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# MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA

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**During his lifetime** Martin Luther King, Jr. justifiably received numerous citations and recognition for his accomplishments to better the lot of oppressed people. Standing in the limelight of the Civil Rights struggle he became, during the 'fifties, one of the foremost Black leaders within America. Such acclaim, however, seems to overwhelm an equally deserving consideration, namely, the significance of King's written works. A mere handful of people bother to acknowledge that King wrote extensively during his lifetime; few dare to probe his writings seriously in terms of accuracy, perception, and prediction of the future with respect to the Black condition in a White America. Inasmuch as social scientists are inclined to cast leaders of a social movement into a "charismatic" mold, there is little likelihood of perceiving King other than as a maker of events and, upon death, a mere historical figure, for a certain moment of racial strife, who never gained, in spite of numerous publications, academic standing as a major interpreter of Black-White relations in America. This in spite of the fact that even revolutionaries, in articulating the realities of social oppression, often prove more perceptive than erstwhile

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scholastic experts who boast of prestigious acclaims bestowed by notable professional organizations.

### A FACTUAL ASSESSMENT

If one takes factual accuracy as an acceptable standard for scholarly accomplishment, then Martin Luther King's foremost publication, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1968), constitutes one of the most significant landmarks of our times. The book appeared in 1967—just as endless proclamations of inevitable Black progress flowed from the endless optimism of scholarly penmanship. Milton Yinger (1965: 72), whose reputation as one of America's sociological experts on race relations elevated him to the presidency of the American Sociological Association in 1975, declared, in a 1965 publication, that "If the United States takes as many steps toward full integration in the next twenty-five years as she has in the preceding twenty-five—and this seems fully likely—the country will have accomplished a major social transformation, deeply affecting the whole course of its development, within a half century. Seldom are such vital reorganizations accomplished so swiftly." Economists, such as Eli Ginzberg and Alfred S. Eichner (1964: 10), stated, in 1964, that "after 345 years, America is well on the road toward establishing the first biracial democracy in history—an accomplishment that will be the equal of its earlier contribution to mankind, a democracy [of] white men." During the 'fifties, E. Franklin Frazier (1957: 705) insisted that "Despite the present inferior status of the Negro there have been fundamental changes in the relations of Negroes to American society which indicate their increasing integration into American life"; and a political scientist, Robert Dahl (1956: 138-139) proclaimed, "the full assimilation of Negroes into the normal [sic] system has already occurred in many northern states and now seems to be slowly taking place even in the South." Such writers, according to Lewis Killian

and Charles Grigg, (1964: 25), “clung to their optimism that the problem would be worked out within the framework of orderly, democratic processes because of the fundamental good will, sense of fair play and justice, and respect for law of the vast majority of Americans.” King (1964: 35), by contrast, took exception to the virtually universal proclamations of Black advancements: “The economic plight of the masses of Negroes has worsened. The gap between the wages of the Negro worker and those of the white worker has widened. Slums are worse and Negroes attend more thoroughly segregated schools today than in 1954.”

A factual assessment of socioeconomic indicators for Blacks sustains King’s assessment rather than the claims put forth by professional scholars:

- Housing conditions improved substantially—for *Whites* but worsened considerably for *Blacks*; according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (1966: 211), overcrowding between 1950-1960 for Black tenant-occupied dwellings increased from 422,000 to 477,000, while the figure for Whites dropped from 970,000 to 632,000, and increased for Blacks in nonfarm housing units from 106,000 to 156,000, while the figure for Whites dropped from 480,000 to 439,000. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1959: 148) reported, in 1959, that “If the population density in some of Harlem’s worst blocks obtained in the rest of New York City, the entire population of the United States could fit into three of New York’s boroughs!”
- The extremely slow pace of school integration came to a virtual halt throughout the nation from the late 1950s and into the mid-60s such that only 0.004% of the South’s Black primary and secondary students attended integrated schools—a mere 13,000 of the 2,803,882 school-aged Black population (Woodward, 1966: 167).
- Unemployment by race underwent dramatic expansion during the early ‘sixties in contrast to the ‘forties and ‘fifties: In 1948, the unemployment rate for non-Whites stood at 5.2% and 3.2% for Whites, a 60% difference; by 1954, the doubling phenomenon took hold as non-Whites reached 8.9% and Whites 4.5%; in 1962, the difference climbed to 124% as non-Whites

