Fellowship of Love:
Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy and the renewal of the Labor tradition

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Labor – Lennon or Luther

1968 marked a turning point in the history of America and the wider West. The post-war settlement showed signs of strain as economic reconstruction ground to a halt and the Cold War confrontation began to take its toll. Youth protests and the Vietnam War polarized society and fueled the flames of the culture wars pitting progressive liberals against conservatives. Millions of citizens lost trust in their system of government and politicians, which was exemplified by President Lyndon B. Johnson's fall from grace. With the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and of Robert Kennedy, the Civil Rights movement and the Democrats lost their most visionary voices just when the country turned its back on the New Deal and abandoned the spirit of sacrifice so characteristic of the Second World War and its aftermath.

An alliance of old moneyed classes and new secular educated elites took the Democratic Party away from the very people it had been set up to protect and represent – working-class communities that were proud, patriotic, and often religious.[1] Progressively, the Democrats became dominated by new minority groups, including students, middle-class feminists, public sector workers, and the fast-growing metropolitan professionals working in finance, real estate, and later the nascent tech sector. Over time, this engendered a new politics of economic and social liberalization that drove a wedge between these two sections of society with their diverging economic interests and cultural identity: one fearing the redundancy of its more "communitarian" way of life, the other benefitting from globalization and cosmopolitan diversity. Caught between them is a fast-growing minority ethnic population whose members are either integrated and flourishing, or else segregated and struggling. The death of King and Kennedy robbed the Democratic Party and the Civil Rights Movement of leaders who could transcend some of the deepest divisions along ideological and cultural lines, which continue to beset the labor tradition to this day.

The era ushered in by the events of 1968 changed the political spectrum as both left and right took a liberal turn.[2] First the Democrats embraced cultural liberalism in the late 1960s and then the Republicans adopted economic liberalism in the 1980s. Later the Democratic Party under

[1] Mark Stricherz, *Why the Democrats are Blue: How Secular Liberals Hijacked the People's Party* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007).
[2] See John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016).

Bill Clinton fused the two liberalisms and (to a lesser extent) so too did the GOP when George W. Bush championed "compassionate conservatism." Both parties privileged the banks on Wall Street over the people on "Main Street" and both were seduced by the siren calls of globalization. The domination of the global over the national and the local reflects the triumph of disembedded liberalism over all its ideological rivals. In turn, the convergence of the two liberalisms is reflected in the oscillation between the Republicans as the party of greed and the Democrats as the party of lust, as Rod Dreher has argued.[3]

This is most of all shown by the "New Left," which ever since the late 1960s has rarely pursued a politics of inter-personal solidarity but rather predominantly one of impersonal emancipation. That means always at base the freeing of economy from political guidance and responsibility, and therefore a new mode of enslavement of people by economic avarice, however culturally disguised as a form of "liberation." Such a politics endlessly seeks to show that an overlooked "exception" – of gender, sexuality, race, disability, religion or culture or inclination – does not and cannot conform to a shared norm or pre-given social role. For this reason, the New Left prefers progress to tradition, identity to class, and free choice to inheritance or common purpose.

Cultural liberalism and liberal market economics are mutually reinforcing in ways that undermine both national identity and the wealth of nations as both liberalisms privilege minority politics and favor vested interests. In the early 1990s, Robert Reich, Clinton's secretary of Labor, spelled out some of the implications of this new liberal consensus: "There will be no *national* products or technologies, no national corporations, no national industries. There will no longer be national economies. At least as we have come to understand that concept."[4] Three decades earlier, Bobby Kennedy had already argued that such economistic thinking would reinforce a system of government out of touch with people and their everyday existence. In a speech at the University of Kansas in March 1968, he said that the state of the nation is wrongly judged by gross domestic product:

> It counts air pollution and cigarette advertising; ambulances to clear our highways of carnage; special locks for doors and the jails for those who break them. It does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages […]. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except

[3] Rod Dreher, *Crunchy Cons: The New Conservative Counterculture and Its Return to Roots* (New York: Crown Forum, 2006).
[4] Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st-century Capitalism* (New York: Vintage), p. 3 (original italics).

