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MARTIN’S DREAM: THE GLOBAL LEGACY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

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During the months before the fiftieth anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, I had numerous opportunities to speak about the meaning of the event. I enjoyed the sugar high of media attention, followed swiftly by the depressing realization that, as suddenly as our scholarly opinions become newsworthy, they become old news. But, for a brief moment, it was possible for some of us scholars at this conference to display the wisdom that inevitably comes from years of research on topics that most people do not think much about. It’s not difficult to impress reporters, who are amazed to learn that the march was indeed “for Jobs and Freedom,” that John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was forced to change his prepared speech when some march leaders thought it too militant, that no female civil rights leader gave a speech that day, and that Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his concluding “I Have a Dream” refrain extemporaneously.

Historians, of course, know that a vast amount of ignorance about the past could be corrected simply by visiting an archive and discovering the amazing facts waiting to be found in largely neglected documents. But we also know that these facts might as well be secrets because only a small minority of people ever visit an archive. Those of us who are academic historians also know that many amazing but little-known historical facts are secreted away in scholarly articles or in books published by struggling university presses.

For several decades now, my colleagues and I at Stanford’s Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute have been stashing “secrets” inside the published volumes of The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. and in articles based on King’s papers. After participating in and observing the commemorations, I can report that, despite the considerable publicity about King and his dream, many of our secrets-in-plain-view remain so. This is certainly not because of a lack of accessible information about King, the most highly publicized and extensively studied African American of the twentieth century. Instead, I think it is because of a widespread tendency, especially in the United States, to view King narrowly as a black civil rights
leader, a description that is accurate but hardly sufficient, because he was also a visionary leader with a unique awareness of the historical and global context of the modern African American freedom struggle. Just as it would be misleading to view Mohandas Gandhi simply as a leader of the Indian independence movement, we fail to recognize the essential identities of King and Gandhi when we ignore the abundant evidence that the two leaders played global as well as national leadership roles.

Another little-known, hidden-in-plain-sight fact to be found in King’s papers is that he saw himself mainly as a social gospel minister rather than as a civil rights leader. Moreover, although he has often been described as having become increasingly radical during his final years, his writings from the period prior to the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-1956 indicate that the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 marked a return to the social gospel convictions of his early ministry. In one of his earliest seminary papers, written in 1948 when he was nineteen — seven years before the start of the Montgomery boycott — he confidently defined his pastoral mission in a way that foreshadowed the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign: “I must be concerned about unemployment, slums [sic], and economic insecurity. I am a profound advocate of the social gospel.”¹ King’s “Autobiography of Religious Development,” the fourteen-page, handwritten paper that he prepared the following year, noted his “anti-capitalist feelings,” spurred by the sight of “numerous people standing in bread lines.”² In one of the love letters he wrote during the summer of 1952 while courting former Progressive Party supporter Coretta Scott, he announced, “I imagine you already know that I am much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic.” He went on to say, “I would certainly welcome the day to come when there will be a nationalization of industry. Let us continue to hope, work, and pray that in the future we will live to see a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color.”³

King was not quite as candid in his sermons as he was in his letters to Scott, but the sermons he delivered while assisting his father at the Ebenezer Baptist Church during the summer of 1953 (soon after his marriage in June) addressed racial segregation and discrimination in the context of the global struggle for peace with social justice. Several of these sermons criticized the “false Gods” of science, nationalism, and materialism. Sharply denouncing American chauvinism and anticommunism, King advised, “One cannot worship this false god of

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³ King to Coretta Scott, 18 July 1952, Papers, 6:123, 125, 126.
nationalism and the God of Christianity at the same time.”4 In another sermon he prepared that summer, he insisted that international peace was the “cry that is ringing in the ears of the peoples of the world,” but that such peace could be achieved only when Christians “place righteousness first. So long as we place our selfish economic gains first we will never have peace ... Indeed the deep rumbling of discontent in our world today on the part of the masses is [actually] a revolt against imperialism, economic exploitation, and colonialism that has been perpetuated by western civilization for all these many years.”5

