

Martin Luther King, Jr. and America's Fourth Revolution: The Poor People's Campaign at Fifty

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This essay traces the development of King's thought and organizational strategies as he came to realize the successes of the first half of the 1960's civil rights campaigns would not come to fruition unless he was able to mobilize a broader movement built on class as well as racial equality. These efforts culminated in the Poor People's Campaign in June 1968. King, from 1965 until 1968, struggled to engineer the nation's willingness to "address" racial inequality into a willingness to realize the injustice, oppression, and anti-democratic nature of poverty as well. A consideration of how King's class-conscious thought evolved, its vision and ultimate failure in the summer of 1968, have importance today. To understand the history, strategy, and potential of his faith, theory and conviction to challenge capitalism and embrace class as a social movement category is to re-engage King's consciousness and do justice to his legacy. We conclude with a brief consideration of King's legacy in the context of contemporary struggles for equality.

- 1 April 4, 2018 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of America's greatest civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. There are many things one can do to mark this somber occasion, including listening to audio tapes of his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech delivered the day before his death, viewing footage of his famous Lincoln Memorial "I Have a Dream" speech, reading his essay "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" as well as participating in various civic events that commemorate his legacy. One aspect of King that might not come to the forefront during our reflection on this brave, philosophically grounded and short life (he was 39 years old on the day he was shot at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis) is the fact that in the year preceding his assassination this self-proclaimed "political surgeon" agonized over whether he had misdiagnosed "the ugly blemish of racism scarring the image of America" eating away at the American dream (King, *Why We Can't Wait* 119). W.E.B. DuBois's statement in *Souls of Black Folk*, that "[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" might have laid the foundation for "America's third revolution—the Negro Revolution" in 1963 (DuBois 13). But as the last year of King's life makes clear, by 1967/1968 it was time for another revolution—as significant as the American Revolution itself—what King called the fourth revolution, or the Poor People's Revolution (*Why We Can't Wait* 1–12).
- 2 The years between King's greatest national accomplishments, the 1964/65 Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts and his death in 1968 were marked by more dissatisfaction among African Americans than celebration. The wave of hope that accompanied the successes of the early years of the civil rights movement created rising expectations, or a degree of mental distress know as cognitive dissonance. African Americans, post 1965, were confronted with two competing experiences—a nation that had made strides towards eliminating the vestiges of its slave past including Jim Crow, discrimination in lending, residence, and employment while structural inequality and poverty continued largely

unchanged. By 1965, cities throughout the nation experienced riots and greater unrest than civil rights leaders such as King had anticipated. In short order, the activist language of Stokely Carmichael, Huey P. Newton, Fred Hampton, Angela Davis, and Abbie Hoffman replaced the non-violence mantra of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). King had become, to his deep dismay, untimely in his own time. Revolutionary socialism, Black Power, and self-defense became the slogans and the strategies of the times, displacing "We Shall Overcome" and non-violence. King was perceived as a black, middle-class civil rights leader with little to offer poor and working-class blacks in particular, as well the poor and working class of all races (Honey 82). As younger activists dismissed King, a shift in his thought developed through his own bottomless vitality. He organized and implemented it in 1967/1968 as the Poor People's Campaign. King's politics, his praxis, shifted toward class analysis and struggle as part and parcel of the freedom struggle. In a poignant critique of some of the other groups contending for leadership in the freedom struggle King stated, "One unfortunate thing about the slogan Black Power is that it gives priority to race precisely at a time when the impact of automation and other forces have made the economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike. In this context, a slogan 'Power for Poor People' would be much more appropriate than the slogan 'Black Power'" (King, *Where Do We Go* 51). This essay traces the development of King's thought and organizational strategies as he came to realize the successes of the first half of the 1960's civil rights campaigns would not come to fruition unless he was able to mobilize a broader movement built on class as well as racial equality. These efforts culminated in the Poor People's Campaign in June 1968. King, from 1965 until 1968, struggled to engineer the nation's willingness to 'address' racial inequality into a willingness to realize the injustice, oppression, and anti-democratic nature of poverty as well. A consideration of how King's class-conscious thought evolved, its vision, and ultimate failure in the summer of 1968, has importance today. To understand the history, strategy, and potential of his faith, theory, and conviction to challenge capitalism and embrace class as social movement category is to reengage King's consciousness and do justice to his legacy. We conclude with a brief consideration of King's legacy in the context of contemporary struggles for equality.

