

THE LONG ROAD TO MEMPHIS:
INTERRACIAL MOVEMENTS FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE, 1865-1968

A King Week Presentation by

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Those of us of a certain age have powerful memories of the events that shook this nation in the winter and spring of 1968. Everyone old enough to grasp what was going on knew that important and sometimes bewildering events were unfolding around us. Beamed into our living rooms by television, they were impossible to ignore. In January, while Vietnamese people celebrated the lunar New Year's festival called Tet, a bold offensive by North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front forces against South Vietnam's cities made a mockery of our government's claims that we were winning the war. In March President Lyndon Johnson shocked us by announcing that he would not seek reelection. And in April the nation was stunned and its social fabric torn by the assassination in Memphis of Martin Luther King, Jr. In the following days smoke from riots blanketed Washington and a hundred other cities like a pall over the republic itself.

But before April 4th few of us could have told you much about what Dr. King was doing in Memphis that dreadful day or about how the direction of his movement was evolving to embrace economic justice as an integral part of the civil rights struggle. Not until after his death, when the networks replayed it over and over, would we see film clips from the eerily prescient sermon King delivered at Mason Temple on the night

before he died, in which he used the imagery of Moses and the promised land to suggest his own imminent death. Few of us would have known much about the two events that converged to place him there that day, a strike by Memphis sanitation workers for decent working conditions and a living wage and a Poor People's Campaign, designed by King's organization to flood Washington later that month with protesters who would combine the fervor of the 1963 march on Washington with the economic demands of the 1932 Bonus Army in which World War I veterans descended on the capital.¹ For many who were witnesses to history, the incorporation of economic demands into the civil rights agenda then was no better understood than the consequences of poverty in the 21st century were understood before Hurricane Katrina pulled back a veil covering the inequities which determined life or death for residents of New Orleans.

Long before Dr. King appeared on the scene some Americans had defined freedom so as to include economic autonomy—meaning, at a minimum, the right to control one's own labor and receive a fair return for it. As the nation's economy became more industrialized and control over it more concentrated, many argued that the political rights assured (to some) in the Constitution and Bill of Rights did not insure freedom. As President Franklin Roosevelt put it in his 1944 State of the Union address, "Necessitous [impoverished] men are not free men." And so, FDR continued, "We have accepted, so to speak, a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all—regardless of state, race, or creed"²

¹ The literature on this subject is extensive and includes an outstanding new book, Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: the Memphis Strike, King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

² Cass R. Sunstein, *The Second Bill of Rights: FDR's Unfinished Revolution and Why we Need it More Than Ever*. (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 12-13

The “so to speak” part signals that Roosevelt was not speaking of more amendments to the constitution but of what Cass Sunstein has called “constitutive commitments...a concrete account of the nation’s understanding of what citizens are entitled to expect.”³ On the long road to Memphis such constitutive commitments took shape through a series of interracial movements for economic justice stretching back for a century and more. This road has many twists and turns and more than a few dead ends. In some places the trail of interracial cooperation grows faint or disappears altogether, obliterated by our nation’s history of racial hatred. Pausing briefly at three points along that road—Reconstruction after the Civil War, the age of industrial concentration and economic crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, and the great depression of the 1930s, we can appreciate just what Dr. King was doing in Memphis and how the expansion of his dream gave new meaning to the word “freedom.”

Consider as a beginning point an unlikely meeting held on January 12, 1865 in Savannah, Georgia, between General William T. Sherman, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, and twenty African American community leaders, most of them ministers. Sherman’s army had liberated Savannah less than a month before, and now he and the Secretary were struggling with what President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation would mean on the ground.

