The Radical Roots of Social Change: Beyond the Myths of MLK

A User-Friendly Resource Packet for Students, Educators, and Community Organizers
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A user-friendly resource packet for students, educators, community organizers and YOU!

Few figures in US history receive as much attention, written expression, conversation or contemporary dialogue as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., champion of civil rights and social justice. As the only non-president with a major monument in his honor on the capital mall in Washington DC, and the only non-president to have a federal holiday dedicated to his memory, Dr. King is as recognizable figure as exists in US consciousness. That is despite the continuing devastating injustices and divisions tearing the country apart. Though contemporary academics and activists such as Harvard University’s Cornel West have done much to spotlight the radical aspects of Dr. King’s work and philosophy, too little is understood about the man whom many still see largely as a utopian “dreamer.”

West writes:

“The response of the radical King to our catastrophic moment can be put in one word: revolution—a revolution in our priorities, a reevaluation of our values, a reinvigoration of our public life, and a fundamental transformation of our way of thinking and living that promotes a transfer of power from oligarchs and plutocrats to everyday people and ordinary citizens.”

By the time of his assassination, Martin Luther King, like his contemporary El Hajj Malik el-Shabazz (Minister Malcolm X), was first and foremost a revolutionary. He understood that US society was in deep decline given its foundations of racism, materialism, and militarism. It is not simply that Dr. King, in his last year, sought to build a working-class united front in the Poor People’s Campaign or that, in his speech Beyond Vietnam, he noted that “a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” King also asserted that if people collectively do not take action soon, “we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.”

More than fifty years after the unresolved assassination of the man whom the 45th US President tweets people should “recommit” themselves to in “acts of service to others,” confusion and misinformation co-mingle with extraordinary levels of disparity and injustice. We inch ever-closer to that demise which Dr. King predicted. This packet is designed as an easy-to-use resource for students, educators, and community organizers: to go beyond the myths which try to color King as a dreamer who can only be followed if one is to commit to a path of sainthood which MLK himself never followed. We examine three snapshots of MLK’s life and legacy that can be used by anyone to build effective future movements for justice for all.
Revolutionary nonviolence and history: MLK, Muste and Deming

It should be of little surprise to students of contemporary US history that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had his social roots in his Atlanta, GA upbringing, his religious roots in Black Baptist traditions, and his political roots in the teachings of Gandhi. What is lesser known, however, is that the individuals and organizations who most helped bring these three key elements together all centered around a small orbit of radicals associated with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the War Resisters League (WRL). During King’s formative years, Rev. A.J. Muste, the elder of this group and a leader of both FOR and WRL and of significant labor struggles, was joined by Bayard Rustin, Glen Smiley, Ella Baker, and a few others.

Muste was the spiritual and political coalition-builder. He was determined to bring together people of all faiths (especially from within diverse Protestant denominations), as well as of diverse ideologies. Though committed to nonviolent direct action, Muste (like Gandhi) was pragmatic about the various strategies and tactics one must take to build broad and successful campaigns against nuclear weapons, war, or racial injustice. By the time MLK delivered his defiant speech against US involvement in Vietnam, he was more returning to a long- and deeply-held position than marking new ground.

When, some years later, Muste protégé Barbara Deming wrote her own classic essay on the need to balance our newly revolutionary “experiments” in nonviolence, she added a strong feminist and women-centered consciousness to the mix. Both Muste and Deming received the War Resisters League Peace Award, with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivering the 1959 speech bestowing the award upon Muste, stating: “he has never lacked heart to give others heart.”

Decades before “intersectionality” and “identity politics,” these historic figures were deeply charting a course for enduring movements. Their foundation was rejection of all forms of oppression and structural violence and building constructive programs and projects to meet human and environmental needs.

Read AJMMI Pamphlet Series titles 1, 2 and 7, and think about the following:

1. How can Muste’s essay on the “spiritual atom bomb” compare with the spirituality MLK calls for in his “Birmingham Jail” essay?
2. Does the nonviolence MLK writes about in “Loving Your Enemies” relate to the types of social change which Deming writes about in “Revolution and Equilibrium”? Who are the intended or hoped-for readers for each piece? How do their perspectives differ? What parts of their arguments might be useful for today’s movements for justice, peace and an end to the climate crisis? Why?
3. Why does MLK call his speech about Vietnam a “Declaration of Independence”? Do you think his calls to action are more or less revolutionary than the original, 1776 Declaration? Why or why not? What parts of MLK’s Declaration do you think are still relevant today? Why?
¿En español!: MLK in Puerto Rico and Beyond

One of MLK’s least-known travels involved two trips, taken in 1962 and 1965, to the island archipelago of Puerto Rico. Invited by the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), MLK spoke at the University of Puerto Rico and what is now the Interamerican University at San German.

