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The Re-radicalization of King: Understanding Martin Luther King Jr's Radical Ideas and the Simplification of His Legacy

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The Re-radicalization of King: Understanding Martin Luther King Jr's Radical Ideas and the
Simplification of His Legacy

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

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Introduction

"Although much of America did not know the radical King—and too few know today—the FBI and U.S. government did. They called him 'the most dangerous man in America'" (West, 2015, p.X). King has constantly been invoked by both sides of the political spectrum to condemn the Black Lives Matter movement and referenced from presidential speeches to car commercials. King has been viewed as a consensus, static, and moderate figure today. However, this isn't the case. King held evolving and radical ideas. He was under FBI surveillance for over a decade and arrested numerous times. He had low public approval rates and was heavily criticized by white and black people. King was a radical, evolving, and contentious person throughout his life. He's not a figure that should be idealized but a person whose political thoughts, philosophies, and radical ideas should be explored.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born in the segregated south in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15, 1929, where King saw firsthand the impacts that racism had on the black community. His father was a Christian minister, instilling the importance of religion within King at a young age. King excelled academically, skipping the ninth and twelfth grades before enrolling at Morehouse College at fifteen. Then, going on to receive his PhD in systematic theology from Boston University, and during his time in school, King began to question social justice and racism in America.

It wasn't until 1955, with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, that King would put his ideas into action. Rosa Parks, the first publicly recognized black woman to refuse to give up her seat to a white passenger, marked the beginning of King's activism. As one of the leaders in the boycott, King advocated for nonviolent resistance as a means of challenging racial injustice and the

importance of collective action and religion. In 1956, after thirteen months of mass protest, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional. In 1957, King co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization dedicated to fighting for racial injustice.

Following this, King and other activists would go on to organize boycotts, protests, and marches aimed at dismantling racial segregation and discrimination throughout the United States. This turned King into a public figure and also put him on the FBI's watch list. King's most remembered achievement came on August 28, 1963, with the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. On the steps of a Lincoln Memorial, King delivered his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, calling for racial harmony and social justice. The march, televised on national television and with over 250,000 participants, helped to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These laws ban racial segregation in public spaces, employment discrimination, and voting discrimination.

King faced opposition from white supremacists who viewed him as a threat to the status quo and opposition from other black activists who opposed King's nonviolent ideology. Tragically, King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, but his legacy and achievements live on.

In this paper, I will examine Martin Luther King Jr.'s writings, focusing on how King's advocacy for nonviolent resistance and integration gave way to more radical ideas. In addition, how these ideas have been intentionally erased or misappropriated from King's legacy to create the narrative of a post-racial America. Some people believe the Civil Rights Movement accomplished its goal with the creation of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

However, as King explained in *Why We Can't Wait?*, this was only a part of the movement. He writes, "A social movement that only moves people is merely a revolt. A movement that changes both people and institutions is a revolution" (King, 1964, p.96). For King, the Civil Rights Movement was a call for action; it was about mobilizing the public to change their racist mindsets and racist institutions and create a lasting impact on society. In King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech, he discussed his radical ideas about racism, capitalism, and imperialism, which I will explore throughout this paper. He says, "I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives, and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered" (King, 2010). Here, King expresses how capitalism has made people prioritize material possessions and profit over the dignity and welfare of the people, which prevents people from dismantling racism to profit off of the exploitation and discrimination of black people. This mindset has gone abroad, and now, on a global scale, people's dignity and wealth are being destroyed for financial gain. If society continues to prioritize these wrong values, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to effectively address King's "giant triplets" threats.

In chapter one, I will discuss how Martin Luther King Jr. is widely known for his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech. However, his contributions and beliefs extended far beyond the fight for desegregation and voting rights. King advocated for economic justice, social reforms, and the eradication of poverty for all Americans. His writings and speeches show how his religious ideas gave way to socialist ideas, in addition to how racism and capitalism are interconnected and how

the states need to create social programs to uplift the disadvantaged people caused by racism and capitalism.

In chapter two, I discuss Martin Luther King Jr.'s evolving ideas about nonviolence, justice, and capitalism. I show how King's ideas shifted from focusing on domestic issues, like the Birmingham Campaign, to addressing international injustices, like the Vietnam War. Tracing King's famous line, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," shows the evolution of his anti-imperialist stance.

Chapter three I will discuss the complex and often overlooked aspects of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy. I will discuss how Martin Luther King Jr. Day created a selective celebration of King's legacy and the impact of collective memory. It explores King's philosophy and intellectual contributions, focusing on nonviolence and the politics of delay. Have been simplified and misappropriated, leading to a distorted public perception of King's beliefs and the Civil Rights Movement as a whole.

Chapter 1: King's Views on Racism and Capitalism

Martin Luther King jr is often remembered for his religious beliefs and campaign for desegregation and voting rights. His "I Have a Dream" speech and the March on Washington in 1963 are seen as the focal points of King's legacy for most people. However, this is only part of the history; King's religious ideas encompassed the social and economic lives of the people. The march was called The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a civil rights and economic justice campaign.

In one of his most famous speeches, "I Have a Dream," in 1963, King begins this speech by discussing the history of slavery. Then he goes on to say, "But 100 years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity" (King, 1963). Here, King explains how the Proclamation Declaration claims to grant freedom to black people; however, chattel slavery turned into a different type of slavery. Racism and segregation are still chains for black people who are forced to live in poverty even though America is a wealthy country. King would echo those exact words in his "Other America" speech five years later. However, it is less well known because unlike the "I Have a Dream" speech that also discusses racial harmony, the "Other America" speech focuses explicitly on economic inequality and poverty.

This chapter shows how Martin Luther King Jr. advocated not just for civil rights but also for economic justice and social reforms, which didn't have the same level of white support. King drew upon the social gospel theory, which emphasizes the importance of social reform within

Christianity. The Chicago Freedom Movement turned King's focus to the relationship between racism and capitalism and how they cause inequality in housing, unemployment, and education.

