

# Martin Luther King, Jr., and Political Philosophy

Brandon M. Terry and Tommie Shelby

Introduction to *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2018) [excerpt]

## EDITORIAL NOTE

*Brandon M. Terry is Associate Professor of African American Studies and Social Studies at Harvard University. Tommie Shelby is the Caldwell Titcomb Professor of African American Studies and of Philosophy at Harvard University. Together they edited *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Harvard University Press, 2018), a collection of original essays by leading political philosophers treating King as a systematic thinker whose arguments repay sustained critical engagement.*

*The excerpt below comes from their introduction to that volume. Terry and Shelby open with what they call a paradox: King is among the most widely celebrated political figures in American history and yet among the least seriously studied within philosophy and political theory. The excerpt traces the sources of this paradox—the "master narrative" of the civil rights movement, the reduction of black political thought to mere strategy, the dominance of oratory over argument in how King gets read—and closes with a statement of the methodological commitments that frame the volume. As you read, pay attention to how Terry and Shelby distinguish between two kinds of failure: the failure to take King seriously enough to study him, and the failure to take him seriously enough to criticize him.*

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Any attempt to interpret and critically engage King's political thought, however, confronts a paradox. On one hand, there is the inescapable fact that King may be the most globally celebrated political figure, as well as part of the most renowned social movement, to have emerged in the United States in the twentieth century. In 1983, after occasionally rancorous debate, but only fifteen years after the civil rights leader's death, President Ronald Reagan signed into law a federal holiday commemorating King's birthday. Twenty years later, at least 730 U.S. cities were home to a street bearing his name. Perhaps the greatest testament to America's reverence for King is the monument to him that stands amid the presidential statues, war memorials, and national museums on Washington, DC's National Mall. There, near where King delivered "I Have a Dream"—arguably the most famous speech in American history—a sculpture dedicated to King's memory depicts him emerging from a massive "stone of hope."

But despite King's having been memorialized so widely and quoted so frequently, 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—even in those subfields where one might expect his contributions to be essential reading. The latest edition of Michael Cummings’s influential collection *American Political Thought* (2015) includes only “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” giving King roughly the same amount of space as Orestes Brownson and Pat Buchanan. The *Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy* (2012), meanwhile, mentions King only once, in a brief reference to his “dream,” and the *Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (2006) has no mention of him whatsoever. In short, philosophers, historians of political thought, and political theorists neglect King’s well-considered and wide-ranging treatments of many important philosophical and political issues, including labor and welfare rights, economic inequality, poverty, love, just war theory, virtue ethics, political theology, violence, imperialism, nationalism, reparations, and social justice—not to mention his more familiar writings on citizenship, racial equality, voting rights, civil disobedience, and nonviolence.

These dual phenomena of ritual celebration and intellectual marginalization are, we believe, connected, and their entanglement presents both an immediate obstacle and a significant risk to any scholarly venture that aims to examine King’s political and philosophical arguments with rigor, clarity, and intellectual integrity. 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.

This master narrative of the civil rights movement, with its heroic cast of characters, narrow geographic focus, and short timeframe (from 1954 to 1968), draws heavily on the formal qualities and figurative elements of romantic historical narratives. In calling certain histories “romantic,” we mean to indicate that their sense of what matters, their contentions about meaning and significance, and the world they purport to describe reveal thematic preoccupations similar to those of romance in literature. Although these elements of historical writing and discourse are often treated as “merely” stylistic, sustained attention to these qualities can help to bring to light the judgments about truth, ethics, and politics that subtly inform most renderings of the past and the lessons we are meant to draw from them. If, as Martha Nussbaum has argued, “style itself makes its claims,” then we may see these “stylistic” questions of narrative form and genre as expressing “a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not.”

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. Consequently, they rely heavily on themes like a politically unified and heroic black community forged from disarray, a redeemed American citizenry overcoming its long racial divide to forge a more perfect American union, or progressive histories that mark discontinuities between racial orders in American history (for example, the break between the Jim Crow regime and the post–civil rights era) as sharp, transcendent, and culminating victories. Invoking this sort of narrative, Cass Sunstein (approvingly) argues that the lesson to be drawn from the movement is that the political and philosophical substance of the civil rights movement is “conservative and backward looking.” In other words, the defining meaning of the civil rights movement is understood as derivative of long-standing American ideals, enshrined within the founding documents, and thus most crucially realized via the impassioned insistence that America simply live up to its creed.

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. This way of thinking trains our imagination and judgment to focus on those moments where the words of civil rights activists seem to most forcefully rearticulate a deep political consensus at the heart of American public culture while dramatizing how racial exclusions violate these commitments.

Indeed, despite the current proliferation of interdisciplinary studies of African American political thought by a handful of scholars, many political philosophers cleave to an old idea advanced by the Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal in his enormously influential tome *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944). This is the deeply misguided notion that black politics and political thought can be reduced largely to strategic thinking concerning how best to advance black interests by exploiting convictions and sentiments widely held among whites, and the rhetorical identification of black interests with the most deeply cherished American ideals and practices.

