

Dr. King's Legacy For Today

Thank you for that introduction. So I teach a class here at San Jose State on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. During this class, we trace the events of Dr. King's life from the bus boycott of Montgomery to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC where he spoke of his dream, to the slums in Chicago where he lived for a time, from Marks, Mississippi, which was to be the starting point for King's Poor Peoples Campaign, to Memphis, where he went to support garbage workers, and sadly, tragically, where he was murdered.

As you can imagine, Martin's journey and struggle to build a just society is rich and full of incredible stories of bravery, courage, and sacrifice, and it easily fills up the 30 class sessions over a 4-month semester. Unfortunately, we don't have 30 class sessions to talk about why Dr. King's legacy is so critical for us today. I only have 10 minutes, so I will keep it brief, but hopefully memorable.

Let me start by saying that some intellectuals are Marxists, others are Weberian...as for me, I am a Kingian! I am a Kingian because I think Dr. King has the correct analysis of American society, the correct solutions, and the correct method to bring his solutions into being.

First, let me explain King's analysis of American society. King's analysis of the US was that racism, economic exploitation, and militarism were inter-related problems that undermined the Beloved Community. King called these 3 inter-related problems "the Giant Triplets" or the triple evils. King would state that, "When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the 'giant triplets' of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are incapable of being conquered".

To see how King saw how economic exploitation and racism were interconnected, King argued that there was a "curious formula", which dated back to the writing of the U.S. Constitution, which defined a black person as 60% of a human being when determining taxation and representation. Martin would say that this "curious formula" still existed in his times, but it declared Blacks 50% of a person since of the good things in life, Blacks had approximately 1/2 of those of Whites. Of the bad things, Blacks had twice those of Whites.

Now, some people today claim that we live in a color-blind or a post-racial society but I am here today, as a Kingian, to say that the relationship between racism and economic exploitation still exists in these United States, as the "curious formula" still describes today's America. For example, in 1968, the year King was murdered, the unemployment rate was 5% for Whites and 10% for Blacks. Today: White unemployment is 3.4%, while Black unemployment is 7%. In 1968, 10% of Whites lived in poverty compared to 35% African

Americans (a bit more than 3x as much poverty). Today, 8.8% of Whites live in poverty compared to 22.8% African Americans (a bit less than 3x). And right here, in Santa Clara County, the Infant Mortality Rate--widely accepted as an accurate indicator of general health--is 2.9% for Whites and 7% for Blacks while median household income is \$101,000 for Whites and \$60,000 for Blacks (almost 2x).

As I stated earlier, I am a Kingian, because his analysis of U.S. problems, and the tools that he gave us to analyze it, are still accurate today. King's "curious formula" gives us an important conceptual tool to understand the interconnection between racism and economic exploitation.

But Dr. King didn't stop at the relationship between racism and economic exploitation. He also saw how both were connected to militarism. For King, militarism was an ideology and framework of action based on large military spending and a willingness to use the military to protect the economic interests of the elite. When speaking of militarism, and its connection to racism and poverty, Dr. King said, "A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will thingify them—make them things. Therefore, they will exploit them, and poor people generally, economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have foreign investments and everything else, and will have to use its military to protect them. All of these problems are tied together."

I believe that Dr. King would look at today's military spending, which in 2018 will be \$824 billion dollars, and he would question why we are spending so much when the US government spends just \$50 billion on low-income housing assistance, or \$70 Billion on food for low-income families. As King stated, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual doom."

So to be a Kingian, we must embrace King's analysis of the problem, and at the heart of his analysis are the Giant Triplets and the Curious Formula. But to be a Kingian also means to embrace King's solutions to America's problems, which means we need to implement an Economic Bill of Rights. Dr. King had concluded that American Capitalism was flawed since it did not provide enough living wage jobs for its people. King called the historic 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voter Rights Act superficial changes, since they had done little to change the economic conditions of Black Americans. King said that that the movement needed to evolve from Civil Rights to Human Rights.

In response, King proclaimed: "Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For we know now, that it isn't enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at the swankest integrated restaurant when he doesn't

even earn enough money to take his wife out to dine? What does it profit one to have access to the hotels of our cities, and the hotels of our highways, when we don't earn enough money to take our family on a vacation?"

King felt that the best solution to solve the problems caused by racism and economic exploitation was an Economic Bill of Rights. First put forward by President Franklin Roosevelt in his State of the Union Address in 1944, an Economic Bill of Rights is composed of several important economic rights, most importantly, the right to a job, the right to a living wage, and the right to housing. In his last book, Dr. King argued that we needed a contemporary Economic Bill of Rights to supplement the Constitution's Political Bill of Rights."

In an article published 8 days after his assassination, King stated, "We need an Economic Bill of Rights. "This would guarantee a job to all people who want to work and are able to work. It would also guarantee an income for all who are not able to work." In fact, the demands for full-employment through a massive public works program, a guaranteed income at middle-class levels and the creation of 5 million low-income homes were the 3 demands of King's Poor People's Campaign that was about to start when he was assassinated.

Today, 43 million people are living in poverty. In California, 23% of Blacks live in poverty, and 19% of Latinos, compared to 10% white. The "curious formula" still exists, and thus, King's demand for an Economic Bill of Rights is still the correct solution to our nations problems.

Finally, King had the correct method to bring about change. Of course, we all know that King was dedicated to non-violence. But more of us must become knowledgeable about how King focused his non-violent actions on targets to create an environment that allowed for change to take place.

On a personal note, this is what I have dedicated the past decade to. Understanding the "change process", so as to take the policy ideas that SJSU students have, and to help the students implement them. The title of my new book, *Change, A Student Guide to Social Action*, has just been released, and it explores how SJSU students have won 12 campaigns in my Social Action class from the minimum wage campaign, to getting air conditioning in Dudley Moorhead Hall, and from getting more printers here at the MLK Library to the student's most recent victory, which was to get President Papazian to join the Workers Rights Consortium, which will guarantee that our SJSU apparel is not made in sweatshops. Importantly, the book provides a non-violent framework, strategies and tactics on how to bring about change. I tell my friends that the book is Kingian, with a feminist flair!

In conclusion, King's call to us is clear: we need to engage people in a massive assault on poverty, racism, and militarism by implementing an Economic Bill of Rights, and paying for it by reducing our military spending. I encourage you to become engaged in this great Kingian work!