King's Evolution in Thought: From Color to Class

- 5 Although we live in a highly saturated media world today, one cannot underestimate the power of the media's coverage of the violence of the early civil rights era; the harrowing death and open casket photos of Emmett Till (1954); the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church that took the lives of four young girls (1963); police using dogs and fire hoses on peaceful protestors in Birmingham (1963); the murder of civil rights workers Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner in Mississippi (1964); the tear gas and swinging clubs of Sheriff Jim Clark's police on the Pettus Bridge in Selma (1965). Each of these episodes provided stark visual representations of the brutality and injustice of racism in the South that jarred the conscience of the nation, forcing the federal government to action. By late 1965, such events together with the non-violent, disruptive strategy of the mainstream civil rights movement of the SCLC, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) resulted in a nation willing to move forward with long overdue reforms toward legal and political rights in the American South. Of equally

significant import in raising consciousness and public perception about the nation during this time was the publication of Michael Harrington's *The Other America: Poverty in The United States* in 1962. The book sold over seventy thousand copies in its first year. Harrington addressed the ways in which poverty, and the poor were both invisible and, like segregated America, composed of people living "a separate culture, another nation" (Harrington, "Our Fifty Million Poor"). Not since the Great Depression, thirty years earlier, had the nation been forced to consider the prevalence and depth of poverty in the wealthiest country in history. In the wake of both Harrington's powerful narrative as well as the civil rights movement, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, in 1964, directed the White House towards combatting the persistence of poverty declaring,

[T]his administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America [...]. It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won. The richest nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it. (Johnson)

President Johnson's War on Poverty contained a number of significant public policy anti-poverty initiatives including the expansion of Social Security; Medicare and Medicaid; Community Action Programs; Model Cities Programs; the Food Stamp Act; the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; and the Economic Opportunity Act that created Head Start, Job Corps, the VISTA Program, and the work-study program (Matthews). By 1967 these programs had a track record of success, reducing the official poverty rate from about 19% in 1964 at the beginning of the War on Poverty to about 13% in 1967.^[1]

- 7 King welcomed the president's commitment but soon realized the limit of the president's focus on his signature domestic issue. By 1967, cuts to War on Poverty programs were enacted as American troop levels and cost of the Vietnam War skyrocketed.^[2] In his famous antiwar speeches "Beyond Vietnam" and "The Domestic Impact of War," delivered in April and November 1967, King argued the war in Vietnam was a moral, economic, and political catastrophe. He explained, "Military adventures must stultify domestic progress to insure the certainty of military success. This is the reason the poor...have a double stake in peace and international harmony" (King, "Domestic Impact of War"). King believed US aggression in Vietnam set a perilous example of the character of American leadership abroad while materially decimating the War on Poverty programs at home. Even though he was reluctant to internationalize the movement or bring it to bear on the war raging in Vietnam, King broke with President Johnson in a long awaited and controversial speech:

There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor—both black and white—through the Poverty Program. Then came the build-up in Vietnam, and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad by war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such. (King, "Beyond Vietnam")

- 8 Another shortcoming of the War on Poverty was that its various programs were limited in