In light of this inheritance and its operative narratives, we should not be surprised to find that King is uniquely vulnerable to having the richness and complexity of his thought ignored. His contributions, once shunted into this truncated realm of rhetoric and protest meant to unmask racial hypocrisy, seem ill-fitted for the disciplinary preoccupations of most political philosophers. Even more perniciously, the triumphalist themes of “overcoming” and “progress” characteristic of popular civil rights history seem to preemptively mark King as a figure entombed within a Jim Crow social order that our post-segregation (if not “post-racial”) era has largely transcended. It may seem, on this view, that the discrete Jim Crow context that gave rise to King’s political thought and praxis limits the usefulness of his ideas in the present. Indeed, among the growing segment of scholars and activists who are intensely opposed to triumphalist or romantic

narratives, King's legacy has suffered collateral damage. Given the significance of King's image to such narratives, many critics reflexively associate King himself, rather than the usurpers of his memory, with the historical erasure of local grassroots democracy, the marginalization of more "radical" forms of black politics, and morally objectionable class, gender, and sexual politics. For these critics, King is easier to imagine as an obstacle than as a resource for critical thinking about injustice in our moment.

To paraphrase Wittgenstein, one might say that when it comes to King, contemporary political theory, philosophy, and social criticism are held captive by a picture. It is difficult to get outside that picture because it lies deep within our cultural common sense. The very vocabularies, narratives, concepts, and paradigms we have developed, ostensibly to understand someone like King, inexorably repeat back to us an image that conceals the scope and subtlety of his thought. The part of King's thinking that remains visible gets compressed into arguments or claims that, for most political philosophers, are already considered convictions. Thus, reading Martin Luther King seriously appears incapable of repaying the effort.

Though he held a doctorate in systematic theology and spent a number of years studying the history of Western political thought and philosophy, King was not an academic political philosopher. In addition to being an activist and a Christian minister, he was, however, a serious public philosopher, writing numerous books and essays and delivering countless speeches for a general audience. Given the professionalization of political philosophy, there is a strong bias against treating public philosophers, even eminent world-historical figures like King, as worthy of sustained study. Academic political philosophers write largely for each other and rely almost exclusively on a tiny canon of nonacademic political thinkers—for example, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, and John Stuart Mill. There is a high bar to acceptance into this elite company, and few black public philosophers (with the exception, perhaps, of W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon) are widely regarded as having cleared it. Public philosophers are generally seen as, at best, popularizers of the original ideas of more significant thinkers. The study of King has suffered because of this academic insularity and prejudice against political thinkers who seek a nonspecialist readership.

It is also important to acknowledge that King is often read through one of the most enduring and entrenched features of black political culture: the celebration of, and reverence for, virtuosic oratory performance and oracular wisdom. Rooted in African American religious and artistic practice, these performances fuse style and substance and embody them in a charismatic rhetorical persona, which seems, to many, to confer authority and standing. A masterful orator and inspiring leader, King had an uncanny ability to turn a memorable and lyrical phrase, to conjure a vivid metaphor, to stir his listeners' emotions, and to move people to action across a wide range of audiences.

These talents understandably continue to play a significant role in securing and shaping King's legacy.

Although poetic and prophetic performance can indeed impart vital philosophical insight, interpreting a public philosopher like King solely through this lens risks distortion and invites misuse. For instance, one can be tempted to invoke a phrase, abstracted from its context, to amplify an idea or advance a cause that King actually opposed. One might treat a quoted remark as if it were a standalone aphorism when in fact King used it as a premise in a wider argument. Or because a particular rhetorical presentation of an idea resonates powerfully, one might feel viscerally that it is grasped without, however, appreciating its full implications or philosophical grounding. We contend that King is a systematic thinker and thus it is imperative to dig beneath his soaring oratory and quotable phrases to find the complex reasons he provides to support his practical conclusions.

The approach to black political thought that we favor also rejects hagiography. Black thinkers are due far more respect and attention than they typically receive from political philosophers. They should not, however, be uncritically celebrated or treated as oracles of near-divine wisdom. Criticism and disagreement are often appropriate, and necessary. Indeed, honest critical engagement (which eschews harsh polemics and ad hominem dismissals) is a way of showing genuine respect for black thinkers. This is a conception of political philosophy shared by our contributors and our subject. It embraces historical specificity and close reading, considers and defends substantive principles, values, and goals, and builds upon the very ideas and theories put forth by the thinkers we sharply criticize. In doing so, it contributes to the rediscovery of rich and often overlooked traditions of political thought.

Our suggestion is that now, perhaps especially, with all that is at stake, a turn to King and his efforts in public philosophy can provide us with a more robust ethical vocabulary, a smarter set of judgments, a more expansive political imagination, and a richer set of traditions to help navigate our own "dangerous road."