Social Gospel Theory

King's belief that religion encompassed the social and economic aspects goes back to his time at Boston University, where he was introduced to Walter Rauschenbusch and his social gospel theory. Walter Rauschenbusch, a prominent theologian and minister, played an essential role in shaping the Social Gospel movement. Rauschenbusch's social gospel theory explained the importance of addressing social injustices, calling for the "Christian public to embrace a social mission, to attend to social sins, as well as to individual sins, to seek social salvation, as well as individual salvation" (Nelson, 2009, p. 446). Rauschenbusch believed that Christians are responsible for confronting all types of sin and that addressing the social mission was an integral part of the Christian faith. In his view, Christians should not only focus on individual morality but also work towards creating a just and equitable society for everyone. Also, Rauschenbusch's vision of the Kingdom of God was not static, "Rauschenbusch also rejected the millennial vision of catastrophic end-times that would usher in a new heaven on earth; his faith was based on an evolutionary, progressive movement toward realizing the human potentiality for justice" (Nelson, 2009, p. 447). Here, Rauschenbusch challenges the apocalyptic vision of time and society that was widely held among Christians during his time. According to this belief, society would continue to decline over time, leading to catastrophic events until the second coming of Christ. However, Rauschenbusch's perspective was different. He believed that society was progressing

towards a better version of itself through social advancements and the realization of justice. To him, society was moving forward, not downward, towards an apocalypse.

In King's book *Stride Toward Freedom*, he directly references Rushenbush, writing, "It has long been my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion" (King, 1957, p. 91). Here, King emphasizes the interconnectedness of spirituality and people's social and economic lives. He argues that the way people live their lives is influenced by their physical environment and economic situation, which has an impact on their souls. Therefore, King believes that religious leaders must take into account the physical dimension of the world and recognize its inseparability from the spiritual dimension. In the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King addressed the white clergymen, drawing a line between the physical and spiritual dimensions. He writes, "In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, 'Those are social issues which the gospel has nothing to do with,' and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between bodies and souls, the sacred and the secular" (King, 1963). King draws from the social gospel theory to challenge white leaders' ideas about not supporting the Civil Rights Movement because it is a social issue. According to King, religious leaders were also responsible for addressing racial and economic injustices. King continues saying, "I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is

your brother" (King, 1963). Here, King criticizes white religious leaders for supporting segregation because it is the law. Because in Christianity, all human beings are equal in God's eyes. Therefore, it's a moral obligation of these religious leaders to stand against segregation, not because it is illegal but because it is a violation of the fundamental principles of equality and justice that are upheld by religion. King tells these leaders to uphold their moral responsibility, which is above the law, and to use their influence to fight for what is right, even when the law is not on their side.

In *Why We Can't Wait?* King discusses how black churches in the south quickly joined the Civil Rights Movement. "The Negro church had emerged with increasing impact in the civil-rights struggle. Negro ministers, with a growing awareness that the true witness of a Christian life is the projection of a social gospel, had accepted leadership in the fight for racial justice, had played important roles" (King, 1964, p. 29). Here, King explains how southern black churches were at the forefront of the civil rights movement and had a history of advocating for social and economic justice. These churches have always understood that their role as religious leaders goes beyond spiritual guidance; they also have a responsibility to promote the well-being of their community. That's why they have embraced the social gospel, which emphasizes the importance of addressing the social and economic needs of people. King gives an example of this by explaining how important the church was during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He writes, "Perhaps even more vital in the Negro's resistance to violence was the force of his deeply rooted spiritual beliefs. In Montgomery, after a courageous woman, Rosa Parks had refused to move to the back of the bus, and so began the revolt that led to the boycott of 1955—56, the Negro' developing campaign against that city' racial injustice was based in the churches of the

community" (King, 1964, p. 29). King explains how important the church was in mobilizing people during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He emphasizes that the church's spiritual beliefs included fighting against racist injustice, which made it a natural ally of the Civil Rights Movement. The church provided a platform for organizing protests, spreading the message of nonviolence, and encouraging people to stand up against discrimination.

Furthermore, Douglas and Loggins explain how Rauschenbusch's theory was incorporated and expanded within the Civil Rights Movement. Writing, the movement "appeal to the state as among the influences that the Black social gospel tradition took from 'white social gospel and progressive movements,' which 'conceived the federal government as an indispensable guarantor of constitutional rights and principles of justice'" (Douglas & Loggins, 2021, p. 68). The authors explain how the black churches had adopted the social theory and advocated for the government to play an active role in ensuring their social and economic rights were protected and enforced.

Chicago Problem

King had seen the connection between racism and poverty before going to Chicago in 1966; King's earlier activism, like the Montgomery Bus Boycott, is only seen as trying to end segregation, but it is also about helping black people gain back some of their economic power. In *Prophet of Discontent*, the authors write, "It could be argued that the proximate goals of the 'first phase'— desegregation of bus lines, chain stores, lunch counters, motels—would, if achieved, have the effect of liberating private wealth accumulation, of greasing the gears of American capitalism by allowing living labor to get to work more easily and consume dollars to circulate

more freely" (Douglas & Loggins, 2021, p. 38). In the south, black people encountered numerous challenges to accumulating wealth, with low job opportunities and their inability to afford cars. They were forced to use public transportation, which was often unreliable and made it difficult for them to get to work on time. Because of Jim Crow Laws, they were forced to sit in the back of the bus and were frequently ejected when the buses were overcrowded. However, the bus boycott cut off the profits the bus company was making off of exploiting black people. This money went back into the pockets of black people, regaining their economic power. In the end, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that bus segregation violated the Fourteenth Amendment.

In King's book *Why We Can't Wait?*, he also discusses the economic exploitation of black people. Writing, "many white Americans of good will have never connected bigotry with economic exploitation. They have deplored prejudice, but tolerated or ignored economic injustice. But the Negro knows that these two evils have a malignant kinship. He knows this because he has worked in shops that employ him exclusively because the pay is below a living standard" (King, 1964, p.18). Here, King discusses that some white people supporting the Civil Rights Movement overlook how the economic system is also the problem. Due to discrimination, it's easier to exploit black people because they have low job opportunities and can't demand fair wages. The economic exploitation of black people is caused by racism and needs to be considered within the Civil Rights Movement. However, once King arrived in Chicago, dealing with systemic racism took center stage because of the north's hidden racism.

The Chicago Freedom Movement, also known as the Chicago open housing movement, was led by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1966, along with other local black and white activists. Andrew Young put out a statement saying, "Dr.

King, with the support of his board, had agreed to help the Northern Negroes organize nonviolent street demonstrations for decent housing, better job opportunities and improved education and against de facto segregation" (Shaw, 2001, p. 318). During the Civil Rights Movement, activists in Chicago focused on dismantling the racist housing practices that were responsible for segregating black people into impoverished and neglected neighborhoods. This was part of a broader effort to address issues like unemployment, poverty, education, and voting rights in the city. However, unlike in the south where Jim Crow laws were the primary source of the problem, in Chicago, there was no single law that could be blamed. Instead, it was a combination of policies, practices, and unwritten rules that perpetuated the problem of segregation and discrimination. As a result, King became more vocal about systemic racism, emphasizing how it was responsible for creating poverty, the housing crisis, and the lack of access to education and job opportunities. He argued that racism was not just a matter of individual prejudice but also a structural issue that affected every aspect of society.