sustained a 11.0% unemployment rate against 4.9% for Whites (Baron, 1963: 43). By the mid-sixties, Charles C. Killingsworth (1965: 89) computed "that Negro unemployment has been understated by at least 50 percent in recent years, and that the Negro rate is actually about three times the white rate instead of being twice as high, as the official figures show."

### LIBERAL ANALYSIS

King proves to be superior to most scholars not only factually speaking but also in respect to analytical ability inasmuch as he vividly perceived the necessity to supplant the demand for equality with justice. He stressed equality to the virtual exclusion of justice in his earlier works, but during the 'sixties justice, as a basis for racial tranquility, came to the fore. Although King made the transition near the end of his life, he apparently was not conscious of the alteration; he sometimes inserted thoughts of equality in spite of his forceful insistence upon justice. In his most famous delivery—his speech of 1963 during the March on Washington—King emphatically demanded justice and made only passing reference to equality. The shift is genuine and is no mere play upon words since it is imperative to abandon one for the other if Black achievement is to be fulfilled.

King became one of the very first to realize that equality impedes Black opportunity; to invoke standards for judgment regardless of color introduces direct competition at just the moment when Blacks are the least able to compete. Increased poverty, poorer education, deteriorating housing, higher unemployment relative to Whites are conditions that reflect and determine the lack of social resources among Blacks to compete "regardless of color." The centuries of oppression that have relegated Blacks into inferiority cannot be overcome by imposing a concept of equality predicated upon a universalistic demand which forbids any favoritism toward either White or Black. Being less socially qualified to compete means that Black inferiority persists and White privileged access to material re-

sources remains unencumbered. For “liberal thinkers,” Richard Lichtman (1969: 172) contends, “combined a passion for democracy, equality and freedom with a system of devices designed to ensure that democracy would not displace the dominance of those whose authority lay in economic power, that equality would not manifest itself in the equalization of the material and social existence of all citizens and their equal access to self-determination.” King (1968: 90) forcefully attacked this liberal formulation of equality:

The white liberal must affirm that absolute justice for the Negro simply means . . . that the Negro must have “his due.” . . . It is, however, important to understand that giving a man his due may often mean giving him special treatment. I am aware of conflicts with their traditional idea of equal opportunity and equal treatment of people according to their individual merits. But this is a day which demands new thinking and the re-evaluation of old concepts. A society that has done something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special *for* him, in order to equip him to compete on a just and equal basis.

Academics, unlike King, refuse to forsake equality and prefer to disregard the resulting detrimental consequences. They contend that the failure to treat Blacks in terms of equality stands as *the* monumental wrong perpetuated by Whites. Thus, many observers acknowledge the supposed inconsistency between White demands for equality by our forefathers and the reality of slavery for Blacks during the revolutionary period of American history; calls for freedom were relentlessly sounded to gain independence from England while all along White enslavement of Black within the Colonies was disregarded. The sharp contrast is generally interpreted as a contradiction—as though Whites were merely inconsistent in voicing ideological expectations for life, liberty, and equality as against the fact of slavery. This widely held interpretation vanishes, however, when one realizes that equality provided an important stabilizing force to blend divergent economic interests among

colonial Whites into a coalition for instilling an effective, united resistance to English rule. Equality enhanced White solidarity so as to overcome the potential divisiveness of class interests among Whites; it became a basis for poor Whites to establish affinity with wealthy Whites in a common cause against British colonialism. The bid for equality did not stand in stark contrast to Black enslavement; instead, *slavery* provided the very contrast necessary so that *equality* could induce a sense of affinity among Whites possessing pronounced class distinctions. The presence of slaves made lower-class Whites feel equal to upper-class Whites. As Edmund S. Morgan (1975: 381) writes, "small farmers could perceive a common identity with the large, because . . . [n]either was a slave. And both were equal in not being slaves." In other words, equality provided an ideological cover in light of economic distinctions in Colonial America; racism flourished to the point of keeping Blacks in slavery to Whites under profitable economic circumstances. Consequently, there is to be found a beneficial and coherent explanation to account for equality proclamations by Whites while Blacks endured the inhumanities of slavery.