The group of freedmen chose as their spokesman Garrison Frazier, a Baptist preacher who had purchased his own freedom and his wife’s in 1856. In answer to the query, “State what you understand by slavery, and the freedom that was to be given by the President’s Proclamation,” Rev. Frazier replied: “Slavery is receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent. The freedom, as I understand it,

³ Sunstein, *The Second Bill of Rights*, p. 64.

promised by the proclamation, is taking us from under the yoke of bondage and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, and take care of ourselves, and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom.” To the follow-up question, “State in what manner you think you can take care of yourselves, and how can you best assist the Government in maintaining your freedom,” Frazier said: “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn in and till it by our labor...and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare.... We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own.”⁴ Four days later General Sherman issued Special Field Order 15, which promised the freedmen land along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, to be worked by families in forty acre plots, and the use of mules no longer needed by the army.

In replying to questions put by the Secretary of War and the Union Army’s greatest field commander, Reverend Frazier set forth arguments that echo down through the years: Slavery means being in a relationship of such unequal power that another person can command the fruits of your labor and that of your family. Freedom comes when you have the resources to support your family by the sweat of your own brow “and have something to spare.” And in a region where slavery had prevailed for generations, getting to that state of economic security would require governmental intervention.

Sherman’s plan for securing the economic freedom of former slaves was soon overturned, but the bold assertion that being free meant controlling productive resources did not die with Special Field Order 15. In Washington, Republican Congressman Thaddeus Stevens proposed that the government seize the property of the wealthiest 10

⁴ “Colloquy with Colored Ministers (1865), in Eric Foner, ed., *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History*, Vol 2 (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 3-5; reprinted from *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 16 (January 1931), pp. 88-92.

percent of former Confederates, give forty acres to each freedman, and sell the rest. But confiscation of property, even rebel property, frightened most of his fellow Congressmen, and his proposal, like Sherman's order, went nowhere.

In the South, many African Americans struggled to prevent their former masters from reasserting control over their labor by forcing former slaves to work in gangs under the close supervision of white overseers for whatever wages the landlord chose to give them. Recognizing that for most of them outright ownership of a farm was not going to happen anytime soon, rural African Americans struggled to establish as much autonomy for themselves as possible, ideally through renting of land or some kind of share cropping arrangement through which they could accumulate enough money to secure a homestead. Make no mistake: these efforts were about establishing a sense of independence and self-worth as much as it was about financial security.

Former slaves and white Unionists (as in the Federal Union, not trade unions) cooperated to exert pressure through the Union League, which spread across the South as a vehicle through which the poor defended their rights. At the grass roots the League was a secret, oath-bound society, modeled on the Masonic lodge and closely connected to the churches to which most black and white southerners belonged. To a remarkable degree local Leagues were integrated, with white and black members sharing in social activities, Republican politics, and solidarity in the face of planter oppression. Under the protection of Federal troops and Republican officials, the Union League built communities of mutual support in the rural South which in some places helped limit or at least retard the recreation of plantation-style agriculture.⁵

⁵ This account of the Union League is drawn primarily from Michael W. Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge:

Interracial collaboration was incredibly difficult to sustain in the face of appeals for white solidarity and of African American distrust of whites, even among people of both races whose poverty was equally severe. Soon local Leagues came under attack from the Ku Klux Klan, and when in the 1870s Republicans began losing power in the South and Federal troops were withdrawn, the League collapsed. But in some parts of the South, including Arkansas, the League had created a culture of political solidarity among the poor that did not die. This solidarity was based on a colorblind economic notion called the labor theory of value. To state the matter scripturally, as these folks habitually did, “the laborer is worthy of his hire.”

Speaking at a centennial celebration for the late W. E. B. DuBois just six weeks before his own death, Dr. King praised DuBois’ pathbreaking book *Black Reconstruction in America*, saying that “far from being the tragic era white historians described, [Reconstruction] was the only period in which democracy existed in the South.”⁶ Dr. King, or at least his associate Bayard Rustin, who drafted the speech, understood what black and white members of the Union League had accomplished.

Within two decades of the League’s rise and fall another movement of the poor emerged which *aspired* to connect American “producers” (laborers in farm and factory who created value) across lines of race, class, and party. Growing out of various farmer and labor organizations, several of which originated in Arkansas and Texas, the Populist movement addressed the ills of those ground down by the economic depressions of the late 19th century, and it produced the largest third party movement in America before the

Louisiana State University Press, 1989). See also Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 283-90.

