

King's Radical Legacy

Predictably, 20 years after his assassination in April 1968, there have appeared a spate of programmes and articles considering again the legacy of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. It is clear that one's estimation of King depends largely on one's perspective. Like the proverbial blind man handling different parts of an elephant's anatomy, definition is determined by whatever part is held. Simply stated, Martin Luther King Jr was neither the reincarnation of Lenin, nor the capitulating reformist, stifling the developing black liberation movement. Considering his last acts - his adoption of a class analysis of social issues, his commitment to workers and his growing internationalism - to suggest he was a 'socialist-on-the-path' may be the fairest appraisal of King's final philosophical position.

To say that King was an emerging socialist is keyed to two factors: his bold denunciation of the Vietnam war and his 'Poor People's Campaign'. King's first published attack against the war in Vietnam occurred in January 1966. While his objection to the war was consistent with his pacifist, non-violent resistance, it also firmly placed him in the stream of the anti-war movement which he had tactfully avoided discussing a few years before. By April 1967, the practical application of this rhetoric was demonstrated when he led 125,000 protestors through Central Park in New York City.

King's Poor People's Campaign was even more markedly socialistic in its attempt to galvanise a movement composed of blacks, chicanos, native Americans and poor whites. That campaign's primary concern was to get an intransigent US congress to do something about the pervasive poverty, to ameliorate the economic plight of America's poor. In a

manner that characterised Malcolm X's last days, King's civil rights agenda was slowly evolving into a struggle for human rights.

This gradual change from Baptist minister to incipient socialist was as unexpected as it was unprecedented for a contemporary civil rights leader. Even his most loyal advisers were not prepared for King's sudden opposition to the Vietnam war. In fact, many of them strongly counselled against this new position, feeling that it would defuse and wreck the movement that was formed to overturn racial injustice. However, viewed from another perspective, and



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considering the exigencies of black power and the black liberation movement - particularly the militant legacy of Malcolm X - King's shift is understandable.

But whether or not King was a blooming socialist is really secondary to the influence he had on the movement. To the extent that his ideas were absorbed by a single follower, his direct impact on Reverend Jesse Jackson is undeniable. Jackson's PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) is an outgrowth of King's earlier 'Operation Breadbasket', as is the Rainbow Coalition, but the logical extension of the Poor People's Campaign. From the standpoint of rhetoric, Jackson's persistent cry against South Africa's oppressive apartheid is no more than an

update and refinement of King's anti-Vietnam war message. And in 1984 when Rev Jackson delivered his resounding address at the Democratic convention, many were reminded of King's immortal speech 'I have a dream'.

If Jackson has come to embody and symbolise the essence of King's devotion to the 'brotherhood of man', he must also endure, it seems, some of the criticism heaped on the late martyr. Like King, Jackson has been assailed from some quarters in America for not fully identifying with left causes; centrists condemn him for being too far to the left and then there are those conservatives who now view Jackson as just another 'nigger' with unreal ambitions. Despite the gaffes and stumbling, as with King, Jackson continues to forge ahead, refining his analysis with each new vista. And as a presidential candidate Jackson has a national forum to further promulgate the fundamental wisdom of his mentor.

It was Martin Luther King's human compassion, his unyielding commitment to peace and freedom, that is perhaps his most enduring legacy. Not one merely to interpret society, his credo was to change it: 'The black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of negroes', he declared near the end of his life, 'It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws - racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society is the real issue to be faced.' Upon his death, even some of his most vocal detractors were compelled to admit that King was the most influential leader produced by black America in the 20th century - and some would say the most influential man, black or white. His life was of the highest moral quality and he is America's greatest gift to the world.#

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