> that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.[5]

What Kennedy anticipated and Reich articulated was the Democrats' betrayal of the national labor interest in favor of an open-border progressivism. It finds perhaps its clearest cultural expression in John Lennon's song *Imagine*, which asks the listener to imagine that there are no countries at all and to urge that the world would be unified under conditions of peace.

The contrast with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s address 'I Have a Dream' could scarcely be greater. As in his other speeches and writings, King invokes some of America's best traditions to articulate a vision of national renewal that has universal significance precisely because it emerges from a particular place with people bound together by a shared purpose:

> Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy […] now is the time to make justice a reality for all God's children […] We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline […] Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force […] many of our white brothers […] have come to realize that their destiny is tied with our destiny and they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.[6]

King's dream is not the abstract utopia imagined by Lennon but instead a reality that is already actualized (albeit partially and imperfectly) in history – the particular history of the United States and the universal history of humankind's fall and redemption:

> You [King's black brothers] have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive […] I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal […] With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.[7]

At a time of deepening division within and across nations, King's prophetic words and his leadership are a rich reservoir for rethinking and renewing politics. His clarion call that '[i]n these days of worldwide confusion, there is a dire need for men and women who will courageously do battle for truth'[8] has even greater resonance today when truth is either determined by absolute technocratic diktat or denied by post-truth relativism.

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[5] Robert F. Kennedy, address given at the University of Kansas, 18 March 1968, full transcript available online at https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Remarks-of-Robert-F-Kennedy-at-the-University-of-Kansas-March-18-1968.aspx

[6] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'I Have a Dream,' in *A Testament of Hope. The essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), p. 218.

[7] King, 'I Have a Dream,' p. 219.

[8] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Transformed Nonconformist,' in *A Gift of Love: Sermons from* Strength to Love *and Other Preachings* (London: Penguin, 2016), p. 20.

Pastor, Preacher, Prophet

King tends to be remembered as a civil rights leader and a political figure who has been variously labeled a militant conservative or a closet communist, but in reality he was first and foremost a pastor. Born into a family of pastors – his father, grandfather and (maternal) great-grandfather were all black Baptist preachers – King grew up in the confessing tradition of the black churches, an inheritance that binds together his faith, family, and fellowship: "[in] the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my being and my heritage, for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher".[9] Just as the black church tradition had always lived out its unique mission by fusing charismatic preaching with civic action, so too King viewed his priestly vocation as the unifying force of his life: "before I was a civil rights leader, I was a preacher of the gospel. This was my first calling and it still remains my greatest commitment. […] all that I do in civil rights I do because I consider it a part of my ministry".[10]

Ministry is for King about the care of body, mind, and soul in a way that rejects any separation of the material from the spiritual. The unity of existence rests ultimately on the body of Christ as both the *corpus mysticum* of Eucharist trans-substantiation and the source of transformation of the social body:

> the church is the Body of Christ […] it must move out into the arena of social action […] as guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community the church cannot look with indifference upon these glaring evils [segregation and economic injustice].[11]

King's understanding of the church and his ministry grew out of America's dissenting tradition that is as radical as it is conservative – fiercely critical of mainstream American complacency vis-à-vis the apparent banality of evil while equally loyal to the country's best traditions of democracy, freedom, self-government, and the eventual abolition of both slavery and segregation. Conformism was a cancer that had corroded the moral and spiritual backbone of the United States, and King saw himself as standing in the unique tradition of prophetic ministry, which called on all American Christians to be faithful to the country as long the country was faithful to the promise of being what King called "the beloved community."[12]

Fusing the more socially conservative middle-class back Social Gospel tradition with the radical old-time faith found in the slave quarters, King led a crusade against the American conformist betrayal of this promise and in this he was motivated by a quest to overcome both white

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[9] Quoted in *A Gift of Love*, pp. ix-x.
[10] *Ibid*.
[11] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Paul's Letter to American Christians,' in *A Gift of Love*, pp. 142, 144-5.
[12] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Loving Your Enemy,' in *A Gift of Love*, p. 53.