King’s expansive Christian worldview was perhaps most evident in his sermon “Communism’s Challenge to Christianity,” in which he rejected communism as secularistic and materialistic but nonetheless insisted that it was “Christianity’s most formidable competitor and only serious rival.” Marxist ideas, he argued, should challenge Christians to express their own “passionate concern for social justice. The Christian ought always to begin with a bias in favor of a movement which protests against the unfair treatment of the poor, for surely Christianity is itself such a protest.”6

In 1954, when he accepted the pastorate of Montgomery’s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King did not mention civil rights reform but did assert that he came to Dexter “at a most crucial hour of our world’s history; at a time when the flame of war might arise at any time to redden the skies of a dark and dreary world; at a time when men know all too well that without the proper guidance the whole of civilization can be plunged across the abyss of destruction.”7 Less than a year after King delivered his sermon on communism, he began pushing gently yet consistently against the complacency of a mostly middle-class congregation at Dexter that had resisted the activism of his predecessor, the Reverend Vernon Johns. He used his acceptance address as an occasion to assert his spiritual authority and to suggest the immensity of the task ahead. He cited the same social gospel credo (Luke 4:18–19) that his father had used in 1940 to describe the “true mission of the church”: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.”8

In December 1955, Rosa Parks transformed the twenty-six-year-old social gospel advocate into a civil rights leader. King did not initiate

5 “First Things First,” 2 August 1953, in Papers, 6:144, 145.
7 King to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 14 April 1954, in Papers, 2:260.
8 “Acceptance Address at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church,” 2 May 1954, in Papers, 6:166.
the Montgomery bus boycott movement, but, when he was unexpectedly asked in December 1955 to serve as head of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), he quickly transformed a movement for better treatment on segregated buses into a struggle for transcendent goals rooted in prophetic religious ideals and American democratic traditions. In his first speech to a mass meeting, he used a phrase that would later reappear in his “I Have a Dream” speech: “We are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.” He audaciously assured black residents, “when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, ‘There lived a race of people, a black people ... who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights and thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization.’”

As the 381-day boycott approached its successful conclusion, King characteristically recognized the global significance of what had been accomplished in Montgomery. “Little did we know that we were starting a movement that would rise to international proportions,” he said as the MIA hosted a gathering of southern activists in December 1956. The Montgomery movement, King proclaimed, “would ring in the ears of people of every nation ... would stagger and astound the imagination of the oppressor, while leaving a glittering star of hope etched in the midnight skies of the oppressed.” Within a few months of the end of the Montgomery boycott, King would take part in the independence ceremony marking the birth of the new nation of Ghana, where he was exhilarated by crowds shouting “Freedom!” He recalled, “I could hear that old Negro spiritual once more crying out: ‘Free at last, free at last, Great God Almighty, I’m free at last.’” Two years later, he would undertake his “pilgrimage ... to the Land of Gandhi,” where he called upon India to “take the lead and call for universal disarmament.” Thus, King’s global perspective was evident long before he became a Nobel Peace Prize laureate or a vocal critic of American military intervention in Vietnam.

Because King’s decade-long detour from social gospel preaching to civil rights leadership has largely defined his historical significance for many Americans, his great oration at the March on Washington is typically seen as a seminal moment in the struggle for civil rights reform. Most of us who attended the march saw it, at least in part, as an effort to prod Congress to enact President Kennedy’s pending civil rights proposals, but it is notable that King’s speech made no
mention of this legislation. Instead, King emphasized the American democratic and egalitarian ideals evoked in the Declaration of Independence. His reference to the “promissory note” signed by “the architects of our republic” drew inspiration from a long African American tradition of exposing the hypocrisy of white American leaders who had justified their revolution by affirming universal rights even while giving black Americans what King labeled “a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’”

King’s stunning oration at Mason Temple in Memphis on the eve of his assassination in April 1968 reaffirmed his self-identity as a leader expressing a global vision of liberation. After surveying previous great eras of history, he assured thousands of striking Memphis sanitation workers that he would choose to live during the time of their travail, even though, he acknowledged, the world was “messed up” and the nation was “sick”: “Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty and say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy.’” Perhaps sensing that his life was near its end, he reaffirmed the prophetic global vision that had always guided his ministry:

The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee, the cry is always the same: “We want to be free.” And another reason that I’m happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to a point where we are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history. ... And also in the human rights revolution, if something isn’t done and done in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed. Now I’m just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period, to see what is unfolding.