Today, equality flourishes, as King notes, in order to justify Black inferiority to Whites in regard to socioeconomic standards precisely because of racism. "White America," King (1968: 3) argued, "was ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lash of brutality and coarse degradation [during the Civil Rights struggle of the 'fifties and 'sixties], but it had never been truly committed to helping him out of poverty, exploitation or all forms of discrimination. The outraged white citizen had been sincere when he snatched the whips from the Southern sheriffs and forbade them more cruelties. But when this was to a degree accomplished, the emotions that had momentarily inflamed him melted away." Equality, today, articulates a racist ideology on a par with the racist ideologies of Christianity and Social Darwinism simply because it justifies degradation of Blacks below Whites without any sense of

injustice on the part of White Americans. Equality sanctifies America's racist tradition of White privilege; its advocates, therefore, are intrinsically racists. And because scholars themselves remain so vigorously loyal to equality, they are, in spite of all outward denials, racist ideologues (Willhelm, 1971a).

### ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

Economic realities constitute another central theme in King's view of the Black experience in a White America. We find, among specialists on the subject of race, that the economic dimension has not been overlooked inasmuch as several schools of thought, particularly by Marxists, stress the economic variable. Still, the most widely accepted academic perspectives present noneconomic reasons to account for the fate of Black people. During the 'sixties assimilationists, in quite different ways, dominated the literature. The family thesis, with all its perverted speculations and outright racism in the hands of Patrick Moynihan (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965; Moynihan, 1965), was revived to proclaim instability in families and the perpetuation of the matriarchal structure as the foremost reasons for the lack of socioeconomic progress by Blacks. The urban thesis flourished, arguing, along several directions, that assimilation would proceed through the process of urbanization and following the assumption of political control over city governments by the Black constituency. The notion of Blacks as but another wave of immigrants destined to undergo the same process of assimilation into mainstream America as did the European migrants of yesteryears was also argued (Handlin, 1962). Finally, advocates of relative deprivation, under the influence of Thomas Pettigrew (1964; Broom and Glenn, 1966), falsely announced substantial progress as the very reason for inciting Blacks to launch the waves of civil rights protest during the late 'fifties and early



'sixties; accomplishments supposedly generate a still greater determination to challenge the status quo in the quest for assimilation. Of course, none of these views has proven correct, and each vanished from purview by the midseventies. Such perspectives came to the fore in order to divert attention from America's racism and the economic system of capitalist production to account for Black-White relations. Without apology, many advocates abandoned their discredited theories only to bounce back with even more absurd and falsified propositions. Thus, for example, Moynihan, after his 1968 appointment in President Richard Nixon's administration, suddenly discarded any notion of Black socioeconomic deterioration and simply declared Blacks had made so much progress in America that Whites should initiate a program of "benign neglect" in order to cut the umbilical cord of Black dependency upon White "generosity" in the form of federal poverty and civil rights programs. Pettigrew (1971) timidly jumped upon the bandwagon of "institutional"—not White—racism; racism, for him, exists within institutions rather than being implemented by White persons. Under the leadership of James Coleman, erstwhile "integrationists" turned "realists," declared their previous equality programs unworkable and thereupon initiated a concerted campaign to accept segregation by rejecting the busing of schoolchildren (Delaney, 1975). Finally, under the banner of biological determinism, scholars, following the lead set by Arthur Jensen (1969), revitalized the long-discredited racism about Blacks being less intelligent than Whites because of inferior genetic inheritance.