The Chicago Freedom Movement faced many challenges from the white and black community. In the white community, King encountered opposition because President Johnson withdrew his support for King after he spoke against the Vietnam War. The white neighborhoods in Chicago strongly resisted the idea of desegregation efforts and would attack the protesters as they marched through their neighborhoods. Moynihan argued that the economic issues people were facing were rooted in their family dynamics. Therefore, it was a problem that black individuals needed to solve, not the state. Because of the Voting Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, most of the public thought that the Civil Rights Movement was over. Additionally, many believed that only the south was racist and that there was no need for a Civil Rights

Movement in the north. The real estate industry, in particular, opposed the movement's efforts to end racial segregation in housing because they benefited from the existing racist practices.

Within the black community, King faced pushed back for his nonviolent approach. In "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charisma and Leadership," Huggins explains how the black culture between the north and the south led to this problem. He writes, "But the tactic worked in the southern setting because of the black community's deep tradition of Christian stoicism. Blacks had long appreciated the moral superiority of those who continued to do right despite violence and oppression" (Huggins, 1987, p. 481). As previously discussed, southern black churches were supporters of the social gospel theory and embraced nonviolent philosophy. Huggins suggests that nonviolence was well received by black southerners due to their pre-existing Christian stoicism ideology. Their belief that enduring suffering with dignity and maintaining moral integrity despite adversity aligned with King's nonviolence ideology.

Furthermore, King's philosophy was rooted in Christian principles of love and forgiveness, which resonated well with the religious and conservative black population in the south. However, "Northern blacks had lived in a world where institutions like the church were relatively weakened in their influence on individual lives. Theirs was a competitive world in which the 'payoff' was all that mattered in the end. Pragmatism was the touchstone of northern urban life ... The message of leaders like Malcolm X had greater power in northern cities" (Huggins, 1987, p. 481). Unlike in the south, black northern churches didn't have the same strong presence within the community, so they couldn't mobilize the people together like the south did with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Furthermore, northern black churches tended to be more

pragmatic, so King's philosophy of nonviolence was less appealing compared to Malcolm X's more militant and self-defensive approach.

In the book *The Chicago Freedom Movement*, Rubinowitz discusses King's hope for the movement, writing, "Just as the movement in Birmingham had influenced the introduction of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Selma march had been instrumental in the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, King hoped the Chicago movement's shining a light on housing discrimination would lead to federal legislation that specifically addressed open housing" (Rubinowitz, 2016, p. 119). However, during the Summit Agreement in August 1966, King and other activists sat down to negotiate with the city. The Chicago Commission on Human Relations claimed they would enforce the city's open-housing ordinance. Chicago Mayor Daley claimed he would support state open-occupancy legislation in Congress, and the Chicago Real Estate Board claimed they would stop opposing the open-housing ordinance. However, the problem was that there wasn't a specific timetable and nothing to enforce or incentivize the city to act on their words. The Fair Housing Act would ensure everyone has equal housing opportunities and prohibits discrimination. It wasn't until King's death that the bill was passed to honor his life. It stayed in limbo for two years because President Johnson wasn't supporting King anymore because of his public anti-vietnam war stance. In addition, most of the previous civil rights legislation affected the south, and people felt the government had done enough for the movement.

King's Experience in Chicago

In King's final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, he reflects on his experience in Chicago and how unemployment, poverty, housing crisis, and education are caused by racism and exploitation within the capitalist system. King draws from his "I Have a Dream" speech, where he says, "the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity" (King, 2010). King discusses the situation in Chicago, writing, "This is truly an island of poverty in the midst of an ocean of plenty, for Chicago now boasts the highest per capita income of any city in the world. However, you would never believe looking out of the windows of my apartment in the slum Lawndale" (King, 2010, p.121). King explains how the city of Chicago is wealthy and the people living there are prosperous; however, this is only the case for white people. Black people in Chicago are forced to live in slums and don't have adequate housing, education, or job opportunities.

King begins by discussing the funding of black and white Chicago schools, writing, "1964 that Chicago spent an average of \$366 a year per pupil in predominantly white schools and from \$450 to \$900 a year per pupil for suburban white neighborhoods, but the Negro neighborhoods received only \$266 per year per pupil...Already in childhood their lives are crushed mentally, emotionally and physically, and then society develops the myth of inferiority to give credence to its lifelong patterns of exploitation, which can only be defined as our system of slavery in the twentieth century" (King, 2010, p.122). Here, King discusses how inequality and exploitation can be traced to the education system in Chicago. Since the city isn't putting the same resources into the black schools as they do to the white schools, it is evident that most black children won't be able to perform at the same level as white children. This feeds into the existing narrative that black people aren't intelligent and lazy, which has worked to justify why

black people don't have jobs or are not paid fair wages. The lack of quality education prevents black people from gaining the necessary skills and qualifications to even apply for higher-paying or stable jobs. In "From 'Freedom Now!' to 'Black Lives Matter'" by Jared Clemons, he discusses the formation of racism ideology. Writing, "These orders, however, are necessarily unequal and cut against the supposed ideals of American equality. Racism operates to smooth over this apparent contradiction by ordaining Black individuals as naturally inferior and, thus, deserving of a lower political, social, and economic standing relative to white individuals" (Clemons, 2022). Here, Clemons explains how racism serves to justify and maintain social hierarchies by claiming black people are inherently inferior while elevating white people. Racism is not just about individuals but also about systemic oppression, which contradicts the claim that America is a land of freedom and equality. Claiming black people are inferior legitimizes unequal treatment in politics, economics, and society.

King continues in his book to talk about the "color tax" placed on goods in the ghettos of Chicago. Writing, "Consumer items range from five to twelve cents higher in the ghetto stores than in the suburban stores, both run by the same supermarket chains; and numerous stores in the ghetto have been the subject of community protests against the sale of spoiled meats and vegetables.... Once confined to this isolated community, one no longer participates in a free economy but is subject to price-fixing and wholesale robbery by many of the merchants of the area" (King, 2010, p.123). King explains how the prices of goods and services within these communities are high and of low quality despite high unemployment rates. Even though there aren't laws that keep black people out of white grocery stores like in the south, since Black

people don't have cars, they are forced to buy from these stores. In addition, they don't have the power to challenge these corporations for increasing their prices or providing poor-quality goods.