their effectiveness because they did not address the economic, structural causes of poverty. King wrote, “Up to recently we have proceeded from a premise that poverty is a consequence of multiple evils: lack of education restricting job opportunities; poor housing which stultified home life and suppressed initiative; fragile family relationships which distorted personality development. The logic of this approach suggested that each of these causes be attacked one by one...While none of these remedies in itself is unsound, all have a fatal disadvantage [...]. Each seeks to solve poverty by first solving something else” (*Where Do We Go* 170–71). King’s solution to the intractable problem of poverty came in the form of guaranteed employment or a guaranteed income. In a June 1967 telegram to President Johnson, King offered “a single proposal” that he believed would end the riots and conquer poverty: “Let us do one simple direct thing,” King wrote to the President, “I propose specifically the creation of a national agency that shall provide a job to every person who needs work, young and old, white and Negro” (“Telegram”). While this proposal, as those outlined in the 1966 “A Freedom Budget for All Americans,” challenged the coercive power of capitalism, unemployment, and income insecurity, King continued to look to the Federal government to intervene in this crisis (LeBlanc and Yates 89–126). King, while not ignoring the poverty and economic exploitation that resulted from racism shifted his emphasis to poverty and economics. King’s line of thought, as well as his new strategy was to raise Americans’ awareness and urge them to consider their Judeo-Christian heritage and mobilize in opposition to poverty and inequality in both white and black America. “In the treatment of poverty nationally,” King wrote, “one fact stands out: there are twice as many white poor as Negro poor in the United States. Therefore, I will not dwell on the experiences of poverty that derive from racial discrimination, but will discuss the poverty that affects white and Negro alike” (*Where Do We Go* 107). Employing the same logic that propelled his argument that racism and discrimination were immoral in themselves and not fitting a democratic nation built on the notion of equality for all, King made a similar claim, describing the immorality of poverty and challenging the nation to reconsider the shamelessness of the values inherent in a wealth preoccupied capitalist culture. For King, “[t]he time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty” (175).

The Road to the Poor People’s Campaign

- 10 In most Northern and Western states integration, desegregation, and enfranchisement laws existed on the books before the federal government enacted them in 1964 and 1965 (Onion). Yet, African Americans in Northern cities lived a racially insidious and oppressive daily existence throughout the period of Johnson’s War on Poverty. Brutalized by the police, living in abject poverty, residing in urban ghettos, working low wage jobs, and experiencing depression era rates of unemployment and underemployment, life for many African Americans in the North proved to be equally intolerable, poor, and inhumane. While Jim Crow and overt de jure segregation were not as prominent in the cities of the North/West as they were in the South, the social, economic, political, and cultural order made certain the “peculiar institution” of racism, discrimination and human bondage endured (Sugrue 59–85). White flight, block busting, urban renewal, law and order policing created ethno-racial prisons throughout the cities of the North and West (King, *Where Do We Go* ch. 3 & 4; Wacquant; Hinton intro., ch. 4 & 7). The 1964/1965 federal reforms did not adequately

ameliorate these conditions for either the vast majority of poor and working-class whites in rural areas or African Americans and Hispanics living in urban ghettos across the nation. King was well aware of the limits of the civil rights movements' accomplishments, in particular for Northern blacks:

Ten years ago, all too many Negroes were still harried by day and haunted by night by a corroding sense of fear and a nagging sense of nobody-ness. But things are different now. In assault after assault, we caused the sagging walls of segregation to come tumbling down. During this era the entire edifice of segregation was profoundly shaken. This is an accomplishment whose consequences are deeply felt by every southern Negro in his daily life. It is no longer possible to count the number of public establishments that are open to Negroes. Ten years ago, Negroes seemed almost invisible to the larger society, and the facts of their harsh lives were unknown to the majority of the nation. But today, civil rights is a dominating issue in every state, crowding the pages of the press and the daily conversation of white Americans [...]. This was a victory that had to precede all other gains. But in spite of a decade of significant progress, the problem is far from solved. The deep rumbling of discontent in our cities is indicative of the fact that the plant of freedom has grown only a bud and not yet a flower. (King "Where Do We Go from Here" 16 Aug. 1967)

- 11 Efforts to reform these conditions, notably during the 1966 Chicago Freedom Campaign when King moved with his wife and children to a Chicago ghetto in order to raise awareness, pressure reform and desegregate public housing met with what King's associates called the worst white resistance they had experienced (Finley et al.; DeVinney). The lack of success of King's 1966 housing campaign made clear the depth of Northern resistance to genuine equality, the intransigence of elected officials to engage in little more than tokenism, and the obsolescence, impotence, and ineptitude of non-violence to render racism an anachronism in the American project. Urban riots in the North, King admitted, were the "language of the unheard" and the consequence of "ghetto prisoners [...] living with the daily ugliness of slum life, educational castration, and economic exploitation" (King *Where Do We Go from Here* 119). At this point, King's life was marked by a significant shift in his thinking about social movements in America, including a more direct understanding of wealth inequality (Kolozi and Freeman). It is not that prior to 1967 King concerned himself with issues of race and racial discrimination to the exclusion of class, poverty, and political efforts to address poverty across races (Jackson 2–4). In 1964's *Why We Can't Wait*, King made the case for African Americans to have both access to integrated facilities and the economic means to use them.

