

### Further Reading

Biographies by Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986) and Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–1968* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006) all do a good job of charting developments in King's final years. Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996) makes the persuasive case that for many years King's more radical legacy was conveniently but unjustly overlooked. For more specific readings on different aspects of King's final years see the Bibliography at the end of this book.

### From Reformer to Revolutionary

David J. Garrow

Many years have passed since Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis on the cool spring evening of April 4, 1968 – more time than the twelve years of his own life that King gave to 'The Movement' between the onset of Montgomery, Alabama's famous bus boycott in December, 1955 and that sudden accurate rifle shot from the bathroom window of a flophouse.

So much had changed in those twelve years. Racism had been confronted as a central theme of American life. Public segregation – of lunch counters, water fountains, city parks, and city buses – had largely vanished from the South. The Movement had evolved from the student sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, and Bull Connor's Birmingham to the divisive controversy over 'Black Power' and the unsuccessful effort to use southern activists and techniques to launch a 'Freedom Movement' in Chicago's ghettos. Martin King had grown from a naive optimist who had told Montgomery's protesters that their passive withdrawal from the buses would persuade white southerners of segregation's immorality to a sagacious, worn down realist who knew that the central injustice of American society lay not simply in its racial practices but in its entire economic structure. Toward the end of his journey, he began to see that only by confronting 'class issues . . . the

problem of the gulf between the haves and the have nots,' and by openly advocating democratic socialism, could 'The Movement' begin to combat the widespread economic injustice that underlay American racism, American militarism, and American materialism.

Up through the summer of 1965 'The Movement' had won the enactment of two of the greatest legislative milestones in American political history: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. At first glance, those two statutes promised to make real the transformation of the South.

Then, over some six months' time, Martin King came to a deep and very painful realization, a realization he had had inklings of before, but that never had crystalized: those acts of Congress, no matter how comprehensive, really did very little to improve the daily lives of poor black people across the rural South. Those bills did little, if anything, to provide better jobs, better housing, or greater economic power for the millions of people north and south who long had been the exploited victims of the American economy. Long time activist Bayard Rustin had been arguing for three years that the Movement had to turn away from a singular focus on race, and confront the basic issues of wealth and poverty in America, but his voice had largely been drowned out. The great 1963 pilgrimage had been titled 'The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom', but Rustin's and A. Philip Randolph's insistence on an economic focus had been replaced by a preoccupation with winning congressional approval of John Kennedy's civil rights bill. Only in the early fall of 1965, as Martin King gradually realized that the 1964 and 1965 Acts had given neither economic independence to rural southern blacks nor anything at all to northern ghetto dwellers, did the economic issue move to the forefront of his mind.

The Chicago Freedom Movement, begun late in 1965 in an effort to unite King's symbolic authority with an interracial coalition of local activists eager for such support, was the first attempt by King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to confront the economic issue and to mount a campaign outside the South. Initially, the Chicago effort intended to concentrate on organizing 'unions' of slum dwellers rather than on street demonstrations or protests. It would be precisely the sort of grass roots organization building that the southern movement's real shock troops, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), had long advocated, but which King and SCLC intentionally had forsaken in order to pursue 'direct action' protests geared to evoke newsworthy violence from reactionary segregationists. That pragmatic strategy had propelled the 1964 and 1965 Acts through a previously reluctant Congress, but it had done little to generate tangible gains or to create ongoing political organizations for the citizens of those southern towns where SCLC had mounted its protests. Now, in Chicago, King knew that something different was called for.

The Chicago problem was neither legalized segregation nor formal exclusion from the political system and elections. Black elected officials had long been a part of the city's political 'machine', and even if blacks were distinctly unwelcome, even as visitors, in many of the city's totally segregated white residential neighborhoods, there was little of the total segregation of public life that only slowly was disappearing from the South. Instead, 'the Chicago problem', as Martin King succinctly put it, 'is simply a matter of economic exploitation'. Be it delapidated rental housing, overpriced food, or lack of job opportunities, 'every condition exists simply because someone profits by its existence'. Protest tactics which had worked admirably in the South, because of the 'general pattern of state and local resistance', would be far less effective against forces of economic exploitation that did not need police dogs or fire hoses to keep their victims supine. 'In Chicago', King acknowledged, 'we are faced with the probability of a ready accommodation to many of the issues in some token manner, merely to curtail the massing of forces and public opinion around those issues'. Organizing the victims of that ongoing exploitation into enduring, self-directed groups would be a more effective strategy for combatting that economic oppression.