injustice and black fatalism. Citing St. Paul's injunction "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (*Philippians* 3:20), King emphasized vocation and God's calling rather than subjective human will and the illusion of some absolute freedom of choice: "We are called to be people of conviction, not conformity; of moral nobility, not social respectability. We are commanded to live differently and according to a higher loyalty."[13] The command not to conform to the world as it is underpins King's prophetic preaching, and it reflects not simply Paul's opposition to the pagan Roman Empire but also and above all the teachings of Jesus Christ on the fellowship of forgiveness and love – not in the sense of mere emotion but rather as the animating principle of the universe: in King's own words, "when I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality."[14]

King's critique of conformism rests not on idealism but rather on a distinct form of realism (about which later) that underpins his prophecy. There is a striking parallel with Kennedy's words of warning about our failure to focus on what makes life worthwhile: King writes "When an affluent society would coax us to believe that happiness consists in the size of our automobiles, the impressiveness of our houses, and the expensiveness of our clothes, Jesus reminds us, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth"."[15] To choose generosity not greed, ordered desire instead of lust, or the path of conviction rather than that of comfort, King believes that the example of Christ has opened up a new reality and "the love ethic of Jesus [that] is a radiant light revealing the ugliness of our stale conformity."[16] Far from advocating a Manichean moralism of the evil forces of darkness pitted against the forces of light, King's vision is one of fall and redemption in this earthly life. Human beings are equally capable of virtue and vice, and they require both an inner spiritual transformation and a sharing in brotherhood if they are to resist evil and embrace the good. As a Baptist pastor, King preached forgiveness of sins and the need to recognize our own sinfulness, starting with our acquiescence and resignation about injustice. This complicity not only perpetuates oppression and exploitation but it also diminishes our humanity and reinforces our weakness on which evil thrives: "we must learn that passively to accept an unjust system is to cooperate with that system, and thereby to become a participant in its evil [… and it] makes the oppressed as evil as the oppressor."[17]

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[13] King, 'Transformed Nonconformist,' p. 12.
[14] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'A Time to Break Silence,' in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 242.
[15] *Ibid*., pp. 12-3.
[16] *Ibid*., p. 13.
[17] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart' and 'Shattered Dreams,' in *A Gift of Love*, pp. 7 and 98.

Though he was one of the most eloquent exponents of his era, King as a preacher did not limit himself to the injustice of his time – the legacy of slavery, racism, segregation, and senseless war. Bound up with his critique of conformism was his rejection of enduring evil. First, there is always the temptation to limit liberty and bring about new forms of tyranny based on blind conformity with majority opinion, which makes us suspicious of independent thought and leads to the curtailing of civil liberties – an ever-present threat as illustrated by the post-9/11 "global war on terror" and ongoing attempts to censor certain groups in the name of liberal tolerance (as with "safe spaces" and "no platforming" on university campuses or the tearing down of statues). In King's words, "if Americans permit thought-control, business-control, and freedom-control to continue, we shall surely move within the shadows of fascism."[18]

The second temptation is to deny truth and seek solace either in absolutism – of reason, science, or technology – or in relativism and its doctrine of egotism and self-expression as the only principles of validity. In one of the most prescient passages of his preaching, King warns us that "our planet teeters on the brink of atomic annihilation; dangerous passions of pride, hatred, and selfishness are enthroned in our lives; truth lies prostrate on the rugged hills of nameless calvaries; and men do reverence before false gods of nationalism and materialism."[19] The sinister fusion of nationalist with materialist ideologies has been a constant in U.S. and Western history for much of the twentieth century, as with Fascism, National-Socialism and Communism. Now it seems to be true of certain forms of capitalism too – whether the authoritarian state capitalism of China and Russia or the plutocratic market capitalism of the USA, the UK and other parts of the West. This is not to imply any moral equivalence between these different models but rather to heed King's warning that Western traditions are not immune to these threats.

