

Harry Belafonte provides an historical insight into the civil rights movement's decay

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25 May 2012

Tom Eley's May 1 article, "Behind the right-wing racial politics of Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton," makes clear the class gulf between these two defenders of big business and the working class.

As the article explains, Jackson and Sharpton are "two individuals who personify the decay of the civil rights movement and the cultivation of a wealthy black elite that is fundamentally hostile to the social aspirations of workers, both black and white." Jackson "has sought to portray himself as the heir to Martin Luther King, Jr., the leading figure in the struggle for black equality from the 1950s to his death in 1968. However, both King and the civil rights movement of the earlier period were of a very different character."

Additional confirmation of this different character is provided in a recent memoir by an important eyewitness to civil rights history, singer and political activist Harry Belafonte. Belafonte, who marked his 85th birthday about three months ago, published a memoir last year, entitled "My Song."

While he became famous as a calypso performer and later in other genres and also as an actor, Belafonte is also well known for his social and political activism. He was one of the sharpest opponents of the Iraq War, which he correctly characterized as a war crime.

Belafonte first met Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1956, in the midst of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Both men, not yet 30 years old, had already become famous in their respective fields. The singer and civil rights leader immediately forged a bond, and Belafonte went on to help raise funds for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and to develop a strong collaborative friendship with King. When King was in New York, he and his closest advisers—Belafonte among them—often met at the singer's apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Belafonte's memoir describes in some detail his last meeting with King. It took place on March 27, 1968, exactly a week before the civil rights leader was assassinated. King was in the midst of planning for the Poor People's Campaign, including the erection of a shantytown near the White House, to protest "until Congress passed an economic rights bill to alleviate poverty in America," Belafonte writes.

A party was held at Belafonte's large apartment. After the

guests had left, King and some of his closest colleagues stayed and talked about the conditions in the country and the state of the civil rights movement. Among those present, in addition to King and Belafonte, were King's lawyer, Clarence Jones, his secretary and bodyguard, Bernard Lee, and Andrew Young, who would later become a congressman, the mayor of Atlanta, and also the US ambassador to the United Nations under President Jimmy Carter.

This passage in Belafonte's book deserves careful examination. The political establishment had reacted with fury to King's denunciation of the Vietnam War. The ghetto rebellions had erupted in nearly every major northern US city over the previous four summers. King was intensely affected by these conditions. In the midst of the discussion, he exclaimed:

"Somehow, frustration over the war has brought forth this idea that the solution resides in violence. What I cannot get across to these young people is that I wholly embrace everything they feel! It's just the tactics we can't agree on. I have more in common with these young people than with anybody else in this movement. I feel their rage. I feel their pain. I feel their frustration. It's the system that's the problem, and it's choking the breath out of our lives."

Belafonte continues, "In the pause that followed, Andy [Young] replied, 'Well, I don't know, Martin. It's not the entire system. It's only part of it, and I think we can fix that.'

"Suddenly, Martin lost his temper. 'I don't need to hear from you, Andy,' he said. 'I've heard enough from you. You're a capitalist, and I'm not. And so we don't see eye to eye—on this and a lot of other stuff.'

"It was an awkward moment. Martin was really angry. But I understood the subtext. Deep down, Andy was ambivalent about the Poor People's Campaign...

"The tension peaked. 'The trouble,' Martin went on, 'is that we live in a failed system. Capitalism does not permit an even flow of economic resources. With this system, a small privileged few are rich beyond conscience and almost all others are doomed to be poor at some level... That's the way the system works. And since we know that the system will not change the rules, we're going to have to change the system.'

"At heart, Martin was a socialist and a revolutionary thinker. He spoke not just in anger, but in anguish. His voice dropped to

a more reflective tone as he continued. ‘We fought hard and long, and I have never doubted that we would prevail in this struggle. Already our rewards have begun to reveal themselves. Desegregation...the Voting Rights Act...’ He paused. ‘But what deeply troubles me now is that for all the steps we’ve taken toward integration, I’ve come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house.’

“We had not heard Martin quite this way before. I felt as if our moorings were unhinging. ‘Damn, Martin! If that’s what you think, what would you have us do?’ I asked.

“He gave me a look. ‘I guess we’re just going to have to become firemen.’”

King was a pacifist and a reformist. If he had been a revolutionary thinker, it is likely that his tone would have been one of determination, not anguish, as Belafonte describes it. Nevertheless, his sincerity as a fighter for the interests of the exploited and the poor comes through quite clearly in this passage, and it is significant but not surprising that this side of his political views is rarely presented as he has been transformed into a public icon.

What is even more important is what this account shows about the bitter tensions within the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King felt himself almost alone, surrounded by right-wing figures like Young or preachers who did not share his broader outlook and political views. The isolation of King also has sinister implications, when one considers that his every move was being followed by the FBI, and that his assassination, about which numerous unanswered questions persist to this day, took place just one week later.

Belafonte has little to say about Jesse Jackson. He describes him as among those who “vied for places of influence” with the slain civil rights leader’s widow, Coretta Scott King, adding that “[s]oon [Jackson] would go back to Chicago and brandish the ‘bloody garment’ that Martin was wearing when he died.”

King’s outburst directed against Young could just as well have been addressed to Jackson, who later came to personify the policy of “black capitalism” embraced by the Nixon administration. Jackson and Young came from different backgrounds and pursued slightly different paths, but their views were very similar. Young worked to some extent behind the scenes, while also pursuing a career in “public service” by running for office as a Democratic politician. Jackson—like Sharpton after him—played the demagogue and looked for big headlines. The tactics sometimes differed, but the aim was the same—in Jackson’s words, to “keep hope alive” in the system and specifically in the Democratic Party.

Belafonte’s eyewitness account of the March 1968 discussion is all the more revealing because he himself is part of this privileged layer, although his history is a different one. He came of age politically in New York in the late 1940s, and his hero was Paul Robeson. He was radicalized as a young man and, as he describes it in his book, moved in circles of

“socialists and communists [who] embraced the working class as the bedrock of a new political order.” Belafonte “never signed on as a member of the American Socialist or Communist party, or even viewed myself as a fellow traveler, as the jargon of the day had it.” It is clear from his memoir that Belafonte was not driven to study, to examine the political programs and the differences among the various tendencies within the socialist movement. While he has remained a critic of specific policies, he has also made his peace with the system.

This is the significance of Belafonte’s statement that he felt his “moorings were unhinging” when he heard King denounce the system. While King was searching for a way to fight back, Belafonte was exhibiting the demoralization and conservatism that were encouraged in the circles in which he had earlier traveled, influenced above all by the Communist Party and its slavish subservience to the Democratic Party.

When King was killed, Belafonte drew no political conclusions from this final discussion in his apartment. In fact, ten pages further into the memoir, Belafonte boasts that he quickly decided, after King’s death, to “help elect black candidates at every level of the political system...I helped persuade Andy Young to run for Congress in Georgia, gave him money, and staged a lot of free concerts.” Belafonte made “four- and five-figure contributions” to help elect black mayors in Cleveland, Gary, Indiana and other cities. Where King had called for “firemen” to deal with the “burning house” of capitalism, his epigones turned in the opposite direction.

Belafonte, like others, has criticized some of the policies of President Barack Obama, but has also said that he will vote for his reelection.



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