

**The
BLACK
C o M M e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

Issue 169 – February 2, 2006

Martin Luther King, Jr., Democratic Socialist
by Paul Street

[click here to become a](#)

bc PAID SUBSCRIBER

(Use the back button on your browser to return to the previous page)

Printer Friendly – PDF Format



Copyright © 2002 - 2006
www.BlackCommentator.com
All Rights Reserved

This article originally appeared in Znet.

One of the many disturbing characteristics of dominant American ideology is the way it deletes radical–democratic beliefs from the official memory of certain acknowledged great historical personalities.

How many Americans know that the celebrated scientist Albert Einstein (voted the "Man of the 20th Century" by Time Magazine) was a self–proclaimed leftist who wrote an essay titled "Why Socialism" for the first issue of the venerable Marxist journal Monthly Review?

Probably about as many as who know that Helen Keller (typically recalled as an example of what people can attain through purely individual initiative or "self–help") was a radical fan of the Russian Revolution.

Or that Thomas Jefferson despised the developing state capitalism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, warning that it was creating a new absolutism of concentrated power more dangerous than the one Americans rebelled against in 1776.

We might also consider the all–too deleted radical egalitarianism of an itinerant Mediterranean–Jewish peasant named Jesus. Jesus rejected the dominant classist cultural norms of his time by advocating and practicing open commensality (the shared taking of food by people of all classes, races, ethnicities, and genders) and by sharing material and spiritual gifts across the interrelated hierarchies of social and geographical place. As biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan notes, he saw the "Kingdom of God" as "a community of radical equality, unmediated by established brokers or fixed locations."

Along the way, Jesus is reputed to have said that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter that kingdom. He condemned the personal accumulation of earthly treasures and

The Black Commentator – Martin Luther King, Jr., Democratic Socialist

made it clear that God was no respecter of rich persons. He insisted that one must serve either God or Mammon and pronounced the poor blessed and inheritors of the earth. (Mathew 19:20–24, 6:19, 6:24.)

Such radical sentiments are largely absent from the vapid, falsely comforting, reactionary, and institutionalized twaddle that has so long passed for "Christianity" in corporate America.

Another example of this radical historical whitewashing is provided by America's own Martin Luther King, Jr., whose "I Have a Dream" speech is routinely broadcast and praised across the land on the national holiday named for him. In the official, domesticated version of King's life, the great civil rights leader sought little more than the overthrow of Jim Crow segregation and voting rights for blacks in the U.S. South. Beyond these victories, the "good Negro" that American ideological authorities wish for King to have been only wanted whites to be nicer to a select few African-Americans – giving some small number of trusted blacks highly visible public positions (Secretary of State?), places on the Ten O'Clock News Team, the right to manage a baseball team and/or an occasional Academy Award and/or their own television show.

How many Americans know that King was rather unimpressed by his movement's mid-1960s triumphs over southern racism (and his own 1964 Nobel Prize), viewing the Voting Rights and Civil Rights Acts as relatively partial and merely bourgeois accomplishments that dangerously encouraged mainstream white America to think that the nation's racial problems "were automatically solved"? How many know that King considered these early victories to have fallen far short of his deeper objective: advancing social, economic, political, and racial justice across the entire nation (including its northern, ghetto-scarred cities) and indeed around the world?

How many Americans know about the King who followed the defeat of open racism in the South by "turning North" in an effort to take the civil rights struggle to a radical new level?

It was one thing, this King told his colleagues, for blacks to win the right to sit at a lunch counter. It was another thing for black and other poor people to get the money to buy a lunch.

It was one thing, King argued, to open the doors of opportunity for some few and relatively privileged African-Americans. It was another thing to move millions of black and other disadvantaged people out of economic despair. It was another and related thing to dismantle slums and overcome the deep structural and societal barriers to equality that continued after public bigotry was discredited and after open discrimination was outlawed.

