How King’s political vision became politically irrelevant

Niebuhr’s political realism won, but it’s King’s radical politics that we need in this neoliberal, neofascist era.

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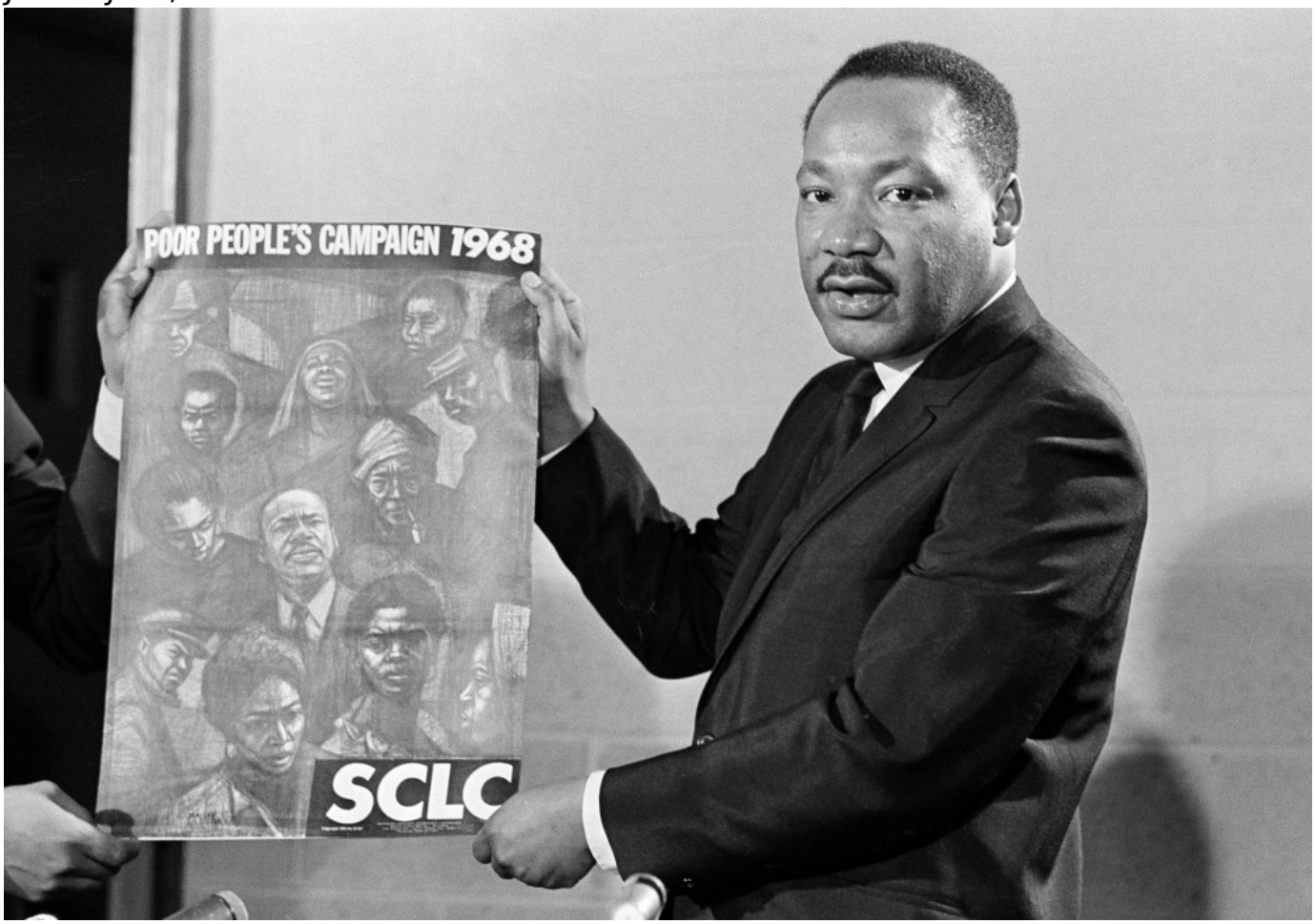

(AP Photo/Horace Cort)

When President Barack Obama delivered his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, he had to carefully negotiate Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy in light of being the first black president of the United States and its Commander-in-Chief in a

War on Terror while receiving the same award conferred on King. Obama said:

> We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations—acting individually or in concert—will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.
>
> I make this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King Jr. said in this same ceremony years ago: "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones." As someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King's life work, I am living testimony to the moral force of non-violence. I know there's nothing weak—nothing passive –nothing naïve—in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King.
>
> But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.