It speaks well of Martin Luther King, as a human being deeply committed to the welfare of all people, that *Where Do We Go From Here?* is completely free of the academic garbage and racism so blatant among such academicians as Coleman, Moynihan, Glazer, Banfield, Hernstein, etc. It is very clear, at least to me, that not only have the so-called liberals, now in command of such publications as *Commentary*, *Dissent*, *The Public Interest*, failed, in the words of King, "to demand

justice for Negroes,” but have deliberately and explicitly assaulted Blacks to assure White domination for the future with the same intent and dedication as academics and intellectuals gave to formulate ideological justifications during the eras of slavery and segregation. King’s (1968: 88) belief that “Negroes have felt that their most troublesome adversary was not the obvious bigot . . . but the white liberal who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice” has proven absolutely correct. As de Tocqueville (1969: 357) commented, in the 1830s, “white northerners shun Negroes with all the greater care, the more legislation has abolished any legal distinction between . . . [white and black].”

King avoided not only the numerous pitfalls of noneconomic, apologetic, and racist theorists of the academy but also advanced a rather different economic interpretation than is customary for the economically oriented analyst. Although significant distinctions abound among those voicing an economic approach, nonetheless, the theme of exploitation remains central for most of the perspectives. Marxists, for example, contend that racism is no more than a capitalist technique perpetrated by a ruling class to accentuate exploitation of the working class; Blacks are superexploited since they are used against White workers to keep the pay of all wage earners as low as possible and, simultaneously, they constitute a reserve labor force from which recruits can be drawn in times of economic prosperity when capitalists demand workers—to be discarded without unsettling consequences in periods of economic contraction. King, however, perceived the makings of a new economic order within America in response to a new mode of technological production, namely, automation. “At the root of the difficulty in Negro life today is pervasive and persistent economic want,” King (1968: 108) maintained. He (1968: 49-50) condemned advocates of Black Power because the slogan “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.” King understood

that automation introduces a new economic order that transcends, but does not destroy, America's racist tradition. Consequently, "From issues of personal dignity they [i.e., Blacks] are now advancing to programs that impinge upon the basic system of social and economic control. At this level Negro programs go beyond race and deal with economic inequality, wherever it exists." King (1968: 50; emp. sup.) declared the utmost necessity for Blacks to seize power so major economic transformations might occur since "the Negroes' problem cannot be solved unless the whole of American society takes a *new* turn toward greater *economic justice*." The "new turn," according to King (1968: 133), means that "Our economy must become more person-centered than property- and profit-centered." He (1968: 163; emp. sup.) continued: "Now we realize that dislocations in the market operation of our *economy* and the *prevalence* of *discrimination* thrust people into idleness and bind them in *constant* or *frequent* unemployment against their will." Due to atomation, "we will find ourselves drowning in a sea of consumer goods" inasmuch as "We have so energetically mastered production" (1968: 163). King, in particular, detected the unique economic phenomenon about automated production, namely, the shift from labor into a goods economy of distribution. The distributive economy comes to the fore as automation enters, displacing a reliance upon employment in the production of goods and in providing services. It is no longer realistic to speak of unemployment as much as total disengagement from the work force. The socio-economic gap between Black and White, rich and poor expands because, as King (1968: 163; emp. sup.) observed, "The contemporary tendency in our society is to *base* our *distribution* on *scarcity*, which has vanished, and to compress our abundance into the overfed mouths of the middle and upper classes until they gag with superfluity." Therefore, King concluded, for the unemployed to remain viable through mere subsistence-welfare programs provides no effective answer. "The problem indicates," King (1968: 163) asserted, "that our

emphasis must be twofold. We must create full employment or we must create income.” With automation full employment, obviously, cannot prevail; consequently, King (1968: 162) professed, “I am now convinced that the simplest approach will prove to be the most effective—the solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now widely discussed measure: the guaranteed income.”