Next, King discusses the housing crisis that black people are facing. He writes, "It swells the purchase price of the house, for the demand for homes by Negroes far exceeds the supply, and as long as theirs are closed communities, Negroes will be forced to pay more. Next, it is applied by the banking and lending institutions, who declare the Negro a poor credit risk and charge him exorbitant interest rates or refuse him traditional loans and thereby force him to buy homes on contract" (King, 2010, p.124). What King is describing is the practice of redlining, which was a legal way to segregate black people and once again exclude them from opportunities and resources. As explained in "Spatial Analysis of Historical Redlining: A Methodological Exploration," Hillier writes, "Redlining was originally a spatial concept, referring to specific areas that were not receiving appropriate amounts of mortgage credit. More recent redlining research refers to discrimination against certain types of areas, without the same attention to identifying specific redlined areas on a map" (Hillier, 2003, p.139). Financial institutions like banks, mortgage brokers, and insurance agencies labeled areas that white people lived in as "good" and areas that black people lived in as "bad." They claimed those areas were "high risk," meaning it was unprofitable for them to build in those areas or lend money to people that live there. This was legal because it was difficult to prove on paper that a black person was denied solely based on their race. Because redlining targeted the space black people lived in, not necessarily the people themselves. Since no money was going into the "high-risk" areas that black people lived in, they didn't have the public infrastructure (like libraries, parks, and

community centers). Nor did they have the means to leave the area since they were denied mortgages in other areas.

During his time in Chicago, King saw the relationship between racism and capitalism. He argued that the education, employment, and housing systems are all part of the same oppressive system that works against black people and perpetuates harmful racial stereotypes. He explained that these systems are designed to benefit the wealthy by exploiting the labor and resources of black people.

Social Reforms

King's writing makes it clear his goals went beyond civil rights, and he believed the government should create social programs to help black and poor people. During King's life, he discusses several social programs he wants the government to implement. King discusses the need for monetary reparations for black people. He writes, "Yet a price can be placed on unpaid wages. The ancient common law has always provided a remedy for the appropriation of the labor of one human being by another. This law should be made to apply for American Negroes. The payment should be in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law" (King, 1964, p.113). Here, King explains how, during slavery, black people were not compensated for their labor, and even after slavery was abolished, they were not paid fairly. As this nation was founded on a common law that obligates the payment of labor, black people are entitled to receive payment for their work. This is why King advocated that the government should provide a settlement to the descendants of enslaved people.

King also discusses creating programs to address poverty in America for black and white people. He writes, "It is a simple matter of justice that America, in dealing creatively with the task of raising the Negro from backwardness, should also be rescuing a large stratum of the forgotten white poor. A Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged could mark the rise of a new era, in which the full resources of the society would be used to attack the tenacious poverty which so paradoxically exists in the midst of plenty" (King, 1964, p.113). King recognized that poverty was a problem that affected not only black people but also white people. He wanted to establish a program that could help uplift all poor individuals by providing them with opportunities that were previously unattainable due to poverty. King believed that the government already possessed the essential resources to implement his proposed bill, but the state failed to take any action. In King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech, he explains how the Vietnam War was a waste of the resources that could've been used for his poverty program. He says, "It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor—both black and white—through the poverty program ... I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money" (King, 2010). The government is investing huge sums of money in a war that King believes is unjust. He thinks that this war is diverting attention from more pressing issues such as poverty and that the funds allocated for war could be better utilized to help people who are struggling with poverty.

As Cornel West explains, King's true dream was to uplift everyone. Writing, "King's dream was rooted in the American dream— it was what the quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness looks like for the people enslaved and Jim crowed, terrorized, traumatized and stigmatized by American laws and American citizens. The litmus test for realizing King's dream was neither a black face in the White House nor black presence on Wall Street. Rather, the fulfillment of his dream was for all poor and working people to live lives of decency and dignity." (West, 2015, p.xi). King's message was always about unity and creating systemic changes. King's dream can't be fulfilled by placing black people within oppressive structures but by removing those systems that created poverty, inferiorized and exploited people.

In addition, King envisions a program to address the education crisis in the black community. Writing, "In addition to such an economic program, a social-work apparatus on a large scale is required. Whole generations have been left behind as the majority of the population advanced. These lost generations have never learned basic social skills on a functional level—the skills of reading, writing, arithmetic, of applying for jobs; of exercising the rights of citizenship, including the right to vote" (King, 1964, p.113). Because of slavery, followed by segregation, black people were not able to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to better their lives and their families. King's idea would have helped to educate the black adults who were denied adequate education in their childhood. This could've positively affected the younger generation because they would've been raised in an educated household. They increase their likely income and the child's chance of higher education.

Disappearance of White Support

During a 2010 interview with NBC, King discusses why white support for the Civil Rights Movement is waning. King says, "Our gains over the last twelve years were at bargain rather so to speak it didn't cost the nation anything. In fact, it helped the nation's economic side to integrate lunch counters and public accommodations. It didn't cost the nation anything to get the right to vote established" (NBC News, 2018). Here, King is discussing how desegregation increased America's profit and how protecting black people's right to vote didn't cost the nation anything financially. However, implementing the previously discussed social reforms would come at a cost. King continues in the interview, explaining that there isn't any support for this. He says, "Now we are confronting issues that cannot be solved without costing the nation billions of dollars. I think this is where we're getting our greatest resistance. They may put it on many other things, but we can't get rid of slums and poverty without it costing the nation something this is" (NBC News, 2018). The Civil Rights Movement wasn't just about establishing civil rights but also about improving the living conditions of black people, which would cost the state money. However, as King explains, their support doesn't extend to financial contributions.

King also discusses the disappearance of white support in his book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Writing, "When Negroes looked for the second phase, the realization of equality, they found that many of their white allies had quietly disappeared. The Negroes of America had taken the President, the press, and the pulpit at their word when they spoke in broad terms of freedom and justice. However, the absence of brutality and unregenerate evil is not the presence of justice" (King, 2010, p. 4). Establishing and legally protecting their civic rights was the first phase of the Civil Rights Movement. The next phase was more radical and demanded the redistribution of resources and the creation of social programs. This is because

black people didn't have the resources to access their newly established rights. However, when the movement shifted to these more practical ideas, there wasn't the same support as when the movement was theoretical.

