

# Martin Luther King Jr. and the fight for social equality

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On Monday, the United States observed Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, a holiday commemorating the birth of the civil rights leader.

Since its inception in the 1980s, the holiday has aimed to turn King into a harmless icon of social conciliation, while obscuring his radical criticisms of American capitalism and militarism. But now, in 2020, this has been joined by a new thrust. King's conception of a mass democratic movement for civil rights based on the unified action of all the oppressed sections of the population is being replaced with an essentially racist narrative that presents all American history in terms of a struggle between whites and blacks. This racial narrative requires the marginalization of King's historical role.

This is exhibited starkly in the *New York Times*' 1619 Project, whose "reframing" of the history of American race relations makes no mention of King. This is not an oversight on the part of a project that proclaims itself as nothing less than a new curriculum for school children. The core of King's politics—the struggle for equality—runs counter to the aims of contemporary liberalism, which is predicated on a fight for privileges among the upper-middle class.

King, a Baptist minister and theologian, emerged as the most prominent leader and voice of the mass civil rights struggle for racial equality that emerged in the period after World War II—from the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott in 1955 against Jim Crow segregation until 1968, when King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee while supporting striking sanitation workers.

King was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1929, during a period that scholars have called "the nadir" of American race relations. In the Jim Crow South beginning in the 1890s, a raft of laws stripped the right to vote from the vast majority of blacks. All public space was segregated by law or custom—schools and colleges; busses, trains, streetcars; water fountains and bathrooms; diners and movie theaters. Interracial marriage was illegal, and even casual interactions between whites and blacks, for example on city sidewalks, were to play out in a custom designed to humiliate and degrade blacks.

The Democratic Party ruled the Jim Crow South unchallenged. Behind it stood the ever-present threat of state-sanctioned racist violence. By one count, mobs and bands of killers lynched more than 4,000 blacks in the South from the 1870s through the 1940s.

Yet racism was not an end in and of itself. As C. Vann Woodward long ago established in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955), it was imposed as a direct response to the Populist movement of poor farmers, which, in the 1880s, had raised the specter of interracial unity among the oppressed. That Woodward's book was upheld as "the historical Bible" of the civil rights movement reflected that movement's agreement with its key finding, that, as King put it, "racial segregation as a way of life did not come about as a natural result of hatred between the races"—the position advanced by the 1619 Project—but "was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the

land."

The Populist movement collapsed a few decades before King's birth. Its inability to overcome the southern oligarchy resulted from its social composition among isolated rural farmers, an undifferentiated and rapidly declining section of the population. Yet its achievements were extraordinary. Shaking the two-party system to its foundations, Populism's challenge to capitalism ultimately fed into the emergence of American socialism.

## The "Great Migration" and the growth of the working class

While King looked to Populism for inspiration, it was ultimately a far more profound transformation, arising from the powerful development of American capitalism, that provided the basis for the civil rights movement: the development of the working class.

In 1900, after the defeat of the Populist movement, 90 percent of African Americans lived in the South, most in conditions of rural isolation. In the 1920s, over 1.5 million blacks left the South for northern cities, bound for wage work. Many more moved to cities in the South—including Atlanta, where King was born, as well as Alabama's industrial cities of Birmingham and Montgomery, which birthed the modern civil rights movement. By 1960, only 15 percent of African Americans remained on farms, a dramatic social transformation which historians now term the Great Migration.

In the cities, the black migrants faced new forms of racism and, as in East St. Louis in 1917 and Chicago in 1919, occasional paroxysms of vicious violence, typically overseen by their historical antagonists in the Democratic Party. Yet it is undeniable that this vast movement—from country to city, from farm to factory, and from South to North and West—was an intensely liberating development. Its impact on American culture can only be called exhilarating.

The arrival in the cities of this brutally oppressed people, a mere half-century separated from chattel slavery, germinated the cultural and intellectual florescence associated with the Harlem Renaissance, the first mass African American political organizations and trade unions, as well as the great forms of popular music including ragtime, rhythm and blues, jazz, and rock and roll.