Of what advantage is it to the Negro to establish that he can be served in integrated restaurants, or accommodated in integrated hotels, if he is bound to the kind of financial servitude which will not allow him to take a vacation or even take his wife out to dine? Negroes must not only have the right to go into any establishment open to the public, but they must also be absorbed into our economic system in such a manner that they can afford to exercise that right. (*Why We Can't Wait* 126)

- 13 Furthermore, King was concerned with the millions of poor whites who would also stand to benefit from equal citizenship for African Americans and from a "massive program of the government," a *Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged* consisting of programs for full employment to counter the "ever-decreasing supply of jobs" wrought by automation (*Why*

We Can't Wait 129). These initial ideas regarding desegregation, integration, and the amelioration of poverty evolved as King did during these years. In the course of barely three years King realized that structural change was needed in order to address—and eliminate—racism and poverty. In *Why We Can't Wait*, King explained white poverty largely as the result of discrimination against African Americans that drove down the wages of both blacks and whites.

Many poor whites were the derivative victims of slavery. As long as labor was cheapened by the involuntary servitude of the black man, the freedom of white labor, especially in the South, was little more than a myth. It was free only to bargain from the depressed base imposed by slavery upon the whole labor market. Nor did this derivative bondage end when formal slavery gave way to the de-facto slavery of discrimination. To this day the white poor also suffer deprivation and the humiliations of poverty if not of color. They are chained by the weight of discrimination, though its badge of degradation does not mark them. It corrupts their lives, frustrates their opportunities and withers their education. In one sense, it is more evil for them, because it has confused so many by prejudice that they have supported their own oppressors. (*Why We Can't Wait* 128–29)

- 14 King repeated this argument in 1967 in *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* but went deeper in his criticism of America than he was able to propose in 1964. In 1964, King called for African Americans to be “absorbed in our economic system” through non-discrimination and government programs, including full employment, that would aid both poor blacks and whites. In 1967, he not only advocated for full employment and a guaranteed income, he added a critique of capitalism and the profit system: “We must honestly admit,” King argued, “that capitalism has often left a gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty, has created conditions permitting necessities to be taken from the many to give luxuries to the few, and has encouraged small hearted men to become cold and conscienceless” (*Where Do We Go From Here* 197). King called for a transformation of the capitalist system and its value structure, not absorption and integration into the status quo. This marked a turn in his social analysis towards a new, more radical direction for the movement. “The Negroes’ problem,” King wrote in *Where Do We Go from Here*, “cannot be solved unless the whole of American society takes a new look toward greater economic justice” (51). In a conversation with singer, actor, activist, and long-time friend Harry Belafonte shortly before his death King’s shift in thinking could not be clearer. According to Belafonte, King said:

I’ve come upon something that disturbs me deeply. We have fought hard and long for integration, as I believe we should have, and I know we will win, but I have come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house. I’m afraid that America has lost the moral vision she may have had, and I’m afraid that even as we integrate, we are walking into a place that does not understand that this nation needs to be deeply concerned with the plight of the poor and disenfranchised. Until we commit ourselves to ensuring that the underclass is given justice and opportunity, we will continue to perpetuate the anger and violence that tears the soul of this nation. I fear I am integrating my people into a burning house. (Autodidact 17)

- 15 Amidst the riots that broke out in American cities in the summer of 1967, a plan for the Poor People’s Campaign was underway—an admission by King of the limits of the “first phase” of the civil rights struggle and a conscious effort to turn poor people’s energy away

from violence and rioting and channel it into a constructive, non-violent, and socially transformative endeavor that would challenge the structural root of poverty and income insecurity impacting the poor and working class of all races. By late 1967, King believed, after much struggle, that the problem of the twentieth century, in America and in the rest of the world, was the problem of poverty. The Poor People's Campaign was an effort to put his experience and success as an organizer to bear on the issue of economic justice in America. This would-be America's fourth revolution.