King also understood that automation in America’s profit-oriented society means the expansion of poverty not only for Blacks but for Whites as well. Therefore, if Blacks are to accumulate sufficient power “for a radical restructuring of the architecture of American society” (1968: 133), they will have to form a new coalition, a new alliance of power. “The emergence of social initiatives by a *revitalized* labor movement would be taking place,” King (1968: 142; emp. sup.) suggested, “as Negroes are placing economic issues on the highest agenda. The coalition of an *energized section* of labor, Negroes, unemployed and welfare recipients may be the *source of power* that *reshapes economic* relationships and ushers in a breakthrough to a new level of social reform.” The creative effort for the new era of automation will not be through a class struggle led by the workers’ vanguard, but by “creative dissenters” (1968: 133) from among the economically dispossessed in alliance with labor’s “energized section” geared to the needs of the distributive economy rather than employment. It is important to note that while King (1968: 94) acknowledged that “whites must continue to support and work in the civil rights movement,” he (1968: 88), as we have seen, repudiated many liberals since “in areas where liberals have great influence—labor unions, schools, churches and politics—the situation of the Negro is not much better than in areas where they are not dominant.”

These economic interpretations by King have proven correct; the nation’s profits do not operate in cyclical terms but are instead highly successful in accelerating still greater profits while decelerating employment. But profits and unemploy-

ment rates remain high and not only climb but persist with remarkable regularity. Officially, the nation once considered, during World War II, 1% unemployment the maximum point of full employment; immediately after the War, 3% unemployment became the official standard; during the 'sixties, 5% unemployment was established as the proper level; today, 7% unemployment constitutes an officially acceptable level. For Blacks, it is reasonable to estimate a current unemployment rate of 25% generally, and, specifically, 40% among Black teenagers (Willhelm, 1977).

### LIMITATIONS

This review summary of King's analysis of the Black condition in a White America reveals, I believe, the very rudiments of race relations under contemporary conditions with greater accuracy and perceptiveness than any approach, regardless of political persuasion, presently advocated by most interpreters. King maintained, at a time when most everyone else did not, the *fact* that the socioeconomic standing of Blacks is deteriorating; he, while not making as sharp a break as is necessary, nonetheless began to abandon the racist equality ideology in favor of justice as the ultimate standard for testing the true merits for Black accomplishments; he strongly emphasized how racism remains entrenched among White Americans, so much so that he reached the point of all but dismissing liberals because of racism; finally, the most significantly, he pursued the view, developed earlier by James Boggs (1963), that the nation's economy is upon the threshold of a technological revolution by the introduction of automation which, in turn, will mean the creation of an economy of distribution rather than employment. Faced with this new technological onslaught of job displacement that will eradicate cyclical unemployment trends and initiate permanent unemployment, King advanced the solution proposed by Robert Theobald (1963), namely, the

guaranteed income for all persons regardless of employment status.

In spite of his brilliant insights, King's perspective suffers from a most serious flaw, namely, a reluctance to treat racism as a fundamental causal factor. The persistence of racism in spite of shifting economic conditions is well documented in the historical survey of six major reform movements undertaken by Robert L. Allen; Allen establishes, in spite of recent criticism leveled against him (Winston, 1977: 101-124), that racism has become a "force, shaping and directing behavior, not merely reflecting it" among Whites regardless of class posture (1975: 236). To be sure, King took note of the pervasiveness of racism, yet his analysis concentrated upon the economic variable at the expense of racism. As he (1968: 17; *emp. sup.*) wrote, "Negro programs go *beyond* race and deal with *economic inequality*." The extent to which King set aside racism in favor of economics is most clearly revealed in his solution for Black survival; he called for a guaranteed income. Yet, no amount of economic subsidy will dispense with racism. Racism can and, in America, will flourish in spite of King's new economics; however true it may be that "Negro programs go beyond race," White America itself remains as racist as ever without compromise. As long as the argument is made that racism is a mere product of economic conditions, then racism itself will not be eliminated. King did not set forth any particular relationship between racism and economics; he failed to inform us how these two variables intersect in a causal sense.