Clemons discusses why there is a disconnect between white people's antiracist beliefs and their engagement in antiracist behavior. He writes, "More specifically, given the relentless commodification of both housing and education over the past half-century— coupled with the winnowing of the welfare state and a general undermining of the public good by political elites —education and housing are now viewed as private goods which must be acquired or developed to survive within the neoliberal capitalist order" (Clemons, 2016, p.3). Because of neoliberalism, social programs have declined, and things like education and housing have become privatized. Since these contribute to people's socioeconomic status, people aren't willing to put themselves in a vulnerable position by engaging in antiracism that could increase other people's access to these goods. Therefore, white people who identify as liberal are more likely to make antiracist commitments that are symbolic rather than material. Douglas and Loggins make a similar claim about King's critique of capitalism. Writing, King was "against the ways in which white privilege and prosperity were themselves conditioned by racial partitioning and Black underdevelopment, how increased capaciousness for some was bought necessarily at the expense of others" (Douglas & Loggins, 2021, p.41). Capitalism and racism are connected because white people's wealth is created through the exploitation of black people, which is made possible due to racism. This dependency makes white people unwilling to make material changes that can affect racism because it would also need to challenge capitalism, impacting their wealth.

In conclusion, King worked towards addressing the social and economic injustices faced by black people in America. King's vision was not confined to civil rights alone but also included the implementation of social programs aimed at uplifting poor and black communities. He placed great emphasis on the interconnectedness of spirituality and social and economic conditions and called for the redistribution of resources and the creation of massive government programs to address poverty and education disparities. Moreover, King analyzed the impact of capitalism on racism and advocated for systemic changes to remove oppressive structures.

Chapter 2: King's Views on Imperialism

Martin Luther King Jr is often viewed as a static figure; however, King's ideas evolved. In this chapter, I will show how King's ideas evolved over time and became increasingly radical in response to the changing social and political environment. Specifically, I will examine how King's anti-imperialist ideas can be seen through his use of his most famous quote: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Using King's writings, I will show how his ideas about justice and nonviolence, which were evident in his earlier campaigns in Birmingham, gave way to more radical ideas like anti-imperialism during the Vietnam War. King realized that the interconnectedness of racism and capitalism, which was explored in the previous chapter, was also present in imperialism. By studying King's evolution of ideas, we can better understand how his vision of justice expanded and became more complex over time.

Birmingham

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr., along with other activists, traveled to Birmingham, Alabama, because it was the most segregated city in America. The goal of the Birmingham campaign was to challenge the city's segregation laws and practices through nonviolent direct action. The police and white residents would violently attack protesters during their nonviolent marches in white neighborhoods. However, "journalists praised [mayor] Connor for his 'restraint' and blamed the 'violence' on 'protesters.' Ignoring the long history of police brutality and Connor's flagrant violations of civil liberties, reporters echoed moderates who called for negotiations" (Jackson, 2007, p. 159). The protesters were seen as the problem, and King, along with other activists, were arrested for protesting without a permit. The Birmingham Campaign is

known for the Children's Crusade, where thousands of children marched in Birmingham, Alabama, demanding an end to segregation. Their nonviolent protest met with violent opposition from the police. The images of police brutality against peaceful protesters and children shocked the nation and helped to mobilize support for the Civil Rights Movement. Another shocking moment was the church bombing where the Ku Klux Klan group planted dynamite in a church, killing four black little girls. The campaign led to the desegregation of public facilities and the negotiation of a truce between civil rights leaders and city officials. Eventually, it paved the way for the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

King first wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," in 1963 in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," addressed to "My Dear Fellow Clergymen." this was in response to the criticism King was receiving from white clergymen in Birmingham. While King was in solitary confinement, eight white clergymen wrote a letter titled "A Call for Unity." They claimed King was an "outsider" and that "hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions" ("White Clergymen," 1963). According to the clergymen and some white people from Birmingham, King's presence was causing violence. They believed that since King was not from Birmingham, he did not have the right to protest there. In response to these claims, King wrote a newspaper article and also wrote on a piece of toilet paper that was smuggled out by a jailer.

In "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," he responds to the first criticism about sparking violence in Birmingham. King reaffirmed his commitment to nonviolent direct action and explained why it needed to create tension. Writing, "Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the

need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood" (King, 1963). Here, King explains how nonviolent tension is different from violent tension and why it is necessary. Nonviolent direct action like sit-ins and marches creates tension, which forces a community that's unwilling to negotiate to address the problems that are happening. This is similar to how Socrates believed in creating tension in people's minds and taking them out of ignorance and into understanding. For King, the tension of direct action also worked to change society and the minds of racist people.

Next, King justified why he had the right to protest in Birmingham even though he was from Atlanta. He writes, "I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds" (King, 1963). King believed that true justice could never be achieved in America if certain parts of society were exempt from it. He emphasized that injustice could never be confined to a single location and could spread to other areas if left unchecked. King believed that it was the responsibility of every individual who was committed to justice to address any form of injustice, regardless of whether they were considered an insider or outsider. In his view, the fight for justice was a collective responsibility that required the participation and cooperation of all members of society.

Opposition to the Vietnam War

Like in the Birmingham Campaign, the Vietnam War was another action of injustice in the world for King. This war raged from 1955 to 1975 and was another proxy war in the Cold War, with America's goal being to contain the spread of communism. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 was used as a justification by President Johnson to enter the already bloody war. American troops were sent to bolster the South Vietnamese government's fight against the communist Viet Cong insurgency. Tens of thousands of American men were drafted into the war and were injured or died. Over time, public support for the war declined, which led to the rise of anti-imperialism. The Vietnam War became a focal point for anti-imperialism in America, creating many anti-war movements that drew support from many groups and people like college students, labor unions, and Martin Luther King Jr.

King was against the war, which caused many people to criticize him. He addresses this in his speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," writing, "I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live" (King, 2010). As I previously discussed, King made his commitments to nonviolence and justice clear in his early writing. He opens his speech by explaining how these commitments and his calling should've made it evident to everyone that he would never support the Vietnam War. Although King had not previously made it clear that his ideas of nonviolence and justice apply to a global context, he does so in this speech.

King discusses how it would be hypocritical for him to advocate for nonviolence to black people without also advocating for nonviolence to the state. He says, "They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government" (King, 2010). King believes that violence cannot solve problems; therefore, wherever and whenever he sees it, he feels responsible for calling attention to it. Not only when it was beneficial for him but also because nonviolence was a strong belief that King held. He believes that this philosophy should be held not just for black people when fighting for their freedom but also for the government when claiming their fight for freedom.