The Poor People's Campaign: Organizing a Social Movement against Poverty

- ¹⁶ In July 1967, the cities of Newark, New Jersey, Detroit, and Michigan experienced some of the most destructive and violent riots in American history. Newark's riot was sparked by the police beating of an African American cab driver, while Detroit's riot began as the result of a heavy-handed raid on a late night private club in a black neighborhood. Large parts of both cities went up in flames in 1967. Each was rooted in systemic police corruption, racial discrimination, unemployment, and economic hardship. In Michigan, Governor George W. Romney called in over 8,000 National Guard and President Johnson sent close to 4,000 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division of the US Army to quell the rioting. By the time it was over, 43 civilians were killed and another 7000 had been arrested. In Newark 26 people were killed, including police and firemen (Kurashige 14–29). These riots, following earlier riots in Cleveland and Watts, made it clear that the nation was not making strides to alleviate either racial or economic hardship for millions of Americans. In response to these riots, President Johnson appointed Illinois Governor Otto Kerner to Chair the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. The report, published in 1968, spoke of America's "apartheid" system in its cities as well as the oft repeated phrase, "the nation is moving towards two societies—one white, one black—separate and unequal" (Kerner). Additionally, the report added, "What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain, and white society condones it" (Kerner). Kerner's report, while highlighting the racial dynamic that endured, pointed to poverty as well as racism as the catalyst for these incidents. It was clear that the civil rights movement had to become a broader, grander class-based movement. Six months after the Newark and Detroit riots, in December 1967, King announced that the SCLC would lead a campaign of "the nation's poor and disinherited [...] to demand redress of grievances by the United States government and to secure at least jobs or income for all" (King, "Statement, Poor People's Campaign" 4 Dec. 1967). The Poor People's Campaign, as it would come to be known, was multi-varied in its strategy and tactics including petitioning and lobbying, marches and demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, occupations (most notably the encampment Resurrection City in Washington, D.C.) as well as aid to striking workers, which King believed was part and parcel of the campaign (Honey 23–49). The Poor People's Campaign was a cross-racial endeavor meant to strike at the structural conditions producing the poverty and economic inequality in which the people were "at war with and among ourselves" (King "Statement, Poor People's Campaign" 4 Dec. 1967). Taking aim at the root causes of America's malaise, King argued, the nation was "gorged on money while millions of its citizens are denied a good education, adequate health services, decent

housing, meaningful employment, and even respect, and are then told to be responsible.” King demanded the federal government take “some definite and positive action” to “provide jobs and income for the poor” since “the true responsibility for the existence of these deplorable conditions lies ultimately with the larger society, and much of the immediate responsibility for removing the injustices can be laid directly at the door of the federal government” (King “Statement, Poor People’s Campaign” 4 Dec. 1967). One of the core goals of the Poor People’s Campaign was social peace and stability. King believed that a campaign to address poverty would not only exert pressure on the federal government to enact policies that would lift people out of poverty, something the wealthiest country on earth had the resources to do, but that the campaign itself would channel people’s frustration, resentment, and despair released in urban rioting into peaceful, constructive, non-violent action. Although King did not condone the riots and the looting he understood why it happened and lay blame on the conditions and the lack of will on the part of the federal government to address the causes. “Tranquility will not be evoked by pious words. To do too little is as inflammatory as inciting to riot. Desperate men do desperate deeds. It is not they who are irrational but those who expect injustice eternally to be endured” (King “Telegram” 25 July 1967). The other key feature of the educative, reaffirming logic of the Poor People’s Campaign was based on the expansion of freedom; in particular the notion of positive freedom; of having the means, resources and opportunities to be free and realize one’s individual and social potential. Throughout his career King was fond of quoting the Declaration of Independence, particularly, “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” But he also added that if someone does not have a job or an income, they have neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. Rather, that person “merely exists” (King, “Remaining Awake”). And in an organizational flyer for the Poor People’s Campaign the link between independence and positive freedom is made explicit. The flyer reads, “we will present to the government a list of definite demands involving jobs, income, and a decent life for all poor people so that they will control their own destiny” (SCLC “Poor People’s Campaign” flyer, *The Vault*). Racism and institutional racism/discrimination continued to be a focus of King’s struggle, but post-1965, Selma and the Voting Rights Act, racism became one of the “triplets of evil” along with militarism and materialism (capitalism) (King, “Beyond Vietnam”). King did not want to see generic integration into a capitalist system as it existed in the United States, with a value structure that placed profit over people. King’s “Domestic Impact of the War” speech as well as the December 1967 SCLC statement each speak from a logic of interrelatedness, justice, nonviolence, freedom, social inclusion and equality. King understood the importance of reiterating the deep connections between all “a threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” and “whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (*Why We Can’t Wait* 65). The idea of an integrated nation—based on a shared concern for all—was always King’s core principle. Re-educating Americans about the need for a social fabric that emphasized solidarity with oppressed people, both racial and economic, was the outgrowth of his thought. The language and logic of King’s Poor People’s Campaign message, similar to that used to great effect in the years preceding the urban riots, was one of brotherhood. His Christian faith led him to see the connections between all mankind. Going back to his own roots, King’s own “holy trinity” argued: doing good was the core value in our American tradition,