Unfortunately, for King, for Chicago, and for all of America, the black slum dwellers did not respond in sizeable numbers to SCLC's southern staff workers, to King's rhetorical challenges, to the fervent church rallies, or to the dedicated local activists. Organizing Chicago's ghettos block by block proved a far tougher enterprise that recruiting several hundred ready marchers in Selma or St. Augustine. After six frustrating months of trying, King and his assistants adopted a new target and new tactics for the Chicago movement. 'Open housing' was the goal, and street marches through Chicago's totally segregated and virulently racist neighborhoods were the means of attack. Discriminatory housing practices contributed to the maintenance of the city's slums, and street protests would draw attention to that aspect of northern racism. King's calculation proved accurate, and the summer months of 1966 witnessed almost daily white assaults upon the movement's marchers as they nonviolently made their way into the most racist Chicago neighborhoods. News reports depicted cars being overturned and burned by white mobs, and a stunned King struggling to regain his footing after being struck in the head with a rock. Threatened with a movement plan to march into an even more violent white stronghold, Cicero, city officials and business leaders offered King a modest agreement full of promises that Chicago would attack housing discrimination and other forms of racism. Eager to salvage some sign of success from an increasingly frustrating enterprise, King accepted the settlement and proclaimed victory. Some activists publicly attacked him for settling for so little, and many King supporters admitted in private that it was a barely palatable outcome. King himself did not need to be told that the Chicago effort was

far from a success. It had generated neither the substantive gains nor the strategic improvements he had desired. Much of his own time, and much of his staff's energy, had been drawn away from Chicago by the suddenly-improvised mass march through Mississippi in mid-June to protest the shooting of James Meredith. Out of the 'Meredith March' and the growing tensions between SCLC and SNCC had come a new rhetorical call, 'Black Power', whose powerful appeal to many black activists was matched only by the emotional overreactions of many white commentators to the phrases' uncertain but threatening connotations.

King thought SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael's trumpeting of 'Black Power' and its anti-white implications a serious tactical mistake for the movement, though he firmly agreed with the calls for black cultural pride and political empowerment. Within the context of the movement's need, and King's own need, to find a method for attacking the entire economic structure of America, the rhetorical controversy over 'Black Power' was necessarily a secondary issue. King knew that, but after the disappointment of Chicago he did not know how the movement could get a clear handle on America's pervasive economic injustice. 'I am still searching myself; I don't have all the answers', he confided to his staff. The movement to date had done much for the black middle class, but little for the black under class, and the time had come for that to change. 'We are now dealing with class issues ... with issues that relate to the privileged as over against the underprivileged ... Something is wrong with the economic system of our nation', King stated, and 'something is wrong with capitalism ... There must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism.'

Throughout early 1967, much of King's time and energy were consumed by his courageous new determination to speak out strongly against America's destructive involvement in Vietnam and the imperialist values which led Lyndon Johnson and his cohorts to pursue that violent enterprise with such a vengeance. Then, in August, 1967, he began to articulate for the first time a plan for bringing about 'a radical redistribution of economic and political power' in America. His idea would require the movement to admit that it had passed from an era of reform to 'a new era, which must be an era of revolution', and that the movement itself had to change from a 'reform movement' to a 'revolutionary movement'. Now, King said, 'we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society ... We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism are all tied together, and you really can't get rid of one without getting rid of the others ... The whole structure of American life must be changed.'