King goes on to say, "They question our political goals and they deny the reality of a peace settlement from which they will be excluded. Their questions are frighteningly relevant. Is our nation planning to build on political myth again and then shore it up with the power of new violence" (King, 2010). Here, King is alluding to the Declaration of Independence, where the writers claim this nation is founded on the ideals of the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness of all men. However, King calls this a myth because black people are being excluded, and King shows how the Vietnam War is an extension of this same problem. How can America live up to its principles if it continues to deny the people of Vietnam their freedom?

By speaking out against the Vietnam War, King received more backlash, even from those who had supported him in the past. However, King didn't back down, and just ten days after his speech on Vietnam, King gave another speech called "Another America." Although this speech

wasn't centered on the Vietnam War, King took some time to justify once again why he needed to break his silence. King used the exact words "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" but on a global scale to discuss the war in Vietnam. People thought it wasn't King's place to become involved with the Vietnam War, which was a similar situation King had in Birmingham. Some people thought King's opposition to the war would hurt the Civil Rights Movement because some of King's white supporters were also supporting the Vietnam War, like President Johnson. Also, some black people believed that by King opposing the war, he was taking his attention from the Civil Rights Movement. King calls himself a pacifist in this speech and goes on to say, "The other thing is that I have been working too long and too hard now against segregated public accommodations to end up at this stage of my life segregating my moral concern. I must make it clear. For me, justice is indivisible. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Now for the question of hurting civil rights. I think the war in Vietnam hurt civil rights much more than my taking a stand against the war" (King, 2010). Here, King expands on his previous words from "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and explains how it is not just injustice in America that needs to be addressed, but injustice in the world. King believed that the Vietnam War was an act of injustice, and he wasn't going to pick and choose which acts of injustice he was going to address based on their convenience. King also explains how the Vietnam War does impact his rights because allowing the injustices of this war to continue creates the conditions for injustices to spread. By remaining silent about the government's acts of injustice, you signal to the government that you are okay with their behavior. Therefore, the government will continue until these acts of injustice become everyone's waking reality. For King, for true justice to be achieved, then, everyone in the world needs also to be free.

Oppression Abroad

King is often viewed as a static figure occupying one space in time. However, he evolved and expanded his ideas as time progressed. One way he expanded his beliefs was through the repetition of the line "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" in a global context. So it is no surprise that King said this during his "Other America" speech, which is about how racism has divided America into two: one prosperous land for white people and one land of poverty for black people. King saw domestic issues like the Birmingham campaign and international issues like the Vietnam War as interconnected systems of oppression. As Sturm explained, "King, arguing that racial injustice, poverty, and the Vietnam War were inextricably linked, urged direct negotiation among all parties...I would contend that King's opposition to the Vietnam War does not display a radical change in his social thought. Instead, it is the logical extension of an enduring democratic socialist orientation of which King's philosophy of nonviolence was a part" (Sturm, 1990, p. 101). Here, Sturm explains that King's opposition to the Vietnam War was not just a product of his nonviolent ideology but was also informed by his deep understanding of racism and capitalism. Dr. King believed that the racism and poverty experienced by Black Americans were connected to the capitalist system. He understood that under capitalism, Black people were consistently exploited, and racism was used to justify this exploitation by promoting the false idea that Black people were inferior. The Vietnam War helped King to realize how imperialism was a global form of capitalism, in which people in the global south were viewed as inferior to the West. This led to the extraction of their resources and the exploitation of their people for financial gain.

Douglas and Loggins explain King's critique of capitalism in America and outside of America. Writing, "I am convinced that capitalism has seen its best days in America, and not only in America but in the entire world. It is a well-known fact that no social institution can survive when it has outlived its usefulness. This, capitalism has done. It has failed to meet the needs of the masses" (Douglas & Loggins, 2021, p.41). King explains how capitalism works by exploiting others, where the few benefit from the masses. Therefore, this system can never effectively address the needs of the majority of people, making it obsolete. Capitalism has become unsustainable in America, so it went abroad; however, as King explains, it's also ineffective abroad.

Another way King's ideas evolved was by applying his ideas about the "American Dream" to a global context. As Sawyer explained when comparing King's "I Have a Dream" speech to his "Beyond Vietnam" speech. She writes, "The early Dream was of integration and equal opportunity within the borders of the United States, which would be accomplished by way of moral appeal to the conscience of white America. The later dream was of social, political, and economic parity within an international context, to be accomplished through structural alterations in the national and world relationships of powerless to empowered, of dispossessed to possessed" (Sawyer, 1984, p. 26). In the beginning, King's idea about freedom was contained in the American context; he wanted all Americans to be equal, just like the founding documents had claimed. However, the Vietnam War made King realize that the prosperity of America was created through the subjugation of other nations. This caused King to expand his ideas of freedom because freedom for King wasn't based on the oppression of others. King's new ideas

about freedom become all-inclusive, not just for white and black people in America but for people around the globe.

Chapter 3: King's Legacy

How the public remembers Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement is a romanticized and simplified version. It created a new narrative about how some white people were racist, causing black people to struggle, but the Civil Rights Movement led to the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, which solved racism in America. In *To Shape A New World*, the authors write, "In the domain of the Civil Rights Movement, romantic narratives tend to organize the timeframe, geographic focus, and leading characters of civil rights history around the creation and culmination of presumed 'national unity' from 'racial division,' as well as the story of 'triumph' or 'transcendence' over the evils of racial oppression" (Terry & Shelby, 2018, p. 3). Here the authors are explaining how people view the Civil Rights Movement as one point in history that created a shared "national unity" against racism and led by heroic figures. People often view the south during this era as the geographic focus of the movement because of the Jim Crow era. Racism is viewed as a thing of the past because the heroic figures have "triumph" over racism.

People have portrayed King as one of these heroic figures, cementing King as a part of the "Great Man" theory, the idea that there are exceptional people with the intelligence and charisma to move history forward. Clayborne Carson pushed back against this idea because of "the tendency to see King as a charismatic figure who single-handedly directed the course of the Civil Rights Movement through the force of his oratory. The charismatic label, however, does not adequately define King's role in the Southern black struggle. The term charisma has traditionally been used to describe the godlike, magical qualities possessed by certain leaders" (Carson, 1987, p.449). Carson explains that King is portrayed as a charismatic and godlike

figure, which does not reflect the person King was or his part in the movement. In the same journal, Nathan Huggins discusses charisma and the relationship between leadership and the group. Writing, "we should not forget that charisma is an exchange between the leader and the group. There are values, myths, hopes, fears, anxieties awaiting expression in the crowd to which the charismatic leader gives voice. The exchange is not completely mindless, and charisma touches something genuine, or else it does not exist" (Huggins, 1987, p. 479). Huggins explains how the charismatic leader inspires the people and uplifts the hopes and wishes the people already hold. The leader is not the driving force but the spokesperson who helps turn their hopes and wishes into reality. King can be viewed through the same lens as a black leader who mobilized the people to join the movement.