love was the basis of our shared Judeo-Christian faith and democratic deliberation the foundation of the republic. The remaining chasm for King—to suggest that the capitalist system, its valuing of money, profit, and things over people could be the source of our exploitation, oppression, and alienation from another—might have been the hardest one to cross. Relying on his Christian faith, King tried to explain how ‘the other,’ whether a racial or economic category, had a face and a history and was something sacred to be taken care of by “us” (King “Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool” 27 Aug. 1967). Society had to consider its moral obligation to assist one another regardless of condition. The parable of the Good Samaritan was reasserted to explicitly speak to poverty at this turn, in addition to racism and discrimination. King’s last campaign was, just like his original SCLC campaign, a movement to start a forth revolution. By taking the lead and asking others to join him, he was reminding Americans that change is possible once people unite, remain clear in their conviction and understand that a revolution begins when we realize the power of the socially aware, activist ‘us.’ Although his dream for a Poor People’s Campaign did not take root, King died believing that people united under the philosophy of solidarity with one another holds enormous power. The effort he wished to see realized was to recognize how thinking in terms of ‘me and them’ needs to be replaced by the logic of ‘you and us.’ In the aftermath of King’s assassination on April 4, 1968 the Poor People’s Campaign stumbled. Ralph Abernathy assumed the lead role in the SCLC. The campaign’s leaders delayed in publishing a list of demands of the campaign. When Bayard Rustin, without Abernathy’s approval, published a list of demands in his “Call to Americans of Goodwill” it was without a critique of the Vietnam War. A week later, Rustin was dismissed and shortly another list of demands was published, this time even more narrow than Rustin’s earlier “Call” (McKnight 126–127; Mantler 121–153). Coretta Scott King led the initial march to Washington on May 12.



Demonstrators participating in the Poor People's March at Lafayette Park and on Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D.C., June 18, 1968. Photo by Warren K. Leffler, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-04302.

After an enthusiastic beginning, the encampment in Washington, called "Resurrection City" lasted only a couple of months.



Resurrection City, Washington, D.C., May 1968. Photo by Henry Zbyszynski. Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License.

24 Although the Solidarity Day march attracted between 50,000 to 100,000 people, the Poor People's Campaign did not channel the energy or create enough public pressure to move Washington to act. Constant rain turned the encampment into a muddy bog. On June 5, 1968, Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles. By the end of June, the encampment was bulldozed and along with it, King's dream for a black, Native American, Hispanic, and poor white coalition to fight for decent jobs, a livable income, health care, housing and human rights. In November 1968 Richard Nixon, who ran on an explicitly 'law and order' campaign and claiming to represent the 'silent majority' was elected President. The fourth revolution was over before it even started.

