

Dr. King and Mr. Garrow

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The historian David Garrow made his reputation with his 1986 biography of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *Bearing the Cross*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1987. As the title suggests, Garrow provided a mostly admiring depiction of the civil rights leader as a heroic figure and political martyr.

It is all the more shameful that Garrow has lent his reputation and standing to a political smear campaign, writing a diatribe against Dr. King published Thursday in the right-wing British magazine *Standpoint*. The article bears the headline, “The troubling legacy of Martin Luther King,” along with the subhead, “Newly-revealed FBI documents portray the great civil rights leader as a sexual libertine who ‘laughed’ as a forcible rape took place.” *Standpoint* is a right-wing publication financed by corporate contributors (including British American Tobacco), whose launch in 2008 was hailed by the *National Review*, the ultra-right magazine founded by William F. Buckley. One of its early issues carried an adulatory review of Robert Service’s anti-Trotsky hatchet job, praising Service’s book, steeped in anti-Semitism and riddled with lies and gross historical errors, as the “best biography” of the co-leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International.

So the magazine has form when it comes to character assassination. A statement by its editor notes that *Standpoint* embraced Garrow’s article after the 8,000-word screed was rejected by leading American publications, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Atlantic* magazine.

The article is based entirely on a trove of FBI internal memos and documents that were made available to researchers as an unintended result of the 1992 congressional passage of The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act, which set up a process for declassification and publication of internal federal records after 25 years had elapsed from the law’s date of passage.

It is well known that the FBI systematically wiretapped the telephones of Dr. King and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the group of ministers he headed, as well as bugging homes, apartments and hotel rooms which King visited in the course of his political work.

The actual tape recordings remain sealed until 2027, under a federal court order issued in 1977. But FBI internal documents from the early 1960s were made available beginning in October 2017 by the agency handling the declassification of Kennedy assassination materials, and Garrow discovered that included among tens of thousands of documents were memos summarizing or commenting on the King tape recordings.

His article is based entirely on these unsupported written remarks by FBI agents and officials. Garrow has not had access to the tapes and therefore cannot verify the accuracy of the summaries. Instead, he offers the following tortured argument for why the summaries, and handwritten notes on them by FBI Assistant Director William C.

Sullivan, should be accepted as factually true:

Throughout the 1960s, when no precedent for the public release of FBI documents existed or was even anticipated, Sullivan could not have imagined that his and his aides’ jottings would ever see the light of day. Similarly, they would not have had any apparent motive for their annotations to inaccurately embellish upon the actual recording and the full transcript, both of which remain under court seal and one day will confirm or disprove the FBI’s summary allegations.

Let us recall who Sullivan was. He was the assistant director for intelligence and had been tasked by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover with politically destroying King on the grounds that he was acting as an agent of the Communist Party, controlled through his (Jewish) adviser, businessman Stanley Levison. A longtime financial supporter of the Stalinists, Levison actually broke with the Communist Party USA in early 1957, after the publication of Khrushchev’s “secret speech” on Stalin’s crimes had sent the Stalinist party into near-terminal crisis.

Garrow himself, in *Bearing the Cross*, described Sullivan’s role in preparing the infamous “suicide demand,” an anonymous letter sent to King in late 1964 along with a tape recording of some of the civil rights leader’s sexual encounters:

The embarrassing recording, and the threatening letter that seemed to suggest King commit suicide, had been prepared at the behest of Assistant FBI Director William C. Sullivan just two days after Hoover’s public attack on King in mid-November. Sullivan had instructed the Bureau’s laboratory to prepare a tape containing the “highlights” of the many recordings of King that the Bureau had garnered over the preceding ten months. Then Sullivan composed the threatening letter and directed one of his agents to fly to Miami with it. On November 21—thirty-four days before Christmas—the agent arrived in Miami, phoned Sullivan for further instructions, and was ordered to mail the package to King at SCLC headquarters (*Bearing the Cross*, p. 374).

In 1986, Garrow described Sullivan’s role as the point man in the FBI’s effort to destroy Dr. King by the foulest methods. In 2019, he cites Sullivan as an objective and irrefutable witness to King’s alleged moral failings—and even crimes. It is reasonable to believe that the transformation has taken place not in Sullivan (who died in 1977), but

in Professor Garrow.

