in Vietnam. King also knew full well that saying the things he was saying would do tangible financial harm to the SCLC, his organization. So King had a degree of political courage and a degree of prophetic commitment that was different in kind than we would see in any electoral politician, black or white.

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** And to follow up on President Obama, would you say that the difference that you detected between President Obama as a candidate in Illinois, versus being president in regard to the different positions he took, was it a case of inauthenticity, or was it simply having to adjust himself to a new role in which he just had to do it because he had to do it?

**David J. Garrow:** In a nutshell, after Barack Obama lost his 2000 congressional challenge against incumbent Representative Bobby Rush, after suffering what was a pretty humiliating defeat—Obama received approximately 31 percent of the vote—after that very embarrassing defeat, I think Obama develops a much more profound need to win than had been present previously.

In 1996, when he's beginning his first run for electoral office, Barack, in his own handwriting, endorses gay marriage. He backs off from that quite quickly, and does not "rediscover" that commitment until Vice President Joe Biden gave him a public push, more than three years into his presidency.<sup>23</sup> On campaign finance reform, in the Illinois legislature in the late 1990s, controlling the damage that private money does to politics was Barack's number one signature issue. But then, come 2008, in order to achieve a partisan advantage over John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, Barack forsakes that commitment to public financing, and gave the role of private money in American politics a horrible, huge boost.<sup>24</sup> Again, in 2001–2002 when Barack begins his run for the U.S. Senate seat in Illinois, he's an incredibly outspoken opponent and critic of the Bush administration's national security policies, and particularly the Justice Department's behavior with regard to surveillance and

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 561, 845–46, 1062.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 1048.

prosecutions. But the Obama presidency again was hugely different on those issues than Obama's earlier record suggested.<sup>25</sup>

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** There is the recent case of the famous author Ta-Nehisi Coates, who has written a number of books, and expressing a rather pessimistic view around race and racism in the United States. Just a few days ago, he and Professor Cornel West got into a dispute around the Obama presidency.<sup>26</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates lionizes it, at least to some extent, and Professor West, for a variety of reasons, pretty much condemns it and thinks it's a sign of continued neoliberalism. Are you familiar with Ta-Nehisi Coates and what some have called his Afro-pessimism about race relations in the United States, and do you have any thoughts about that?

**David J. Garrow:** Well I have not read all of Coates's various works. I certainly 100 percent share his pessimism, period. I have extremely deep strong feelings, informed by all my research time on the Far South Side of Chicago, about the multiple facets of privation that those almost entirely all-black neighborhoods still suffer from: number one with regard to gun violence, which I think is the single most horrific thing in present-day urban black America. But in addition to gun violence, the state of Chicago public schools in those neighborhoods is measurably *worse today* than when Barack Obama in 1987–88 was devoting a fair amount of his community-organizing time to Chicago school reform.

I have tremendous regard for Cornel West, and to a significant degree, though by no means 100 percent in terms of some particular language or specifics, I'm much closer to Cornel's fundamental view of the Obama presidency than I am to Coates's. I would stress, too, that I don't think Cornel is anything of an outlier with regard to his criticisms. I would similarly cite Randall Kennedy of Harvard Law School and Fredrick Harris, the African American political scientist at Columbia University, both of whose critical writings I quote from in *Rising Star*. Overall, I think that the extent of African American disappointment and disquiet concerning the Obama presidency was much more extensive in private than most white folks would realize from the public record.<sup>27</sup>

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** My last question: If you could resurrect and speak with King today, what do you think he would say?

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 817, 830, 833, 986, 1072–73.

26. Explained by Robin D. G. Kelley, "Coates and West in Jackson," *Boston Review*, December 22, 2017, <https://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-coates-and-west-jackson>.

27. See Garrow, *Rising Star*, pp. 1059–60, 1062, 1069.

**David J. Garrow:** I believe Dr. King, if he could see the America of 2018, would emphasize two things. Number two, he would emphasize, as he did again and again during the 1960s, that nonviolence is an ethic not only for people of color, not only for the domestic scene within the United States, but that the ethic of nonviolence is to be lived and applied in the international realm as well.

Now that's very difficult for most of us to grasp, to embrace. It's certainly difficult for me to embrace, given the threats that exist out there in the world. King, for example, would have spoken out very harshly about the horrible human tragedy that has been taking place these last several years with regard to Syria. I've been very disappointed that American politics has not realized just how great the scale of that tragedy there is, and the impact of that tragedy flowing outward across the Mediterranean world and how it has so extensively impacted European politics in country after country: Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, the UK, etc. But number one, I think what Dr. King would most highlight today, as I touched upon earlier with regard to the Trump presidency, is that American progressives, black and white, cannot allow anything that happens on the right, anything that happens with an unprincipled showman in the Oval Office, that no matter how intensely one opposes some of the policies of the Trump administration and some of the personal behavior of President Trump, that no one who identifies with Dr. King's legacy and spirit can allow themselves to embrace or practice a politics of hate. King would be telling us never to allow anyone, including Donald Trump, to drag you so low as to hate, that even with Donald Trump, one must always distinguish between the evil deed and the evildoer.

King very deeply believed in the potential salvation of every human soul. Dr. King understood that human beings can commit deplorable deeds yet nonetheless always remain potentially redeemable. For example, if anyone were to ask how Dr. King would confront the question of is it acceptable to "punch a Nazi," King without question forcefully would have said you *never* punch a Nazi, and that was coming from someone who twice had been physically assaulted by *actual* Nazis—once in Birmingham and once in Selma—and who on neither occasion raised his own hands in his own self-defense.<sup>28</sup>

**Kenneth D. Johnson:** Thank you visiting with me today.

28. See Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, pp. 221, 378–79.