The Legacy of the Poor People's Campaign: Contemporary Issues and Struggles

25 In contemporary America, class-based prejudices and the persistence of poverty are not only accepted, but are legitimate in informing and influencing both public opinion and public policy. In a June 2017 speech President Donald Trump defended his selection of the super-rich to Cabinet positions by stating, "In those particular positions—I don't want a poor person—does that make sense?" (Levitz). A July 2017 *New York Times* article about a low-income housing program in Houston, Texas highlighted the community's resistance to the program. A local councilman stated that the community's opposition to the low-income housing development was not based on race but based on "their socioeconomic status." The councilman stated, "[s]ome people are able to afford things that other people can't. [...] It's not a bad thing, it's just a socioeconomic thing" (Eligon, Alcindor and Armendariz). In the midst of a homelessness crisis that has grown in the last two decades, New York City's real estate market developers receive tax exemptions that allow for variances in local zoning regulations for luxury high rise developments in exchange for a small share of affordable units. Meanwhile, segregated entrances/exits to buildings, or "poor doors" have been created (with a different street address and no access to common areas) for low-income residents so they cannot integrate, much less mingle, among their wealthier neighbors (Schwartz). Whether they consider whom their children might live near, play with or select who is best qualified to govern, Americans seem intent on shutting out the poor. Poverty, and the oppressive, debilitating condition of being poor, as a human rights imperative, is lost on Americans. Poverty, the poor, and their lived experience is now structurally and cognitively shielded, rendered invisible, referenced as a statistical abstraction in a nationwide poverty rate figure (in 2015, the most recent year for which data is available, the official poverty rate was 13.5% or 43.1 million people).^[3] Poverty is invisible in America or at least the nation wants it to be. Gated communities are constructed to avoid it. Gentrified neighborhoods move it. Billions of dollars are spent on manpower and technology to 'keep us safe' from it. College freshman are taught about America's racial history, its continued consequence on the opportunity structure in the present, and the persistence of racism and racial discrimination today. Unlike poverty, race, as commonly understood, is a social/cultural/ethnic concept that Americans can see and explain. Striving to embrace difference is the mantra of our times. The ideological impact of this seems benign except when it leads to a collective dismissal/effacement of class difference as "celebrating diversity" might come at the expense of "understanding class" (Benn Michaels 1–20). This is not to suggest the nation needs a 'class, not race' discourse

but rather a framework that always combines 'class and race.' In fact, King's third revolution—one that highlighted the hardships, indignities and immorality of race was a relative success. When Americans are able to get beyond individualistic and cultural rationales for explaining poverty, they often (tentatively) acknowledge racism and racial discrimination. Political leaders also talk about overcoming racial distinction and marginalization in the opportunity structure. Still, the same view does not resonate with the term class. Class based inequalities in the opportunity structure, class based discrimination and segregation in housing, schools and employment, are perfectly legitimate. Diversity has become the politically correct phrase of the last thirty years. By celebrating difference rather than striving to overcome, or merely recognize (much less eliminate) class, racial distinctions have monopolized the political discourse. Government has capitalized on this trend, washing its hands of core civil rights and socioeconomic equality (zero unemployment, integration, wage equality, unionization, tort laws) while encouraging schools, corporations, employers to hire diversity officers and 'honor diversity.' While conservatives bemoan the 'costs' of diversity, both monetary and societal, King might argue that such "limited reforms have been obtained at bargain rates" (*Where Do We Go* 5). The real reforms for which he struggled, a redistribution of social, economic and political power including quality education, healthcare, housing, a guaranteed income and/or full employment in which the "potential of the individual is not wasted" for all—his passion for love and justice—would come at a much higher monetary cost (172). Approvingly citing President Johnson's assistant director of the Office of Economic Opportunity Hyman Bookbinder's statement that, "the poor can stop being poor if the rich are willing to become richer at a slower rate," King focused on challenging the class structure of the society to move the nation forward toward peace, freedom, fairness, and justice (6). The criticisms of the focus on diversity are not meant to imply that diversity is not in and of itself important. Diversity programs such as affirmative action have obliged government, employers, and educational institutions to provide opportunities to previously excluded groups creating important positive social and individual results. Still, as research has shown, over the last several decades America's class structure has hardened. Upward social mobility has declined, and the middle class has decreased in size.^[4] While the percentage of Americans who are upper income has increased so has the percentage of Americans who are low income. Middle income and low-income Americans have seen an overall decline in their share of income. Poverty in the US, and income insecurity of those hovering barely above the federal poverty threshold has been a problem that policymakers have refused to systematically confront. While there has been an increase in black middle and upper-class households, low income blacks have seen their income decline while the bulk of middle income African Americans have only seen marginal increases^[5] (Brown). Diversity programs have no doubt helped some African Americans enter the middle and upper class, but low-income people, regardless of race have seen their incomes and opportunities stagnate. The societal implications of the movement King wanted to enact, from a heroic discourse about political and economic inequality and the pressures and expectations placed upon the public sphere to address and ameliorate these conditions, to a movement based on, and reaffirming individuality over, the common rights (commonweal) of all needs additional consideration. The national discourse is focused less on the general good and government's long-standing obligation to assist people from their material hardship (diversity may have provided government with the exemption it always wanted—from its