Obama paid tribute to King while simultaneously distancing himself from King and questioning the applicability of his politics to the present realities confronting U.S. foreign policy. This move is paralleled on a larger scale by liberals who have domesticated and privatized King's political vision. When he is not caricatured by conservatives in order to promote a color-blind, post-racial meritocracy, King is praised by liberals and leaders of the Democratic Party even as they treat his politics as an unattainable ideal that is impractical for shaping political commitments and strategy. Nevertheless, I believe that recovering King's radical politics, including its democratically socialist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist/internationalist contours, is not only helpful but pragmatically useful in today's neoliberal, neofascist era.

Realism after Liberal Optimism

There are many ways to account for how King's political vision became irrelevant *in politics*. This is not to say that King did not have any impact in the realm of politics

(e.g. Voting Rights Act of 1965) but America's two major political parties have largely avoided his calls to scale down militarism, form a multiracial working-class coalition, and combat poverty. One shorter answer to this is that King's politics became reduced to his nonviolence. While nonviolence is certainly central to King's outlook, the other dimensions to his political thought have been suppressed and screened out. A longer answer could critically look at the history of the civil rights movement, the black power movement, and fissures within an ascendant black political class as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor does in her book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*.

One important way to account for King's political irrelevance is by understanding the influence of political realism. A particular outlook which emphasized the human inability to fully realize social equality or translate personal ethics into collective ethics, and the need to compromise with the world as it is in a balance of powers, became a filter through which King's politics could be privatized. His language of love and beloved community could be separated from his bold proposals for economic justice and systemic critiques of capitalism and militarism which could all be applauded as beautiful dreams that were always beyond the horizon of real world politics.

Reinhold Niebuhr is, at least partially, responsible for the dominance of this kind of political realism which came to shape not only King's liberal religious audience but a broader American public. Obama himself named Niebuhr as one of his "favorite philosophers." When one reads Obama's speech in Oslo, one can easily see the influence of the same thinker who wrote: "A rational society will probably place a greater emphasis upon the ends and purposes for which coercion is used than upon the elimination of coercion and conflict." Nevertheless, Niebuhr's thought is more complicated than the ossified realism he came to be identified with even if later works such as *The Irony of American History* lent themselves to the political establishment's realpolitik.

A pastor and religious ethicist also famously known for his alleged authorship of the serenity prayer, Reinhold Niebuhr broke into the intellectual scene when he wrote *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1932. In it, the young Niebuhr launched a blistering attack on the sentimentalities of liberal progressivism in both its secular and religious forms. He questioned assumptions in figures such as John Dewey and Walter Rauschenbusch about inevitable progress, about the goodness of human nature, about the power of education and pacifism to eradicate societal evils. He

chastised the same liberal Christian circles that had formed him: “In spite of the disillusionment of the World War, the average liberal Protestant Christian is still convinced that the kingdom of God is gradually approaching…” Writing against the backdrop of the Great Depression and the rise of European fascism, Niebuhr’s gloomy take deeply resonated.

In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr argued that liberals failed to distinguish between individual morality and collective morality and consequently failed to grasp the great ambiguity and difficulty in attempting to change society as a whole. He pointed to the paradox of nationalism which could transform individual unselfishness into nationalist egoism. Simultaneously, the young Niebuhr in these pages was decidedly Marxist in his criticism of a democracy dominated by wealthy classes. The tragic necessity of violence he initially entertained was a revolutionary violence. In an article written in 1937 which carries eerie echoes for our day, Niebuhr retained a Marxian critique while contemplating America’s vulnerability to fascism:

> Up to the present moment petty bourgeois demagogy has fortunately not yet tapped this weakness of lower middle class life in America. The history of our post-war Klan proves how vulnerable our middle class life is in this respect. One may well wait with bated breath for the moment when an artful demagogue will provide an inevitable articulation for the racial resentments of our petty bourgeois life.