The article represents the coming together of the American pseudo-left (Garrow is a longtime member of the Democratic Socialists of America and a contributor to *Nation* magazine) and the political right. In this, as in many things rotten and reactionary, a key role is played by the #MeToo campaign, which is based, like Garrow's article, on the use of unsupported allegations of sexual misconduct directed at prominent personalities to create an atmosphere of hysteria and witch-hunting.

Garrow seizes on the most inflammatory allegation—that King witnessed and encouraged another minister's rape of a female parishioner—and writes:

King's far-from monogamous lifestyle, like his binge-drinking, may fit albeit uncomfortably within his existing life story, but the suggestion—actually more than one—that he either actively tolerated or personally employed violence against any woman, even while drunk, poses so fundamental a challenge to his historical stature as to require the most complete and extensive historical review possible.

At another point in the article he writes, "The FBI's tape recording of that criminal assault still exists today, resting under court seal in a National Archives vault."

The language is revealing: Garrow presumes that the recording is genuine and not doctored, although in the passage from *Bearing the Cross* cited above he noted the skill of the FBI lab in editing a tape recording; and he presumes that a crime actually took place, although the only "evidence" is an FBI memo about an alleged recording to which he has not listened.

The most salacious claim, of King's peripheral role in a sexual assault perpetrated by someone else, thus has zero evidentiary basis.

As for the rest of the article, Garrow huffs and puffs about the number of King's sexual partners—whether a dozen or several times that number—and voices his "shock" over King possibly fathering a child out of wedlock. To all of this, one can only ask: even if true, how would it in any way alter the historic role that Martin Luther King Jr. played in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in his assassination in 1968?

The #MeToo campaign has been widely used to oust prominent politicians, actors, directors, musicians, television personalities and academics from their positions, with the result that, in many cases, women have moved into positions of power, privilege and high income previously occupied by men.

This is no doubt gratifying to the handful of already privileged women who have profited from it, but it comes at a very high cost in terms of democratic rights and social consciousness. The #MeToo campaign rejects such principles as the presumption of innocence, the right of an accused person to confront the accuser, even the right to some form of legal proceeding before punishment is imposed. And it spreads the falsehood that the most fundamental division in society is that of gender, rather than class.

Applied to historical figures, #MeToo joins forces with the broader, equally reactionary trend of post-modernism. Martin Luther King Jr. was a philanderer. Thomas Jefferson and George Washington were slave-owners. Abraham Lincoln shared some of the racial prejudices of his epoch. For the post-modernists, this entirely negates the positive

significance of the American Revolution, the Civil War that destroyed slavery, and the civil rights struggles of a half-century ago. Marxists entirely reject such a perspective.

Where does this stop? Did Robespierre beat his wife? If so, was the French Revolution for naught? Was Spartacus a male chauvinist? If so, were the Romans justified in crushing the slave revolt and crucifying him? Did the first ape that came down from the trees and walked upright reproduce in a fashion disapproved of by the #MeToo witch-hunters? That is, if reproduction is even permissible, given that it usually involves that most perilous of activities, sexual contact between the male and female of the species.

Let us give a final word to Trotsky. He wrote, in one of his later essays, "Once Again On the 'Crisis of Marxism,'" against those who deplore the difficulties and contradictions of the struggle of mankind to rise from barbarism to civilization, and the purported weaknesses and errors of those who seek to lead that struggle:

These gentlemen forget with remarkable ease that man has been cutting his path from a semi-simian condition to a harmonious society without any guide; that the task is a difficult one; that for every step or two forward there follows half a step, a step, and sometimes even two steps back. They forget that the path is strewn with the greatest obstacles and that no one has invented or could have invented a secret method whereby an uninterrupted rise on the escalator of history would be rendered secure.

For argument's sake, let us grant that all previous revolutionary history and, if you please, all history in general, is nothing but a chain of mistakes. But what to do about present day reality? What about the colossal army of permanently unemployed, the pauperized farmers, the general decline of economic levels, the approaching war? The skeptical wiseacres promise us that sometime in the future they will catalogue all the banana peels on which the great revolutionary movements of the past have slipped. But will these gentlemen tell us what to do today, right now? (*Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1938-39*, p. 205-206)

Martin Luther King Jr. was not a revolutionary, although in the final years of his life he evinced a certain sympathy for socialist and anti-capitalist ideas, one of the key factors driving the American ruling class to seek his elimination. But cataloging his "banana peels" can neither detract from the progressive character of the civil rights movement nor provide a correct political orientation for the defense of democratic rights and the struggle against social inequality today.



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