political obligation to make life materially better), towards a prioritizing or the acknowledgement of one's specific cultural identity as an end in itself. The long-standing commitment to socioeconomic integration as a political imperative built into the trajectory of American democracy (liberal universalism) and King's twin pillars of love and justice should not be cast aside in the rush to embrace diversity. Anniversary tributes to the life and legacy of King will bring us, importantly, closer to King's actions, speeches and writings. The ideals of our democratic project can be renewed as we revisit the life and legacy of King. The year 2018, the fiftieth anniversary of his death, also promises to be a year of activism not only to resist white nationalism and the affront that is the Trump presidency, it might also be an opportunity to revitalize a proactive, positive agenda similar to the spirit, values, and substance of King's Poor People's Campaign. Rev. William Barber, the former head of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP, is engaging a cross-racial set of organizations to begin a national initiative to eliminate poverty. Speaking to the United Steel Workers, Barber picked up King's mantle of constructing a cross-racial coalition linking civil and labor rights.

No more separation. Black and white, Latino let's come together. No more separation [...]. Voting Rights is a union issue. Wages is a civil rights issue. We need a steadfast togetherness so that our movement won't have movement fatigue. We can't bow down. Now, we must be stronger together. Now, we must fight back together. Now, we must save the soul of this nation together. Now, we must fight for justice together. Now, we must fight for love together. (Barber qtd. in Salzillo)

- 31 Barber is planning a new Poor People's Campaign, which he says is "not a commemoration" of King but a continuation of his legacy and of his last organizing effort (Barber qtd. in McClain). Given that the elected branches of the federal government are in conservatives' hands with deep antipathy to the goals of the Poor People's Campaign, Barber envisions a movement focused on state governments. Additionally, Barber may be well positioned to unify the split among progressives between those focused on economic issues and those focused on social/cultural issues. Barber has spoken out about poverty, healthcare, racism, voting rights; he has sought to organize black and Latino workers and he has been a vocal supporter of LGBTQ rights. In addition to Barber's efforts the Movement for Black Lives, a coalition of 50 organizations, has published a platform complete with specific policy proposals. Drawing on King's critiques of the triplets of oppression—militarism, racism and materialism—the M4BL platform calls for a "complete transformation of the current system" including a massive jobs program and a guaranteed income (*Movement for Black Lives*). Both Barber and M4BL have been engaged in direct action on the local and national levels. Additionally, as King well knew, in order for direct action and non-violent pressure to work in fostering change, groups need partners in government. Indeed, King's Poor People's Campaign urged the federal government to take responsibility for ending poverty. Likewise, for the M4BL or Barber's new PPC's platform to become policy these movements need policy makers at the local, state, and national levels to, if not share the movement's goals and values, at least be amenable to be pressured by them. The fiftieth anniversary of King's death may not be an electoral watershed year for progressives, but the anniversary can foster a reconsideration of his struggle to move the nation toward a commitment to racial and economic justice, the fourth great American Revolution. King's vision to expand freedom and equality will only be realized when

Americans stop ignoring the poor and instead learn how poverty denies people their basic political, moral and human rights in the modern era.

Notes

[1] In the fifty years since the War on Poverty began, the poverty rate has fluctuated with the economic cycle, while never going below 11% (Center for Poverty Research).

[2] American troop levels in Vietnam surged from 23,000 in 1964 to 536,000 in 1968. See "Vietnam War Allied Troop Levels."

[3] See Center for Poverty Research.

[4] See "The American Middle Class is Losing Ground"; Semuels; Davis and Mazumder.

[5] These numbers are similar to those of whites.

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