⁶ Quoted in Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 703.

20th century. Where the former slaves and their white allies had struggled to prevent former slave owners from regaining the upper hand, Populist viewed monopoly capitalism as a new form of slavery and fought it through cooperatives and political action. They demanded that the federal government break up the trusts, free the money supply from control of bankers, and establish federal control over the railroads.

In 1965, speaking from a flatbed truck to a crowd of 25,000 that had gathered in Montgomery to rally for voting rights at the end of the march from Selma, Dr. King praised the Populist party which had flourished briefly in the 1890s, saying that its potential coalition of poor whites and African Americans, bent on securing a more just economy for all, had provoked the white power structure of the South to destroy it. In that speech, as one King biographer notes, day King “drew a direct line from Reconstruction to the Selma march.”⁷ The line passed through the Populist movement.

King cited as his authority on Populism the historian C. Vann Woodward, author of a recently published book called *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, which was widely cited at the time to show that segregation in the South was of recent origin and that interracial cooperation had once flourished among poor whites and blacks. In his biography of Tom Watson, Woodward had quoted approvingly the Georgia Populist’s admonition to both groups: “Now the People’s Party says to these two men, ‘you are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings. You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism

⁷ Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, p. 186. King’s history lesson fell flat with his Montgomery audience, according to King staff members who were present.

which enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggers both.”⁸

Woodward and King found in Populism a useable past in the struggle for desegregation and economic justice. Speaking for myself, Woodward’s story of a forgotten biracial coalition in my native South, read for the first time while I watched King’s movement unfold, is what got me interested in Populism. From Virginia and North Carolina to Arkansas and Texas, one can find stories of men and women who crossed the color line, at great personal risk and upon pain of alienation from their families and friends, to pursue the Populist dream.⁹

But on the whole, the Populist movement failed to sustain an interracial partnership, and some white Populists eventually supported black disfranchisement and segregation. Unlike the much smaller Union League, the farmer movement which swept across the South in the 1880s mobilized a cross section of rural whites, including many Confederate veterans and their families. In the end, racial and sectional loyalties trumped shared economic distress, and old party loyalties kept most southerners, black and white, from joining under the Populist banner.

The remarkable thing is that such a coalition existed at all in that time and place. Where it worked best, as in Arkansas, biracial populism often had roots in organizations of the Reconstruction era—from the Union League and Republican politics to the earliest biracial trade unions. The Populist *dream* of colorblind economic justice, though unrealized, is part of the long road to Memphis.

⁸ C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1938), 220

⁹ Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); and McMath, “C. Vann Woodward and the Burden of Southern Populism,” *Journal of Southern History* 67 (November 2001): 741-68.

Vann Woodward began his study of the Populists in the depths of the great depression of the 1930s. Later he recalled: “I could not help but being influenced by analogies between their time and my own, by the similarities between the depression in which they struggled and the one in which we were then still floundering.”¹⁰ One analogy which Woodward overlooked was between Populism and a small but militant group in his home state of Arkansas, the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union.

In 1934 eighteen men, eleven white and seven black, met in a school near Tryonza and founded the STFU. Like members of the Union League, their goal was to limit the ability of plantation owners to control their labor and their lives. But unlike those earlier agrarian radicals, they had to challenge not only the planters but also the federal government, which was seeking to pull farmers up from poverty by paying them to take some land out of cultivation. The catch was that the federal dollars were distributed by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration to land owners. Planters were supposed to pass a share along to their tenants, but instead they often evicted them from the land they had been farming. The tactics which the STFU used to pursue economic justice for sharecroppers included creation of tightly knit local “congregations” to sustain members in the face of threats, a strike against planting cotton for plantation owners in 1936, and a sophisticated lobbying and public relations campaign in 1937 to press the Roosevelt administration for changes in the subsidy program and to win support among liberals nationwide.