This chapter will discuss how Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy has been oversimplified and misappropriated, leading to overlooking the radical ideas discussed in previous chapters. It will also discuss how King's intellectual contributions, particularly his views on the politics of delay and nonviolence, are not included in King's legacy.

MLK Day

"They did not all celebrate the same King and few of them celebrated the whole King. However, they did not need to, King was fashioned into a hero for their causes, and his death only amplified that dynamic" (Rounds, 2020, p. 316). As Rounds explains, the parts of King's legacy I discussed previously (like anti-imperialism, institutional racism, and social reforms) are not viewed as a part of his legacy. Some people have picked out certain aspects that do not

conform to the narrative they wish to create and have used the other parts to justify their beliefs or agenda.

Altering King's legacy began with the creation of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 1983, after Congress passed the H.R. 3706 bill and Roldan Reagan signed it. The New York Times reporter Walter Isaacson wrote that with the next election coming up, "Reagan swallowed his long-standing objections that this would open the door to many other groups seeking similar holidays and decided that he would support the measure." (Isaacson, 1983). After this, Martin Luther King Jr. Day became a national holiday on the third Monday of every January; however, Roldan Reagan might have had ulterior motives and wanted to be the one to set the tone for this holiday. As Christopher Rounds explains, "Could it be that Mr. Reagan understood that the easiest way to get rid of Martin Luther King Jr. is to worship him? . . . The best way to dismiss any challenge is to exalt and adore the empirical source through which the challenge has come" (Rounds, 2020, p. 320). In Reagan's speech following the signing of this bill, he claimed King could accomplish everything since he was American. Reagan said, "As a democratic people, we can take pride in knowing that we Americans recognized a grave injustice and took action to correct it. And we should remember that in far too many countries, people like Dr. King never had the opportunity to speak out at all" (Reagan, 1983). Reagan claimed that since the American people had the right to freedom of speech, which was not a protected right everywhere, this gave King the space to advocate for justice. In addition, he claims that all Americans saw the experiences that black people were facing as an injustice and supported it. However, this overlooks the countless times King was arrested for his peaceful protest, which is the same thing

that happens to people in countries that do not have the right to free speech. Also, how many white Americans opposed King and the Civil Rights Movements obstructing their progress. In an interview with Bradon Terry, he explains how the "canonization has come at a cost that in turning King into a figure of national consensus and ceremonial celebration we've flattened a lot of what's incisive and interesting about his work" (Terry, 2023). Terry gives an example of how, during his research, he found a white supremacist group who claimed they were like King because both were fighting for an oppressed racial minority. Terry explains how a national consensus of supporting King has led people/groups to appropriate some of King's ideas and take them seriously. However, this has come at a cost because they misappropriate and simplify his ideas.

Rounds describes an example of what Terry is describing in the interview. Rounds discuss how conservatives have focused on King's ideas: " 'not to change laws, but to change people, to make neighborhoods of enemies and a nation out of divided races.'... In this analysis, racism was not the result of structural inequality that required legal and legislative reform, but an individual and moral failing rooted out by King's faith-based appeal" (Rounds, 2020, p. 320). King indeed wanted to change the minds of white people, but King also participated in several meetings with local officials and presidents to change legislation. By focusing only on King's wishes to change the minds of racist individuals, Rounds expresses how it takes attention away from systemic racism.

In addition, people have also focused on the King's "I Have a Dream" speech, where he says, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (King, 1963). People

have used this line and taken it out of context because, in 1963, it was a radical idea for most Americans to look at black people as people first without attaching all of the negative racial stereotypes to them. In addition, Jim Crow laws in the south made discrimination based on race legal, and in the north, there was no legal protection if someone was being discriminated against because of their race. Some still think this way, but it is publicly frowned upon and illegal. However, people have removed this context and claimed, "MLK's legacy as advocating for colorblindness; then it is transferred to arguing against affirmative action or reparations or a variety of other race-based remedies to historical injustice" (Goulbourne, 2022). These claims overlook the context of the quote and do not consider that, as mentioned in the previous chapter, King did advocate for social reforms. King wanted the state to consider the historical and present injustices black people and poor people faced and create programs to resolve these problems. Terry and Shelby discuss the "ritual celebration and intellectual marginalization" (Terry & Shelby, 2018, p. 2) of King and the Civil Rights Movement, explaining why it is essential for people to look at the whole picture. Writing, "such efforts must avoid crashing upon the shoals of the dominant narrative of the civil rights era, which portrays the movement only as a moment of intensive activism, legal struggle, and moral suasion focused on extending the existing rights and opportunities promised in America's founding documents to those African Americans living under the shadow of Jim Crow in the South" (Terry & Shelby, 2018, p. 2). The authors explain how people have celebrated the King on a grand scale; however, other parts are overlooked. They warn people to avoid only interpreting the Civil Rights Movement as a specific period of activism, legal battles, and moral persuasion, to extend the rights and opportunities promised in

The Declaration of Independence and Constitution to black people living under Jim Crow laws in the Southern states.

In *Praise of Forgetting* by David Rieff, he discusses the creation of collective memory of the past. He writes, "Since, as the great French historian Jacques Le Goff once remarked, 'memory only seeks to rescue the past in order to serve the present and the future,' it is hardly surprising that exercises in collective historical remembrance far more closely resemble myth on one side and political propaganda on the other than they do history, at least as that is understood as an academic discipline" (Rieff, 2016, p. 22). Rieff discusses the creation of collective historical remembrance within the public and how it is more reflective of politics than history. Because collective memory can alter the past by reconstructing and rewriting historical events to align with the present societal and political agendas, this distorts the past and creates myths that serve certain groups' interests. A similar situation happened with the creation of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Conservatives deliberately de-radicalize King, simplifying and overlooking his ideas that would not fit into their agenda. Rounds explains that "those who opposed what King worked toward in life would intentionally and continually withhold this emergent radicalism from mandated public remembrances of his legacy" (Rounds, 2020, p. 321). By deliberately choosing to celebrate King's misappropriated ideas, it has worked to silence his radical ideas. This modern-day narrative about King purposely does not include his views on anti-imperialism, economic justice, or institutional racism.