Through World War II and after the war, Niebuhr’s thought continued to shift. He became more concerned about the totalitarianism of Soviet communism and moved towards the U.S. political center and away from the more marginal socialist political groups of his youth. Gary Dorrien, currently the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, argues in *Social Ethics in the Making* that it is the early 1950s Niebuhr who provided ideological scaffolding for the containment strategy of Cold War liberalism that came to be revered by the political establishment. Although his positions on the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War vacillated, Niebuhr’s thought easily contributed to forms of gradualism.

One commonality between Niebuhr’s early and late political thought is that he lacked a substantial critique of white supremacy. Liberation theologian James Cone recounts in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* how Niebuhr preached gradualism and patience in the midst of lynching. When King reached out to him, Niebuhr refused to sign a petition asking President Eisenhower to protect black children integrating

schools in the south. Both King and Niebuhr were influenced by the early 20th century Social Gospel which was a progressive Christian response to the "Gilded Age" and both sought to connect religious meaning and larger questions of ethics to the political sphere. Yet, on the issue of "realism," there was a significant break. James Cone explains:

> Unlike King, Niebuhr viewed agape love, as revealed in Jesus' cross, as an unrealizable goal in history—a state of perfection which no individual or group in society could ever fully hope to achieve. For Niebuhr, Jesus' cross was an absolute transcendent standard that stands in judgement over any human achievement. The most we can realize is 'proximate justice', which Niebuhr defined as a balance of power between powerful collectives. But what about groups without power? Niebuhr did not have much to say to African Americans…In contrast to Niebuhr, King never spoke about *proximate* justice or about what was *practically* possible to achieve.

The Liberationist King

King had a vast and potent political imagination. In his last address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967, King called for the restructuring of American society as a whole. He explained, "Now when I say questioning the whole society, it means ultimately coming to see that the problem of racism, the problem of economic exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together." He called for America to be born again in a structural conversion. In the same address, he argued for the equivalent of a universal basic income.

Fusing insights from the Social Gospel and the tradition of black prophetic Christianity, King dreamt big while shedding the naivetés that early Niebuhr eviscerated and the racial blinders that white liberals operated in. He expected no easy or inevitable progress. Yet, he spoke with a sense of urgency that Niebuhr's realism never possessed:

> Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels inevitability. Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals. Without persistent effort, time itself becomes an ally of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social destruction. This is no time for

> apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.

King detected the persistence of white supremacy even within progressive policies and reforms, stating, “With all the struggle and all the achievements, we must face the fact, however, that the Negro still lives in the basement of the Great Society.”

In multiple instances later in his life, King openly talked about the need for democratic socialism. He called Norman Thomas, an influential socialist (and former Presbyterian minister) who ran multiple times as the presidential candidate for the Socialist Party of America, “the bravest man I ever met” in an article published in 1965. While King was on his way to accept the Nobel Peace Prize he sent a message to Thomas telling him: “I can think of no man who has done more than you to inspire the vision of a society free of injustice and exploitation…It is with deep admiration and indebtedness that I carry the inspiration of your life to Oslo.” Nevertheless, King was not reluctant to point out weaknesses in Thomas’s political framework. In this same article, he says:

> I have remarked upon Thomas’s suspicion of orthodoxy, but in one respect he accepted orthodox Socialist views on race. The Socialist Party had no special plank on the problem of the Negro. It assumed that abolishing capitalism would automatically mean equality for the Negro…This failure to understand the deeply rooted psychological basis of racism contributed to the Socialist failure to win massive Negro support.

Along with Niebuhr and Thomas, King had libertarian sensibilities that made him suspicious of totalitarianism in all forms including that of the Soviet Union. Still, this concern did not paralyze what he saw as the need to strive towards creating a radically different kind of world. Moreover, unlike Niebuhr and Thomas, King’s politics were anti-racist and related white supremacy to class struggle without collapsing the former to the latter.

Another crucial contour of King’s political vision was his internationalism. He did not segregate his ethics behind the borders of American exceptionalism but related U.S. struggles to freedom struggles taking place throughout the world. From Ghana to Apartheid South Africa to Vietnam, King spoke out for human rights even when it made him extremely unpopular at home. The speech he delivered at Riverside Church about Vietnam, perhaps one of his most important, alienated many of his liberal supporters. Throughout this period, King critiqued communism but also

pointed out the moral hypocrisy and imperialism of Western capitalist nations; he did not participate in “Red Scare” hysteria even as the FBI wiretapped him, suspecting he had close communist ties. With piercing clarity, King linked racism, capitalism, and imperial militarism in a larger decolonial framework:

> A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth…It will look across the oceans and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: ‘This is not just.’ It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America and say: ‘This is not just.’ The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just.