Dr. King began his speeches, noting:

Victor Hugo said on one occasion that there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come, and the idea whose time has come today is the idea of freedom and human dignity. Wherever men (sic) are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, Lagos, Nigeria, Accra, Ghana, New York City, Montgomery, Alabama, Jackson, Mississippi, the cry is always the same. We want to be free. And it is more than a solo voice today, it is a mighty chorus, crying out with amazing harmony, and because of this surge towards freedom, we see a new age developing. Those of us who live in the 20th Century are privileged to stand between two ages: the dying old ad the emerging new. In this sense it is a great time to be alive.

Toward the end of Dr. King’s presentation on the campus of Rio Piedras, he compared the plight of Puerto Ricans living in the northern states of the US with that of African Americans in the south. He addressed an audience member’s question about the efficacies of violent tactics and the discipline of nonviolence. MLK responded as follows:

“When we started our struggle in Montgomery, Alabama, I had the gun in the house just as many other people, and I went to my wife one day and we talked about this thing. I said, as I was a leader of the non-violent movement I cannot in good conscience have a gun in the house. I don’t think I need it and I don’t want it, and we discussed it, and I said I know the vast majority of people in Montgomery would not follow this. But it is often necessary for a leader to take an absolute position in order to get the followers to take a relative position.”

As Dr. King continued reviewing strategies and tactics, he added that in many ways the struggle to get rid of the colonial power of the USA in Puerto Rico was “much more difficult” than the struggle to “bring about integration.” MLK noted: “There is a difference between integration and independence.” In the case of integration, “you are not driving out a foreign invader. You’ve got to live the next morning with the very people you are struggling with at this hour…

“In most places and situations where you have a struggle for independence, it is a numerical majority struggling in a situation where the numerical minority is there in the political controlling situation. Where in our struggle in the United States it’s a numerical minority seeking to develop a new relationship, and a brotherly relationship, with a numerical majority. I think that in both situations, whether it’s a struggle for independence or integration, nonviolence is necessary and workable. But I think it is even more necessary in a situation where you’re working for integration.”
Read AJMMI Pamphlet Series titles 8 (out of print but provided in this packet) and 13 (convening, if possible, groups speaking both English and Spanish). Discuss the following:

1. How do MLK’s notions about “freedom” and “independence” compare to your own ideas, thoughts, and feelings about those same concepts today?

2. Puerto Rico is still a US colony, with a vibrant and often nonviolent movement for decolonization. Research current US policies and Puerto Rican responses, including the campaign for the US army to leave Vieques, the campaign to free Puerto Rican political prisoners including Oscar Lopez Rivera, and the campaign to impeach Governor Rossello. How do these efforts compare to the work of MLK and the movements he helped lead?

3. Reflect upon the ways in which MLK discusses necessary and “more necessary” tactics for freedom, and the ways in which War Resisters’ International (WRI) discusses “liberation” and revolution. How are these definitions and discussions relevant today?

**Revolutionary MLK today: with Ruby Sales and Rev. Dr. Emma Jordan-Simpson**

On the 2019 special MLK edition of *Law and Disorder Radio*, producer Heidi Boghosian welcomed author/organizer Matt Meyer and two special guests in an extraordinary inter-generational dialogue on the “Legacy of the Radical Dr. Martin Luther King.” MLK youth colleague and member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Ruby Sales joined Rev. Dr. Emma Jordan-Simpson, Executive Director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), former New York director of the Children’s Defense Fund and Senior Pastor of Brooklyn’s Concord Baptist Church.

The introduction to the internationally syndicated program began by reminding us that Dr. King’s close ties to the FOR and to A.J. Muste began during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. FOR staff members Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley traveled to Alabama to support the local nonviolent efforts challenging white supremacy. Dr. King and Muste developed a close personal relationship at the time, even though as a theology student King had questioned the absolute pacifism which FOR appeared to espouse. Before his role in FOR, Muste was a respected labor leader, helping to found the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and befriending another key leader who would greatly influence the young King: Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters President A. Phillip Randolph. Ironically, some years later, when Muste forced Rustin off the FOR staff because of his homosexuality and War Resisters League quickly hired Rustin as their Executive Secretary, it was Randolph who convinced both MLK and the WRL to have Rustin work as a special assistant to the southern movement. Rustin eventually became the core coordinator of the historic August 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Justice, during which Dr. King gave the most famous speech.