Almost four years earlier, in the wake of the September, 1963, bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in which four young black girls had been killed, two of the movement's most creative activists, SNCC's Diane Nash and SCLC's Jim Bevel, had proposed to their colleagues and to

King that the movement respond to this tragic outrage by taking mass direct action to a new height: civil disobedience by thousands of protesters, designed to completely close down Alabama's capital city of Montgomery. 'People were highly aroused, frustrated, and sad, eager to do something, but no one knew what to do', Diane Nash wrote in describing the situation and in explaining why complete but nonviolent disruption of Montgomery was the appropriate scale of action for the movement to adopt. When she spoke to King, however, he 'looked at her and laughed', one close friend of King's recalled. Why? 'Because she suggested we go out and throw ourselves under trains and the wheels of airplanes, and he just chuckled. He said; "Oh, Diane. Now wait, wait. Now, let's think about this'. It was a joke, really - and she was for real'. By August of 1967, however, Martin King had come to realize that massive nonviolent disruption was something to be practiced rather than laughed at. Furthermore, the best place to practice it was not in Alabama but in Washington, DC, the one city where mass civil disobedience would be able 'to cripple the operations of an oppressive society'. It was a radical vision, King knew, a vastly different type of political action than what he had advocated twelve years earlier in Montgomery or even four years earlier at the seemingly triumphant March on Washington. But now, in 1967, Martin King appreciated how naive he and most of his movement colleagues had been throughout the ten years from 1955 to 1965. 'We really thought we were making great progress', he confessed at a meeting in Chicago. 'We somehow felt that we were going to win the total victory, before we analyzed the depths and dimensions of the problem', In the beginning he had thought that 'a great number of white southerners are ready to do what is right' if the movement would simply confront their consciences. Twelve years later he knew he had been wrong. 'There aren't enough white persons in our country who are willing to cherish democratic principles over privilege', he remarked less than three weeks prior to the final cool evening in Memphis. 'Truly America is much, much sicker', King confided to one close aide, 'than I realized when I first began working in 1955'. So much had changed in those twelve years in America, in the South, and in 'The Movement'. So much had changed in Martin King, too, in his beliefs about the fundamental alterations that America would have to undergo and the tactics that would have to be employed to coerce the society toward greater racial and economic justice. American life would have to be transformed. The 'radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.' A concern with eliminating human suffering would have to replace an obsession with military might. A commitment to others, 'to the least of these', would have to replace a society-wide pursuit of selfish materialism.

So much had changed in those twelve years leading up to April 4, 1968 in Memphis. So little, in all truthfulness, has changed in the years since. Yes, King's exhausted SCLC colleagues did carry through with the idea of a

'Poor People's Campaign' in Washington in the late spring of 1968, but it was a very faint shadow of what King privately had envisioned. The articulated goals were vague and modest, and bespoke nothing of transforming American life or restructuring the American economic order. The tactics too were tame, far tamer than the mass disruption that King had spoken of before his assassination. Neither the radical goals nor the nonviolently disruptive tactics that King himself had come to believe necessary were put forward or tested.

Some things, of course, have changed over these past years. Prominent examples from all across the South show the electoral strength that black citizens now possess in many places in the region. Talented black politicians have been elected mayors of Atlanta, New Orleans, and even Birmingham. In many smaller cities, and in some rural counties, blacks have won positions on local governing boards. Some of the changes seem dramatic, even touching: the influential black minority that sits on Selma's city council, the election of former SNCC activist Charles Sherrod, southwest Georgia's original 'outside Agitator', to the governing body of Albany, GA, once the scene of the movement's most frustrating southern campaign.

But the transformation of the South oftentimes is overstated. Yes, Selma, Albany, and Birmingham are vastly different places than they were twenty years ago. In many small towns and rural counties, however, local activists and a small band of dedicated voting rights attorneys are still attempting to win meaningful electoral influence for black citizens whose potential political power is heavily diluted or completely frustrated by 'at large' election schemes that allow white majorities to prevent the election of any black candidate. Even more importantly, neither in the South's larger cities nor in the rural areas has there been even the beginnings of the sort of shift of economic power and wealth needed to put black citizens on a par with their white neighbors.

Electing black mayors and other local officials, in the South or in the North, no more marks full empowerment for black people than did the passage of the 1964 and 1965 Acts mark the supposedly all but total success of the movement. On the surface, both sets of developments appear to be precisely what long was sought. Truthfully, however, electing black officials in the 1980s is the same sort of incomplete and potentially misleading victory that the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act handed King and the movement in the 1960s.