When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis in April of 1968, he was in the city to support sanitation workers on strike. In the last season of his life, he was also busy organizing the Poor People’s Campaign, an effort to build a nationwide multiracial working-class coalition that would go to Washington D.C. to demand economic justice. In March of 1968, King spoke about “The Other America” to union Local 1199 in New York City. He outlined the need for a diverse coalition to tackle the country’s “socialism for the rich, rugged individualism for the poor.” King elaborated:

> Now, I said poor people, too, and by that I mean all poor people. When we go to Washington, we’re going to have black people because black people are poor, but we’re going to also have Puerto Ricans because Puerto Ricans are poor in the United States of America. We’re going to have Mexican Americans because they are mistreated. We’re going to have Indian Americans because they are mistreated. And for those who will not allow their prejudice to cause them to blindly support their oppressor, we’re going to have Appalachian whites with us in Washington.

I think it is significant that the final chapter of King’s life closed with a strong link between anti-racism and economic justice considering that our modern Republican and Democratic parties have seldom brought these two together and considering that there is continued debate over whether race *or* class was responsible for our most recent presidential results.

Recovering King's Vision for Today

Where is King’s political vision today? While liberal Christians and religious progressives believe themselves to be inheritors of King’s politics, I’m afraid many are more faithful practitioners of the political realism offered to them by the Democratic Party. King is revered but Niebuhr won out. Within the mainstream of American politics, King’s radical politics have remained largely irrelevant. The Democratic establishment’s rejection of Jesse Jackson’s “Rainbow Coalition” is an example of how powerful political classes at different turns have evaded anything coming close to resembling King’s justice-based coalitional politics. This is not to say that there aren’t occasionally those like Rev. William Barber II who keep embers of King’s vision burning. It’s just not clear how our major political leaders haved allowed such prophetic speech to actually impact their policy or platform.

In spite of suppression and domestication, King’s radical politics are more relevant than ever and we would do to draw from this well for our struggles today. Rather than dismiss his political vision as impractical, it is due time for it to experience a resurgence and extension within the electoral realm as well as various avenues beyond electoral politics. This does not imply that King was perfect or is the only voice we need to listen to. Additionally, retrieving King’s political vision does not foreclose learning from newer movements like Black Lives Matter. In many ways, we will have to go beyond King and apply certain values and strategies in fresh ways within our context.

King’s internationalism and deep commitment to peace could productively shape how we think about international trade agreements, Palestinian rights and anti-Semitism, and our indefinite Wars on Drugs and Terror. Regardless of one’s position on violence or pacifism, King’s nonviolent tactics and organizing can inform us as we reimagine ways to resist and put pressure on unjust practices and structures. Even King’s critiques of nuclear weapons could seem less “idealistic” in our increasingly dystopic world. His anti-racist democratic socialism could help us to prioritize economic justice while creating diverse, multiracial coalitions resistant to the temptations of neofascism which scapegoats minorities and foreigners. It would remind us that healthcare is fundamentally a human right and not a business. Today’s democratic socialism would also have to be a *feminist* and *queer* socialism which extends King’s rigorous defense of civil rights and liberties to women and the LGBTQ+ community. There can be no consistent democracy without full reproductive rights for women and rights protecting the freedoms and love of queer

and trans people.

Recovering King's political vision in our moment would require acknowledging not only the problems of the Right but the crisis in the liberal center. Pragmatism is only helpful to the degree that one remembers *what* one is working towards and *who* one is fighting for. Where there is no vision for a better kind of world in which the marginalized are not left behind, the people perish.

Everything changed on the night of November 8th, 2016. It became clear to me that a certain kind of political thinking failed my generation. We were told to face the world as it is and to be the kind of progressives who "get things done." We were told that there was no alternative to neoliberalism. To imagine and ask for anything more was naïve. Yet, here we are. On November 8th, 2016, the most electable candidate did not get elected and the realism shoved down our throats for decades turned out to be out of touch with reality and its pragmatism turned out to impractical. Now an ominous nationalist cloud looms not only in the U.S. but also in Europe. More of the status quo won't help us now. Pretending that everything is okay and that "America is already Great" won't help either. Perhaps it is time that we start dreaming again.