Many people see SNCC and King as quite different in many respects, but, after spending the first two decades of my adulthood in the thrall of SNCC and the next quarter century studying King, I have come to see them as moving along different routes toward similar conclusions. King, like SNCC’s organizers, did not see the passage of civil rights legislation as the end of the struggle. King and most SNCC

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 359.
15 Ibid., 360.
workers did not retire from activism after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act but instead increased the intensity and radicalism of their efforts. They insisted that it was necessary to look beyond the limited civil rights gains of the 1960s toward truly global liberation. King’s radical vision encompassed “the barefoot and shirtless people” of the world, while SNCC workers identified most passionately with the disenfranchised black peasants of the Deep South.

The visionaries of the civil rights movement and of the anticolonial struggles recognized that the acquisition of citizenship rights was a historical achievement that would affect the majority of humanity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most people were still peasants — poor, mostly illiterate, landless agricultural laborers without the basic rights of citizenship, unable to vote and participate in the political life of the country in which they lived. A small minority of these peasants would join revolutionary movements to overcome colonialism and systematic racial subordination, but more often they sought greater freedom and opportunity by leaving the American South to migrate to urban areas, as my mother and father did. A sizeable minority of peasants, including my ancestors, would benefit from the relative freedom of urban life as they struggled to build better lives for themselves and their children. King and other visionaries of the mid-twentieth century understood that these discontented black peasants and urban workers were potential recruits for the successful movements during the decades following World War II to overcome colonialism and the Jim Crow system. But these visionaries also saw that history’s greatest freedom struggle did not end with the overthrow of systems of racial oppression.

The long struggle of peasants and their still-struggling urbanized descendants to improve their lives and to become full citizens was the most inspiring story of the twentieth century. The historical significance of King as well as SNCC is that they identified with those at the bottom of the American social structure and sought to remind those of us who are a few generations removed from peasantry that we have a responsibility to use our skills and resources to assist those who are poor, insufficiently educated, and politically powerless. When SNCC organizer Bob Moses traveled to the Mississippi Delta in 1960 and met with black voting rights activist Amzie Moore, a historic connection was made between a visionary black urban intellectual and a courageous rural grassroots leader. SNCC workers did not initiate the southern freedom struggle, but SNCC’s projects in the Deep South
enabled skilled and dedicated young organizers to connect with the local leaders who were already there. Similarly, when King traveled to Memphis in March 1968 to assist a strike of sanitation workers, another historical connection was made between a visionary black intellectual and black urban labor leaders one or two generations removed from peasantry. SNCC and King spearheaded history’s greatest freedom struggle as it achieved a decisive victory over the American Jim Crow system. Similar historical connections elsewhere in the world overcame colonialism and the South African apartheid regime.

The Voter Education Project, once headed by former SNCC worker John Lewis, used the slogan “The Hands that Once Picked Cotton Now Can Pick a President.” Indeed, one of the great achievements of the twentieth century has been the worldwide transformation of peasants into citizens capable of having a voice in determining the destiny of nations. I imagine that my late mother, who escaped peasantry in the American South, would have been amazed by the victories of the past century and pleased that her descendants have done so well. I wonder whether, in her most hopeful moments, she and others of her generation would have been so audacious or perhaps so sufficient in their faith to imagine that their children would someday participate in a movement to destroy the system of white supremacy that had oppressed them, or would someday incorporate the story of peasants becoming citizens into the narrative of American history, or would witness the inauguration of the son of an African freedom fighter as president of the United States.

The revolution envisioned by King in his last speech in Memphis has not been completed, but it offers a way of thinking about the topic that brought us together in 2013 for the conference that inspired this volume of essays. King’s valiant life and SNCC’s courageous challenge to white supremacy in the Deep South remind us of the large debt we owe to the ongoing liberation struggles of the world’s peasants and to the urbanized descendants of those peasants.

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