The Great Migration raised African-American workers as a critical section of the working class. But the fusing of that class across racial and national lines was no mean task under conditions in which capitalist employers knew well that they could pit workers—white, black, immigrant—against each other in wage competition. The American Federation of Labor, among the most provincial and reactionary labor organizations on the planet, fed into these divisions. Most of its unions imposed racial exclusions against blacks and agitated against immigrants.

Reformist socialists that oriented to the AFL, such as Victor Berger of Milwaukee, also excluded blacks from their conception of the working class.

Under these conditions—the emergence of a powerful industrial working class, but one hamstrung by outmoded forms of organization—the Russian Revolution of 1917 hit with meteoric impact. Among the black intellectuals inspired by the Bolsheviks were Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and A. Phillip Randolph, who co-founded the socialist magazine *The Messenger* in 1917 and went on to head the largest predominantly black trade union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

These intellectuals immediately drew comparisons to the situation of Jews under the seemingly eternal Romanov dynasty. “For American Negroes the indisputable and outstanding fact of the Russian Revolution,” McKay explained in 1921, “is that a mere handful of Jews, much less in ratio to the number of Negroes in the American population, have attained, through the Revolution, all the political and social rights denied them under the regime of the Czar.”

In the North, socialists took the lead in the fight for the great industrial unions in auto, meatpacking, rubber, and steel, insisting that blacks be accepted on equal footing with all others. Even in the Deep South, socialists fought under the banner of the Russian Revolution in the 1920s and 1930s, winning the allegiance of militant workers, black and white, in such places as Alabama, where the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, nine African-American youth falsely accused of rape, won the support of workers the world over. It is difficult to overstate the heroism of these workers who braved the wrath of the “southern lawmen” as well as the Ku Klux Klan.

The Stalinists of the Communist Party, along with the supposedly left CIO bureaucracy, betrayed these workers in the name of their alliance with the Democratic Party, whose southern wing remained in the hands of the white supremacist oligarchy. Nonetheless, socialism remained the *bête noire* of the Jim Crow politicians, who saw in every stirring of the southern workers the work of “outside agitators” and “communists.” And, despite the best efforts of reactionary red-baiters, socialism continued to influence a layer of southern intellectuals and leaders.

## The significance of King

King was neither a Marxist nor a revolutionary. But his socialist sympathies, and those of his wife, Coretta Scott King, were well-known. He agitated for a significant economic restructuring of American society, albeit without calling for the overthrow of the capitalist system. Even though he cautiously adapted his politics to the pressures of the red-baiting environment of the United States in the 1950s, King spoke a language utterly incompatible with the racial narrative of contemporary rightwing affluent petty-bourgeois nationalists.

Communism “should challenge us first to be more concerned about social justice,” King noted in a sermon first delivered in 1953. “However much is wrong with Communism we must admit that it arose as a protest against the hardships of the underprivileged. The Communist Manifesto which was published in 1847 by Marx and Engels emphasizes throughout how the middle class has exploited the lower class. Communism emphasizes a classless society. Along with this goes a strong attempt to eliminate racial prejudice. Communism seeks to transcend the superficialities of race and color, and you are able to join the Communist party whatever the color of your skin or the quality of the blood in your veins.”

King eloquently articulated the democratic sentiments of Americans of

all races and ethnicities striving to tear down all the artificial barriers erected by the ruling class in a conscious effort to divide the working class.

In a 1965 sermon King explained that the “majestic words” of the Declaration of Independence penned by Thomas Jefferson, that “all men are created equal,” were the cornerstone of the civil rights movement. He did not see that document, which gave expression to the Enlightenment principles which animated the American Revolution, as a cynical ploy or a lie—as 1619 Project figurehead Nikole Hannah-Jones imagines it—but an as yet unfulfilled promise, “lifted to cosmic proportions,” and one the civil rights movement was fighting to make a reality.

He and many others who were part of the mass movement in the 1950s and 1960s understood very well that no lasting progress could be made without the unity of the working class and recognized that under capitalism workers were being oppressed regardless of the color of their skin.

Writing in 1958, King noted that two summers of work in a factory as a teenager had exposed him to “economic injustice firsthand, and [I] realized that the poor white was exploited just as much as the Negro. Through these early experiences I grew up deeply conscious of the varieties of injustice in our society.”