Third, King's critique of materialism applies as much to capitalism as it does to Communism. Much like the Christian socialist R.H. Tawney in the Anglican tradition, King viewed the capitalist system as favoring both inequality based on monopoly power and a "lust for acquisition":

> our unswerving devotion to monopolistic capitalism makes us more concerned about the economic security of the captains of industry than for the laboring men whose sweat and skills keep industry functioning.[20]
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> May it not be that the "certain rich man" [the fool who dies in *Luke* 12:20] is Western civilization? Rich in goods and material resources, our standards of success are almost inextricably bound to the lust for acquisition.[21]

[18] King, 'Transformed Nonconformist,' p. 15.
[19] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[20] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'On Being a Good Neighbor,' in *A Gift of Love*, p. 23.
[21] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'The Man Who Was a Fool,' in *A Gift of Love*, p. 76.

Once more King's words are as prescient about the nature of capitalism as they are true about really existing Communism:

> The misuse of capitalism may also lead to tragic exploitation […] one tenth of 1 percent f the population controls more than 40 percent of the wealth […] If you are to be a truly Christian nation, you must solve this problem. You cannot solve it by turning to Communism, for Communism is based on an ethical relativism, a metaphysical materialism, a crippling totalitarianism, and a withdrawal of basic freedom that no Christian can accept.[22]

King shows how capitalism and Communism are but two sides of the same modern coin that combines materialism with militarism. Both tend to focus on things rather than persons – "machines and computers, profit-motives and property rights are considered more important than people."[23] Whereas capitalism rests on an individualist view of the world, Communism considers human beings as mere cogs in the wheel of the state that – for as long as it lasts – is the end for which individuals are but the means.

Crucially, King's argument is that both systems are false choices that conceal from view the real alternative, which is personalist and social:

> Truth is found neither in traditional capitalism nor in classical communism. Each represents a partial truth. Capitalism fails to see the truth in collectivism. Communism fails to see the truth in individualism. Capitalism fails to realize that life is social. Communism fails to realize that life is personal. The good and just society is neither the thesis of capitalism nor the antithesis of communism, but a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism.[24]

Central to King's critique of materialism is an ontology of immanence that rests on an inherent contradiction between the idea of man as the measure of all things, on the one hand, and man as the outcome of arbitrary physicalist processes, on the other hand. At the same time, such a view of the universe must assume that life is "an interaction of matter and motion operating by a principle of necessity" because no other hypothesis – certainly not the reality of a personal Creator God – can be entertained within the limits of naturalist reason. Connected with materialism is secular humanism with its assumption that social progress is as much a natural necessity as is the law of gravity. Both materialist and humanist philosophies negate the reality of the soul and reduce the mind to the chemical processes making up the physical brain in a manner that sense and signification are now purely natural (determined by biology), or else exclusively artificial (the result of human volition). Either way, such a conception cannot account for phenomena such as love, life, or the dignity of labor that are key to human flourishing.

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[22] King, 'Paul's Letter to American Christians,' p. 142.
[23] Martin Luther King, Jr. 'Where Do We Go From Here?,' in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 629.
[24] *Ibid*.

Reality, Reciprocity, Relationship

King's prophetic critique of cultural conformity and the acquiescence of materialism is not based on an espousal of idealism but rather a certain form of realism that is as metaphysical as it is political. The problem with idealism is its superficial optimism based on a cult of inevitable progress, which ignores the sheer contingency of history and the limits of reason due to sinfulness. This applies in particular to theological liberalism, which for King "had been all too sentimental concerning human nature […] and overlooked the fact that reason is darkened by sin and […], devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations."[25] King's quest for an alternative to the idealism of liberal theology took him on an intellectual journey from neo-orthodoxy via existentialism to a form of realism, of which Jesus' teachings are the prime exemplar – starting with forgiveness and love of our enemies: "[f]ar from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, the command to love one's enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival […] Jesus is not an impractical idealist: he is the practical realist."[26] For King, Jesus' realism is not simply an intellectual alternative to idealism; it is the living reality of divine love, which alone can save us from nihilism: "[…] the highest good is love. This principle is at the center of the cosmos. It is the great unifying force of life. God is love. He who loves has discovered the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality; he who hates stands in immediate candidacy for nonbeing."[27]