¹⁰ C. Vann Woodward, *Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 37. While King and his associates had the depression-era Bonus March in mind as a model for their Poor People’s Campaign, they appeared to be unaware of a Populist precursor, the army of Midwestern Populists led to the nation’s capital in 1894 by Ohio businessman and greenbacker Jacob S. Coxey (along with his wife and their infant son, Legal Tender Coxey. When Coxey’s group, which called itself the Commonwealth of Christ, arrived in Washington Coxey mounted the Capitol steps to deliver a speech and was promptly arrested for trespassing.

Local chapters of the STFU looked a good deal like the Union League and the Farmers' Alliance, complete with traveling organizers, secret rituals and "church-like" lectures. Unlike the Alliance, STFU chapters were for the most part racially mixed. As a white STFU organizer named Myrtle Lawrence said, "They eat the same kind of food we eat...they work for the same boss men that we work for; they hoe beside us in the fields....Ignorance is a kill'n them just the same as it's a kill'n us. Why shouldn't they belong to the same union we belong to?"¹¹

The pedigree of this new organization was an interesting mix of populism, socialism, and evangelical/Pentecostal religion. Some of the socialists, like co-founder H. L. Mitchell, were home grown, but the Union had the support of Socialist Party leaders like presidential candidate Norman Thomas. Some of the religious leaders, like Reinhold Niebuhr, were outsiders, but many were home grown like the Baptist preacher who initiated Myrtle Lawrence. Virginia-born and Vanderbilt-trained minister Howard Kester connected the STFU to the southern network of radical social gospellers.

The STFU was a small but significant part of a cluster of a left-liberal organizations fighting for economic freedom in the 1930s. The largest group was the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which began organizing mass production industries in 1935. In addition to demands for a living wage, these groups sought economic security, recognizing that "the vast economic transformations of the past half century had woven insecurity into the fabric of working-class life," and that the depression had made it much worse.¹² Although not yet committed to ending the laws and customs that enforced racial discrimination in America, this cluster of leftist

¹¹ Payne, "The Lady Was a Sharecropper," 22.

¹² Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 199.

organizations and an associated network of “movement intellectuals” took the lead in supporting diversity and rejecting racial prejudice. This broadly-based liberal movement encouraged Franklin Roosevelt in the later years of his presidency to focus his own agenda on the issue of economic security.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s, and Martin Luther King in particular, owed a great deal to this cluster of liberal and radical organizations from the 1930s. From the industrial unions they adopted the use of boycotts and sit-in demonstrations. From the movements of the 1930s and 1940s King’s own organization drew counsel from the likes of Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, and Stanley Levison, as well as from a leading black churchman of his father’s generation, Howard Thurman, whose little book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Dr. King carried with him everywhere. Some civil rights leaders viewed the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union as a forerunner and inspiration for their movement. Some also considered the STFU to be a connecting link between the civil rights movement and Populism.

King’s actions on the road to Memphis stood in a long line of crusades for economic justice, but they were also a product of his own moment in history. Like the striking sanitation workers in Memphis whose slogan was “I am a Man,” Martin Luther King echoed the answer Reverend Frazier gave to General Sherman: freedom requires access to resources so that “we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare.”¹³ In preparing for the Poor People’s Campaign, King asked the Populists’ question: why, in a land so blessed with human and natural resources, should a few monopolize wealth while millions go hungry? Through the Poor People’s Campaign he

¹³ I am not suggesting there was organizational continuity from the first Reconstruction to the second, but rather continuity of an understanding shared by many that America’s “constitutive commitments” included a right to the kind of economic freedom that both Reverend Frazier and President Roosevelt described.

intended to press a reluctant Congress to implement something like the economic bill of rights that Roosevelt had proposed in 1944. But King lived in a moment quite different from the 1860s, 1890s, or 1930s. By 1967, the year before he died, horrendous conflicts at home and abroad had convinced King that drastic changes were required to overcome the interlocking threats of racism, poverty, and war.