Whether or not King’s assassination was more than the work of the small-time hood James Earl Ray, it is a documented fact that, from the early 1960s on, the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover aimed to destroy the civil rights leader through a campaign of dirty tricks, media leaks, intense surveillance, and even encouraging King to kill himself. “Yet somehow,” historian William Chafe writes, “King emerged from the ordeal a stronger, more resolute, more courageous leader.”

King responded to the attack from the FBI in 1967 by launching his interracial Poor People’s campaign, an initiative seeking economic justice for all impoverished Americans. He also became among the most outspoken critics of the American onslaught in Vietnam, memorably denouncing the United States government as the “greatest purveyor of violence today” in his 1967 Riverside Church speech.

He had become convinced, King told his staff the same year, “that we can’t solve our problems now until there is a radical re-distribution of economic and political power.” It was time, he said, “to raise certain basic questions about the whole society... We are engaged in a class struggle... dealing with the problem of the gulf between the haves and the have nots.”

King’s recognition of the necessity of interracial struggle and the contributions that whites had made to the civil rights movement informed King’s criticism of the racial separatism espoused by the Black Power movement, which he rightly called, in 1967, “a cry of disappointment ... born of the wounds of despair.”

## King and the 1619 Project

King’s turn to the left caused alarm among conservative civil rights leaders. To them, King responded—in words that echo with the same force against the lavishly funded “race experts” of today—“What you’re saying may get you a foundation grant but it won’t get you into the Kingdom of Truth.”

The logic of these positions, indeed his entire life’s work, placed King on a collision course with the Democratic Party—the same party that ruled over the Jim Crow South and the big city political machines in the North, and had led the United States into Vietnam. Even if his political limitations caused him to delay this reckoning to the end, his life’s work had a real impact on the lives of millions.

Now the universal, Enlightenment principles King fought for and defended are under vicious assault. It is striking that in the 1619 Project, the *Times*' initiative to write the "true" history of America as rooted in slavery and racism, King's contribution to the fight for equality is totally ignored. This doesn't represent a different interpretation of facts or a mere oversight but an outright historical falsification.

The *Times* is seeking to impose a new "narrative" on US history in which anti-black racism is presented as an immutable feature of "America's DNA." This, Hannah-Jones argues, emerged out of the "original sin" of chattel slavery, itself a function not of labor exploitation, but of white racism against blacks.

Promoted by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, which is heavily endowed by corporations and billionaires, the 1619 Project proposes itself as a new curriculum for public education. Crumbling schools and hungry children from Chicago to Buffalo are being given lesson plans that argue the American Revolution and Civil War were conspiracies to perpetuate white racism, and that all manner of contemporary social problems—lack of health care, obesity, traffic jams, etc.—are the direct outcomes of slavery.

Following other eminent historians interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Stanford Professor Clayborne Carson, director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, criticized the 1619 Project from the standpoint of its treatment of history, its dismissal of the American Revolution, and the obscure and rapid process through which it was produced. He went further, however, making powerful observations about King and the civil rights movement he came to lead—two subjects almost entirely absent from the 1619 Project.

Carson noted that the ideals of the American Revolution and the Enlightenment played a key role in the civil rights movement and King's own role as a political leader. "One way of looking at the founding of this country is to understand the audacity of a few hundred white male elites getting together and declaring a country—and declaring it a country based on the notion of human rights," Carson explained.

"Obviously, they were being hypocritical, but it's also audacious. And that's what rights are all about," he noted. "It is the history of people saying, 'I declare that I have the right to determine my destiny, and we collectively have the right to determine our destiny.' That's the history of every movement, every freedom movement in the history of the world. At some point you have to get to that point where you have to say that, publicly, and fight for it."

It is these principles and perspective which are being explicitly rejected by the *New York Times* as upper middle-class layers marshal various forms of identity politics to jockey for a greater share of the massive amounts of wealth which have been piled up in the coffers of the top one percent. In this struggle for privilege and wealth the political principles which King stood for can find no place and therefore he too must be excised from the historical narrative.



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