Nowhere is this presently more clear than in the urban battleground that brought Martin King face-to-face with America's most deep-seated economic injustices, Chicago. Mayor Harold Washington's victory in Chicago was rightfully celebrated by progressive Americans of all races all across the country. Particularly ironic was the fact that Washington's campaign manager, Al Raby, was the very same man who in 1965 had headed up the coalition of local activists that had persuaded King and

SCLC to come to Chicago. In the immediate aftermath of Washington's surprising win, Raby understandably was ecstatic. 'Martin Luther King said he wouldn't see the promised land, but that we would. In Chicago we have come to see that promised land', one news report quoted Raby as exclaiming.

Washington's election, however, will not, by itself, constitute the promised land that Martin King had in mind. Indeed the unrelenting racial machinations of white Chicago politicians who tried unsuccessfully to deny Washington his victory in the general election vividly revealed just how much anti-black hostility still exists in that city many years after the white mobs stoned Dr King. Washington's victory should be celebrated, but the significance of any single electoral triumph should not be exaggerated. Whether Chicago has a good mayor or a bad mayor, a black mayor or a white mayor, will not bring about the radical transformation that would represent Martin King's real 'promised land'.

Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968 was speaking out in the strongest terms against the racism, militarism, and economic injustice that pervaded all of American society. How much have any of those preeminent evils abated in the years since April 4 in Memphis? Very little, I'm afraid. Racism? Look at the transparent political maneuvering in Chicago, at recent news reports from places like Boston or Miami, at the latest stories about the 1950s-style civil rights policies being promulgated by Ronald Reagan's Justice Department. Militarism? Look at the Reagan defense budget and the incredibly excessive and wasteful military appropriations currently being advocated by the administration. Look everywhere in America, at the unemployment lines in Alabama as well as in Michigan and California, at the urban slums in any major city, at the drafty shacks you still can find in virtually any county in the South, at the people huddled over sidewalk heating grates in those parts of the country whose spring evenings are cool, too cool to spend the night outside.

Yes, little of what Martin King wanted to change in American society as of 1968 had been altered since his death. The pervasive evils that he denounced then are little weaker, and some perhaps considerably stronger. The 'radical restructuring' of American society that he so fervently sought has not even begun.

If racism, militarism, and economic injustice have changed little over the past two decades, one thing that has changed drastically is the image many Americans have of Martin Luther King, Jr. himself. Unfortunately, King today oftentimes is portrayed as simply a prototypically successful American reform leader whose message and achievements comport perfectly with the most reassuring myths about American society and politics. If King is not pictured as the gentle minister who achieved desegregated seating on Montgomery's buses, then it is his 'I Have a Dream' oration that is cited to represent him. The incessant implication is that America in the 1960s made

King's dream come true. Rarely quoted, if ever, is a line that King used many times between 1966 and his death: 'the dream I had in Washington back in 1963 has too often turned into a nightmare'.

Frequently nowadays it seems as if the last two and one-half years of Martin King's life conveniently have been forgotten, that the civil rights movement ended when Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law, just before Watts, before Martin King went north to Chicago, before Martin King spoke out against the Vietnam war, and before Martin King began speaking about democratic socialism and massive nonviolent disruption. King was very serious about how the movement, and he himself, had to move forward from 'reform' to 'revolution', and challenge American society at its core rather than simply at its most flagrantly unjust edges. Martin King's goal was not simply to win thoroughgoing racial integration throughout American society, it was to transform that society from the ground up. That would entail both a 'radical restructuring' and very basic changes in American values, the creation of a society and an economy 'more person-centered than property-centered and profit-centered'. 'Let us', he emphasized, 'not think of our movement as one that seeks to integrate the Negro into all existing values of American society'.

In recent years, King's challenge has rarely been confronted and only infrequently pursued. That ability to forget, to avoid uncomfortable reminders, to lose commitment, was an ability that King himself wholly lacked. 'I'm tired of marching', he confided one evening in Chicago, 'tired of marching for something that should have been mine at first ... I must confess I'm tired ... I don't march because I like it, I march because I must'.

### Was Martin Luther King a Marxist?

Adam Fairclough

Martin Luther King, Jr, has seldom figured in the Left's pantheon of Socialist heroes. To many of his contemporaries he seemed a typical product of the 'black bourgeoisie': a middle-class preacher from a middle-class family who pursued middle-class goals. Although an eloquent and courageous crusader for racial justice, his ultimate vision – as expressed for example in his famous 'I Have A Dream' oration – seemed to be the integration of the Negro into the existing structure of society; capitalism was