It was one thing, King felt, to defeat the overt racism of snarling southerners like Bull Connor; it was another thing to confront the deeper, more covert institutional racism that lived beneath the less openly bigoted, smiling face of northern and urban liberalism.

It was one thing, King noted, to defeat the anachronistic caste structure of the South. It was another thing to attain substantive social and economic equality for black and other economically disadvantaged people across the entire nation.

How many Americans know about the King who linked racial and social inequality at home to (American) imperialism and social disparity abroad, denouncing what he called "the triple evils that are interrelated": "racism, economic exploitation, and war"? "A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years," King told the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) in 1967, "will 'thingify' them – make them things. Therefore they will exploit them, and poor people generally, economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together"

The Black Commentator – Martin Luther King, Jr., Democratic Socialist

How many Americans have been encouraged to know the King who responded to America's massive assault on Southeast Asia during the 1960s by pronouncing the U.S. government "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," adding (in words that ought to give George W. Bush pause) that America had no business "fighting for the so-called freedom of the Vietnamese people when we have not put even our own [freedom] house in order?"

In words that holding haunting relevance for George W. Bush's supposedly divinely mandated war on Iraq, King proclaimed that "God didn't call American to do what she's doing in the world now. God didn't call America to engage in a senseless, unjust war, [such] as the war in Vietnam."

"And we," King added, "are criminals in that war. We have committed more war crimes almost than any other nation in the world and we won't stop because of our pride, our arrogance as a nation."

How many know that King said a nation (the U.S.) "approach[ed] spiritual death" when it spent billions of dollars feeding its costly, cancerous military industrial complex" while masses of its children lived in poverty in its outwardly prosperous cities?

How many know the King who said that Americans should follow Jesus in being "maladjusted" and "divine[ly] dissatisfied...until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort from the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice.... until slums are cast into the junk heaps of history and every family is living in a decent home...[and] men will recognize that out of one blood God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth"?

How many know the King who told the SCLC that "the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people," King elaborated for his colleagues. "And one day we must ask the question, 'Why are there forty million poor people in America?' And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question you begin to question the capitalistic economy."

"We are called upon," King told his fellow civil rights activists, "to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. But one day," he argued, "we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that [radical] questions must be raised....'Who owns the oil'...'Who owns the iron ore?'...'Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two-thirds water?'"

How many know that King was a democratic socialist who thought that only "drastic reforms" involving the "radical reconstruction of society itself" could "save us from social catastrophe"? Consistent with Marx and contrary to bourgeois moralists like Charles Dickens, King argued that "the roots" of the economic injustice he sought to overcome "are in the [capitalist] system rather [than] in men or faulty operations"

Interestingly enough, the fourth officially de-radicalized historical character mentioned in this essay (King) saw through the conservative historical whitewashing of the third (Jesus). Here's how King described Jesus at the end of an essay published eight months after the civil rights leader was assassinated: "A voice out of Bethlehem two thousand years ago said that all men are equal.... Jesus of Nazareth wrote no books; he owned no property to endow him with influence. He had no friends in the courts of the powerful. But he changed the course of mankind with only the poor and the despised."

King concluded this final essay, titled "A Testament of Hope," with a strikingly radical claim, indicating his strong identification with society's most disadvantaged and outcast persons. "Naive and unsophisticated though we may be," King said, "the poor and despised of the twentieth century will revolutionize this era. In our 'arrogance, lawlessness, and ingratitude,' we will fight for human justice, brotherhood, secure peace, and abundance for all."

The Black Commentator – Martin Luther King, Jr., Democratic Socialist

If I hadn't known better the first time I read that phrase, I might have attributed it to Eugene Debs.

*Paul Street (pstreet@niu.edu) is currently teaching a course on the history of the civil rights movement at Northern Illinois University and is the author of *Empire and Inequality: America and the World Since 9/11* (www.paradigmpublishers.com, 2004) and *Segregated Schools: Educational Apartheid in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005).*