

Letter from reader on 30 years since King assassination

14 April 1998

To Helen Halyard,

I read with interest your article on Dr. King. I do not at this moment have it in front of me so I cannot comment on anything specific in it, but I thought that it did a reasonable job of portraying the shortcomings of King and the civil rights movement. However, there is a lot more worth looking at here. While it is of course true that the civil rights movement had a reformist political outlook and was led and populated to a large degree by petty bourgeois elements, it also had an internal dynamic that tended to propel it in a more radical direction. The issue of civil rights for African Americans can not be logically disconnected from the struggle for social equality for the working class as a whole, particularly its poorest and most oppressed sections. I think Dr. King was heading in this direction at the time of his death. He was beginning to champion working class causes, and not exclusively the struggles of African American workers alone. (I have heard some speeches he made toward the end of his life where he clearly calls for a common struggle against poverty and exploitation on the part of black and white workers. I could not tell you specifically however where he said it and what he said.) And of course this was coupled with his strong stand against the Vietnam War in which he clearly accepted the right of the Vietnamese to self-determination and repudiated the official falsified Washington version of the history of the conflict, which at that time 1967-1968 was the guiding mantra even amongst most liberals. (I believe he came out against the war before the Tet offensive, when middle class public opinion finally began to change, but I may be wrong about that.)

Of course, Dr. King still remained confined within the straitjacket of his religious pacifism. I am merely suggesting that he was a complicated individual who exhibited many of the contradictory tendencies latent in

the civil rights movement as a whole. He did, however, give voice to its more radical side just before his death. How far he would have gone is anyone's guess. It is also not unlikely that his assassination was related to this political development, though I can certainly understand why you don't want to get into that issue--it is a minefield loaded with all kinds of conspiracy theory nuts. This is unfortunate because of course politics does include real conspiracies--it is just that you cannot explain major social movements on the basis of conspiracies.

If one were to do a major reassessment of Dr. King and his legacy, the issue of his assassination should be discussed at least to the degree of bringing out the unwillingness of the government to reopen the investigation, despite the pleading of the King family. This is not to mention the hatchet job done on the King family by some of the fallen idols of the civil rights movement, who today play the most reactionary roles. A reassessment of Dr. King could also deal with the rise, limited gains and ultimate disintegration of the civil rights movement as a whole--its dissolution into various components such as the demagogue Jesse Jackson, the right-wing elements such as the current SCLC and CORE, or Andrew Young who has found a new career as a PR front man for Nike's exploitation of Indonesian workers. The role of the Stalinists and revisionists in disorienting the civil rights movement from the beginning is an issue that should be discussed. Also the role played by nationalists and separatists in driving the nail into the coffin of the civil rights movement should be brought out.

In any case I don't wish to belabor the point, but it seems to me that out of all the figures that emerged out of the civil rights movement, Dr. King stood head and shoulders above the rest in terms of personal integrity and his unwillingness to compromise with the

establishment. At the same time he remained trapped within an ideology that ultimately could not provide a solution to the problems he was enunciating.

It is only the pacifist-liberal religious side of Dr. King that is portrayed in all the official remembrances. He has been sanitized in order to turn him into another harmless icon in the pantheon of American history, in much the same way that Tom Paine, Abraham Lincoln and others have been sanitized. Those figures in American history that cannot be so easily sanitized, such as John Brown, have instead become demonized, as been done AGAIN by a recent historical novel.

Thanks for your consideration.

Fraternally Yours,

AS

10 April 1998



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