By realism King understands not just a metaphysical principle but also a living reality experienced in daily existence just because the creative source of all being is personal and as such can be both known and loved: "I have always believed in the personality of God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life."[28] The experience of a divine loving presence is for King not purely subjective and based on supernatural faith. It can be glimpsed from the relational character of the world and the mutual reciprocity that characterizes life. In one of the most significant passages of his work, King writes that

> In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.[29]

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[25] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,' in *A Gift of Love*, p. 150.
[26] King, 'Loving Your Enemy,' pp. 45-6.
[27] King, 'Paul's Letter to American Christians,' p. 147.
[28] King, 'Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,' p. 157.
[29] King, 'The Man Who Was a Fool,' p. 73.

King's theological realism has echoes with Christian thinkers as diverse as St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, and Edmund Burke. The Augustinian element in King is his emphasis on the reality of evil as the negation of goodness and the corrosion of being: "Christianity […] reckons with evil as a force that has objective reality. But Christianity contends that evil contains the seeds of its own destruction."[30] For King, evil violates the moral laws of the universe, which is governed by God's infinite love for humankind, because it diminishes our humanity and destroys the very sources of life – love and forgiveness that are conditions for human attempts to bring about a measure of justice and peace in a world of oppression, exploitation, and violence.

Linked with this is a Thomist trace in King when he writes that divine love and our love for each other and even for our enemy actualizes the real relationships that help to restore our fallen humanity.

> […] in Jesus' words, "Love your enemies … *that ye may be children of your Father which is in heaven*." We are called to this difficult task in order to realize a unique relationship with God. We are potential sons of God. Through love that potentiality becomes actuality. We must love our enemies, because only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of his holiness.[31]

As King argues, *agape* – not *philia* or *eros* – is both the essence and the energy of the personal Creator God whose kenotic sacrifice has infused a broken world with the creative love that redeems humankind.

This Christian conception of love as the unifying force of reality also informs King's appeal to altruism, which differs fundamentally from any binary understanding opposing it to egotism. Instead, King emphasizes that in the Christian tradition altruism encompasses self-love properly understood precisely because altruism is about sympathy (as for Hume), not pity or empathy (as for Rousseau and the advocates of utilitarian ethics): "[t]rue altruism is more than the capacity to pity; it is the capacity to sympathize. Pity may represent little more than the impersonal concern which prompts the mailing of a check, but true sympathy is the personal concern which demands the giving of one's soul."[32] This resonates with notions of cosmic connectedness that are present in Hume when he speaks of "the coherence and apparent sympathy in all the parts of this world,"[33] which reflects a modern development of ancient and medieval conceptions (drawing on Platonist, Stoic and Hermetic sources) of hidden powers that bind together the cosmos, the body and human society. Crucially, for King, pity dehumanizes us by abstracting from particular needs whereas sympathy helps us to restore humanity in others and in ourselves: "Pity may arise from interest in

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[30] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Our God Is Able', in *A Gift of Love*, p. 106.
[31] King, 'Loving Your Enemy,' p. 52 (original italics).
[32] King, 'On Being a Good Neighbor,' p. 27.
[33] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Hafner, 1948 [1779]), XII, p. 86.

an abstraction called humanity, but sympathy grows out of a concern for a particular needy human being who lies at life's roadside."[34] King's accentuation of sympathy is key to understanding his argument that black emancipation is neither some form of New Left liberation from rootedness nor in diametric opposition to the white community but instead a shared search for the true freedom of all and the quest for "the simple art of living together as brothers."[35]