One year to the day before his death King gave a speech at Riverside Church in New York in which he addressed all three. In that speech and others that followed he denounced America's war in Vietnam, saying that it was "one of the most unjust wars that has ever been fought in the history of the world." It was unjust to the people of Vietnam and to the poor at home who are "sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions...."¹⁴ By 1967 King and his associates had come to believe that the unrest and rioting spreading across American cities were caused in large measure by a loss of hope among the urban poor, a despair made worse by federal programs such as the one that continued to drive poor blacks off the land and into crowded cities. President Johnson, who longed to fulfill FDR's unfinished agenda, had launched a "War on Poverty," but the war in Vietnam, King argued, was draining resources from that domestic campaign, thus making it another casualty of the fighting in southeast Asia.

Dr. King, who had traveled widely in the developing world, did not stop with poverty at home. Self-interest and simple justice required that America support the economic emancipation of the third world as well. In a portion of his last speech which never received the attention of the haunting "mountaintop" passage, King made this point

¹⁴ James McWin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 275, 233.

clearly: “These are years when the masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya...or Memphis, Tennessee, the cry is always the same: “We want to be free.”¹⁵

King knew that this struggle for freedom from poverty must transcend the color line, for much the same reasons that Tom Watson and Myrtle Lawrence had expressed and because of his abiding commitment to an inclusive social gospel. He knew, as did LBJ, that prospects for such a coalition were rapidly diminishing and that his own organization was ill-prepared to create such a diverse movement from scratch. But he worked for it until the day he died, though it cost him the support of impatient black militants and white radicals.

By attacking the triple threat of racism, poverty, and war, and by extending his appeal to the aspirations of people in the developing world, King was proposing a radical expansion of the civil rights agenda. Indeed, he was articulating a vision of freedom that went beyond anything put forth by a major public figure in America, with the possible exception of Franklin Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech (1941), a bold outline for a world in which the peoples of the world would be free from want and free from fear.¹⁶

¹⁵ Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 462.

¹⁶ King’s thinking about the incorporation of economic issues into the struggle for racial justice reflected both his early experiences in the black church in Atlanta and his exposure to European-American theological traditions at Crozer Seminar and Boston University, where he received his Ph.D. Martin Luther King, Sr., William Holmes Borders (pastor of the neighboring Wheat Street Baptist Church), and other prominent black pastors in Atlanta were involved in interracial efforts for economic justice in the 1920s, as was King’s role model, Morehouse College Professor and President Benjamin E. Mays. Howard Thurman (mentioned in the text) was a Morehouse classmate of King’s father and an influence on MLK throughout his life.

In an autobiographical essay written when he entered Boston University, King described the influence on him of *Christianity and Crisis* by Walter Rauschenbusch, the quintessential Baptist social gospeler of the early 20th century, and then the impact of reading Marx. King said he rejected aspects of Rauschenbusch’s theological liberalism and also rejected Marx’s materialism, but found value in both. He was also influenced for a time by A. J. Muste, leader of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation, and through the FOR by Mordecai Johnson, President of Howard, who had just returned from meeting Gandhi

These dreams remain unfulfilled. Sadly, at the moment of King's death the political and cultural climate in America was beginning to shift in such a way that has made it difficult even to imagine that such dreams ever existed. Difficult, to be sure, but not impossible.

when King heard him speak. King started reading Reinhold Niebuhr during his last year at Crozer and recalled that "The prophetic and realistic elements of Niebuhr's passionate style and profound thought were appealing to me, and made me aware of the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence. I became so enamored of his social ethics that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything he wrote." This autobiographical document is available at <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King>. See also at that site a helpful paper entitled "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the African-American Social Gospel," by Clayborne Carson, editor of the King Papers.

It seems fair to characterize King politically as a "democratic socialist" (he was also influenced directly by European political figures in this tradition in the 1950s and 1960s) or as a "Christian socialist" (in the traditions of Rauschenbusch, the young Niebuhr, and some black churchmen). Both of those traditions would have supported a hopeful outlook on interracial cooperation. Did King really think that such a biracial coalition was possible in 1968? He was not naïve, but I think he believed that his objectives could not be achieved without it.