Finally, in failing to perceive the full extent of racism King failed to appreciate the very real possibility of genocide. He (1968: 110) understood how the economics of automation could result in the impoverishment of Blacks: "Being a Negro in America," he contended, "means being herded in ghettos, or reservations, being constantly ignored and made to feel invisible." Yet, economic displacement provides not so much a reason as it is the circumstance that makes it economically possible for Whites to dispense with Black people. Now that

Whites no longer need to draw upon Black labor it becomes economically feasible to ignore Blacks. As Robert Allen (1970: 51) wrote in 1970, "accelerated technological innovation [i.e., automation] in a decreasingly competitive and increasingly monopolistic economy *combined with racism* have acted *in concert to phase black people out of American society.*" King's failure to emphasize race meant he would fail to recognize that racism would be the very reason Whites would not initiate the economic revolution for bringing about King's program for a guaranteed income. Unlike the rather few people who pose the thesis of automation (Yette, 1971; Willhelm, 1971b), King did not seriously contemplate genocide for Black people. Instead, seeking a genuine revolution, he repeatedly proclaimed the necessity to instill hope in the belief that not to do so would result in the spread of despair—a state of mind that, King thought, was not conducive for generating Black commitment and sacrifice for social change. He (1968: 16) expressed a faith "that no matter how many obstacles persist the Negro's forward march can no longer be stopped." For King to have defined the alternatives as the ghetto reservation or genocide would have suffocated King's revolutionary hope for the future.

In pulling back from the prospects for genocide King simultaneously pulled back from reality. For White America has come to the point in economic development to be able to dispense with Blacks and, therefore, moves into a new era in dealing with Black people. As long as Blacks are prepared to accept a life of destitution, isolated from Whites upon the ghetto reservation, they will be utterly invisible and, hence, tolerated by Whites. If, however, they resist the reservation fate, either by nonviolent movements or acts of violence, Whites will resort to extermination.

How King's own life came to an end provides confirmation of the claim of conditional genocide. As long as King confined his efforts to the Civil Rights struggle, a social movement geared to equality, he not only prevailed but received vigorous

White endorsement as well; upon shifting to demands for what he (1968: 50) called "economic justice," King shifted dramatically from civil rights issues in favor of an economic revolution in the quest for a people-oriented economy rather than capitalism's profit-taking ambitions. He reached the height of public support and exposure during the 1963 March on Washington when civil rights, defined in terms of eliminating legal support for segregation, enthralled the 200,000 people rallying around the Washington Monument and President John F. Kennedy inside the White House. In April 1968 King met his end—just before another march on Washington, a march defined in economic terms under the heading, "The Poor People's March on Washington." King's murder was deliberate; it was a conspiracy (Segal, 1976); it was done to snuff out the leader of an economic revolution. "Ballistics expert Herbert MacDonell," Jeff Cohen (1976: 47) reports, "testified at [James Earl] Ray's 1974 [court] hearing that there was 'no way' the rifle said to have killed King could have been fired from the rooming house bathroom window. . . . Dr. J. T. Francisco, who was originally assigned by the court to determine the circumstances and cause of death, testified, 'From my findings, I could not exclude other sites [than the bathroom window] as the source of the bullet.'"

It is important to note that Black leaders who focus upon color have survived. Thus, Stokely Carmichael shouted "Black Power"; Malcolm X vehemently assaulted people with White skins as devils and glorified people of color without being killed, yet upon making the shift from race to an economic analysis (Breitman, 1976: 125-127), he, too, met his end. The Black Panthers articulate an extensive economic program counter to capitalism and, thus, have been victims of extermination by various police agencies (Blumenthal, 1976; Wilkins and Clark, 1973).

What we have been witnessing over the past decade is a systematic, coordinated program for liquidating all Black leaders with a national reputation who draw upon race as a collective movement for economic transformation of Ameri-



can society on anticapitalist terms. The mass of Black people are kept under local police surveillance upon the ghetto reservation and the Black college campus; contrary to the claim put forth by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1977: 182), police violence is rising and police killing of ghetto Blacks is swelling to the point of virtual impunity and immunity from prosecution. The conditional genocide option—either survive on the ghetto reservation in destitution or resist and confront White repression and liquidation—is, therefore, more so than ever before, the Black reality in a White America.

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