King as a Scholar

A large part of King's legacy that's been sidelined is his intellectual thought; the doctor in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is often overlooked or thought of as an honorary title. Terry and Shelby discuss that King is viewed as a footnote in political thought/philosophy. They write, "serious study and criticism of his writings, speeches, and sermons remain remarkably marginal and underdeveloped within philosophy, political theory, and the history of political thought...From this vantage, what appears most innovative and valuable about the Civil Rights Movement and the intellectual contributions of leaders like King is essentially tactical and rhetorical" (Terry & Shelby, 2018, pp. 2-3). The authors express how academia has viewed King and the Civil Rights movement as tactical and rhetorical, meaning the movement was merely strategic thinking about advancing black people and used rhetoric that aligned with American ideals and practices. Suggests that black people within the movement did not have their thoughts that white people did not already hold. This perspective overlooks the more profound philosophical and political thought that black people formed during the Civil Rights Movement. The rest of this section will examine King's views on the politics of delay and nonviolence, which have been widely overlooked or simplified.

Politics of Delay

One of King's political thoughts that has yet to be analyzed is his theory on the politics of delay. Although "politics of waiting" or "politics of delay" emerged in the early 21st century, the concepts can date as far back as Plato. In his book, the Republic, ideas about power dynamics, government, and waiting are seen. The connection between politics and waiting has recently gained more attention as people have connected it to things like citizenship, poverty, democracy,

and social justice. In the book *Patients of the State*, Javier Auyero conducts an ethnography about welfare offices in Argentina, and he concludes the state and marginalized people and their relationship to time and power. Writing, "I will argue that everything in their experience of waiting conspires to teach them a lesson: 'Keep waiting, be patient, there's nothing you can do about the endless queues.' Those in the lower regions of the social and symbolic space learn, in practice, to be patients of the state" (Auyero, 2012, p. 73). The politics of waiting that Auyero describes is the unequal power dynamic between the people and the state. Waiting shows how those in power can control other people's time by delaying, raising false hopes, or keeping them ignorant about the length of their wait. This forced waiting creates a sense of powerlessness and acceptance for those at the bottom to remain patients of the state.

King expresses those same ideas within his book *Why We Can't Wait?*, he writes, "undeniably, the Negro had been an object of sympathy and wore the scars of deep grievances, but the nation had come to count on him as a creature who could quietly endure, silently suffer and patiently wait. He was well trained in service and, whatever the provocation, he neither pushed back nor spoke back "(King, 1964, p. 13). Here, King is describing how black people are patients of the state and have been forced to wait for their freedom by the state silently. This is similar to what Auyero describes: people in the lower social sphere are forced to wait for the state to take action. It is unclear when or how it will happen, but the people wait because they have been taught this their whole lives and feel they have no other choice. King explains that this movement shows a break in this psyche of waiting for the state, writing, "the Revolution is not indicative of a sudden loss of patience within the Negro. The Negro had never really been patient in the pure sense of the word. The posture of silent waiting was forced upon him psychologically

because he was shackled physically" (King, 1964, p. 5). King explains how black people have been taught to wait for those in power to make decisions since slavery, and this mentality has been passed down in black communities. The Civil Rights Movement shows how black people are taking back this power and are not going to remain patients of the state anymore.

In the "Letter to Birmingham Jail," King discusses how a movement will never be the right time for the state. Writing, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was 'well timed' according to the timetable of those who have not suffered" (King, 1964). Similar to what Auyero expressed, the state making people wait expresses their power. King understood this, which is why the people must force the state to act. To those in power, it will never be the right time because acting according to the people who are oppressed takes away from their power. King then discusses how nonviolent direct action forces the state to take action. Writing, "nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored" (King, 1964). The tension these demonstrations created within the communities was loud and forced the people to stop and watch. This disruption forced the people in power to move because those protesting showed them they no longer operate under their timetable. This forced the people in power to negotiate with King and the protestors, making the change they had been hoping for and forced to wait for.

Nonviolence

Another aspect of King's philosophy that has been simplified is his commitment to nonviolence. Some conservatives have used this to claim King fits within "America's Republican tradition." Claiming King's "embrace of the philosophical tradition of the West—based on Hobbes, Locke, Mill, and Rosseau—that led to the liberation of all Americans ... Jim Crow was destroyed, and American history was transformed" (Rounds, 2020, p. 222). This quote makes it seem like racism was solved, and it is similar to Roldan Reagan's claim during the creation of MLK Day because it equates King's success to the West and Western ideas. In addition, people have viewed King's thoughts about nonviolence as only strategic. All these claims have overlooked the more profound philosophical beliefs King held about nonviolence.

In *Why We Can't Wait?* King discusses his theory about nonviolence, writing it "was not a doctrine that asked an eye for an eye but one that summoned men to seek to open the eyes of blind prejudice. The Negro turned his back on force not only because he knew he could not win his freedom through physical force but also because he believed through physical force he could lose his soul" (King, 1964, p. 30). Here, King is explaining that he uses nonviolence for three reasons: King believes black people would not win their freedom with violence. Nonviolence can transform people who are racist by changing their minds, and nonviolence protects people's souls.

To King, nonviolence was strategic but also a way of life; King believed those who inflicted violence on others would taint their souls in the process. In "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King discusses the "self-purification" that those participating in the protests would go through. This process was done to prepare them mentally and spiritually to endure violence

without retaliating. King knew this was a difficult thing and needed to be embodied and continuously practiced throughout a person's life.

During Bradon Terry's interview, he discusses why nonviolence was not about making King's argument palpable for the white audience. Terry says, "It changes you, ruins your sense of what is beautiful, what's true, what's valuable. It turns inward and causes you to destroy your own social ties right that hatred is uncontrollable. It seeks every opportunity for itself for its expression to prove its reality to itself it's corrosive" (Terry, 2023). Terry explains that this was an ethical argument for King, not simply about strategy. King believed violence and hatred were a self-corruptive force that would harm a person's soul and negatively impact the person's outlook on life. Terry continues in his interview explaining why it is essential to understand King's theory of nonviolence as a philosophical argument. He says, "I worry that in the kind of strategic conception of black thought and the philosophy of protest that has prevailed in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement that we've lost a whole wing of thinking and are eroding our own capability of having a serious ethical disagreement about better and worse ways of living" (Terry, 2023). When people think of nonviolence as only strategic, it removes black thought from the conversation within philosophy. It prevents people from engaging in meaningful ethical debates about different ways of living.

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