*Law and Disorder Radio* opened the dialogue on MLK’s radicalism and relevance by quoting from one of the last speeches Dr. King was ever to deliver:
“Our only hope today,” Dr. King prophetically stated in 1968, “lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world, declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo.”

Reflecting on her upbringing in Newark, New Jersey of the 1960s and 1970s, coming to understand MLK only later as a college student, Rev. Emma noted that part of Dr. King’s greatest influence was understanding that a level of freedom itself was not enough: he understood that “there was a way to be free.”

Rev. Sales, a founder of the Spirit House Project and national convener of the “Make Every Church a Peace Church” movement, interjected:

“I think we have to go back and visit that sermon which people have misunderstood: ‘I Have A Dream.’ It was a radical statement, it was a statement based on Isaiah’s vision of a new world coming...It was a radical vision which said that I imagine the work that we are doing will create the transactional results that will create a situation where all people can sit down, all children can sit around a common table...The dream was not separated from the work. [Dr. King understood] that every movement that has survived, that has been a powerful movement, started out expressing a transcendental impulse that resided in the hearts of people—no matter who they were, no matter their differences. He felt that we lived in a capitalist, materialist society that dismembers us, that makes us believe that we can say one thing and live another way; that we could have a contaminated inside and create a just society. So, he was calling on us to rethink how we saw the world and how we saw injustice. When he raised the question ‘Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos to Community,’ that was a radical statement that was saying to us: “Look, Contrary to what you’ve been told, injustice breeds lawlessness, injustice breeds chaos, injustice causes people who say they represent the law to break the law. Injustice IS disharmony!

We must remember as we celebrate his legacy that Dr. Martin Luther King and the ordinary Black people which he sat himself beside were breaking down walls that began with the Doctrine of Discovery, walls that forced Native/Indigenous peoples to be on reservations, walls in barrios, walls that turned Black and Brown communities into ghettos, walls that—as growing up in the segregated south—I was contained by. America has never gotten over its white supremacist fascination with walls. Because walls are necessary in order to leave some people out, in order to maintain white supremacy. We have to look at what Martin Luther King was saying in light of where we are today. Why is it that some sixty or fifty years later white America is still preoccupied with the business of building walls? And why are walls necessary in a growing society that is becoming majority ‘people of color,’ Black and Brown? Why are walls urgent today and why is democracy under attack? A democracy threatens white nationalism, with white people no longer the majority...What does it mean when you require people to bow down and worship at the altar of whiteness?”

Ruby and Emma concluded by agreeing that Dr. King exhibited, after “being with the people,” a “pragmatic hope” based not on a superficial abstract but on an understanding of power. An
enslaved people would not allow whiteness to contaminate their spirit—"an intentional theology," as Sales put it, “which offered a way out of a moral nihilism. What was going on in the south provided a pathway for both Black and white people, Brown people, a pathway straight to the heart of democracy. In that sense, it was deeply radical, deeply spiritual, and deeply revolutionary.”

1. Listen to or read excerpts from the program with Ruby, Emma, Heidi, and Matt: https://lawanddisorder.org/wp-content/uploads/lawanddisorder20190128.mp3

Do you agree with Ruby and Emma’s characterizations of “whiteness”? Organize a discussion about differences concerning whiteness and democracy and make a concrete plan about what you/your community, classroom, club or circle of colleagues think needs to be done for the future. What are your “pragmatic hopes” and how can you start the work to achieve them?

2. At the end of the broadcast, Ruby suggests that we need to “clear Empire cataracts out of our eyes,” and to stop thinking of movement-building as a fundamentally “materialist endeavor.” She critiques northern based “liberals” and “progressives.”

What have been the main obstacles to effective social change in your experience and opinion? How might you be able to get help to become more successful? How are resources secured, handled, developed, and safe-guarded? Why might investigating the life and work of the Southern-based, Black-led freedom movement—and the true, revolutionary legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Minister Malcolm X, and others of their generation—be useful today?

PLEASE send feedback, reports, questions, challenges, and requests for support to: AJ Muste Institute, 168 Canal Street (6th floor), New York NY 10013; info@ajmuste.org; https://ajmuste.org/

All archival photos of Dr. King are courtesy of the late David McReynolds, a founding member of the Muste Institute, whose work can be further viewed here: http://www.mcreynoldsphotos.org/