Finally, King's realism has striking parallels with Burke's focus on mutual obligations rather than individual entitlements as a basis for a just order. While King worked tirelessly for equal rights for the African-American community and other ethnic minorities, he also knew that rights guaranteed by laws are insufficient not simply because their enforcement depends on state power that can deny justice to citizens, but also because they lack a sense of duty towards others. Without ever citing Burke, King adopts a Burkean perspective that differs fundamentally from Kantian categories in that the emphasis is on real relationships, not formal ties: "[…] unenforceable obligations are beyond the reach of the laws of society. They concern inner attitudes, genuine person-to-person relations, and expressions of compassion which law books cannot regulate and jails cannot rectify. Such obligations are met by one's commitment to an inner law, written on the heart."[36] This is close to the following passage by Burke:

> Men are not tied to one another by papers and seals. They are led to associate by resemblances, by conformities, by sympathies. It is with nations as with individuals. Nothing is so strong a tie of amity between nation and nation as correspondence in laws, customs, manners, and habits of life. They have more than the force of treaties in themselves. They are obligations written in the heart. […] The writers on public law have often called this aggregate of nations a *Commonwealth*.[37]

What is remarkable is that the notion of commonwealth is central to King's political theology in the sense that he contrasts capitalist individualism and communist collectivism with the "commonwealth of inpouring contributions," which he describes in strikingly Burkean terms as "a vast treasure of ideas and labor to which both the living and the dead had contributed. When an individual or a nation overlooks this interdependence, we find a tragic foolishness" to which he opposes "mature realism."[38]

In short, King's realism is about a vision of reciprocity and real relationships grounded in the reality of everyday experience and not some the distant utopia of abstract altruism so beloved of the liberal left since Lennon.

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[34] King, 'On Being a Good Neighbor,' p. 27.
[35] King, 'The Man Who Was a Fool,' p. 77.
[36] King, 'On Being a Good Neighbor,' p. 29.
[37] Edmund Burke, 'The first *Letter on a Regicide Peace*' (1796), in Ian Hampsher-Monk (ed.), *Burke: Revolutionary Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 253-334, quote at 316-7.
[38] King, 'Where Do We Go From Here?,' p. 582; King, 'The Man Who Was a Fool,' p. 72; King, 'Where Do We Go From Here?,' p. 598.

MLK's legacy for Labor

Martin Luther King's legacy for the Labor tradition is just the opposite of John Lennon's warm words. Whereas Lennon inspired a generation of left liberals wallowing in a culture of victimhood and a passive politics of protest, MLK bequeathed a vision and a practice of politics that emphasizes sacrifice, resistance, and the transformation of power. King's alternative to Lennon's utopia is based on three closely connected elements: first, new thinking based on perennial principles; second, the making of a leadership capable of forging broad alliances; third, the building of institutions as a means to attain power. Taken together, they provide the basis for a renewal of the left today that the remainder of the essay will develop.

New thinking in ten triads

Perhaps King's greatest intellectual gift is the language and conceptual grammar at the heart of his prophetic teaching. One way to summarize this is in terms of a series of ten triads:

1. Agency, association, and asset
2. Courage, character, and cultural commonwealth
3. Dignity, discipline, and democracy
4. Faith, fellowship, and freedom
5. Head, heart, and habit
6. Identity, integration, and integrity
7. Love, labor, and leadership
8. Mutuality, movement, and maturity
9. Person, power, and purpose
10. Sacrifice, self-interest, and solidarity

Within the scope of the present essay, it is not possible to do justice to all these ideas. But suffice it to say that for King these ideas are 'principled practices' – a governing philosophy that blends guiding principles with concrete action. From family via the Church to the Civil Rights movement, King's life was a shining example of the power of personal *agency* as a rejection of fatalism and as the driving energy for human *association*. His experience as the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association in 1955-56 that led a successful boycott against segregation convinced him that leadership is a personal gift that is best received by being shared with others, so that they themselves may become leaders and participate in the exercise of power. Combining his commitment to democratic socialism, personalist theology, and Gandhian nonviolence, King

founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957 to institutionalize social power as the greatest *asset* of nonviolent resistance and transformation.

In this and his other endeavors, he was inspired by the sheer *courage* of all those who had come before him in the struggle against racial, economic and political injustice – including Rosa Parks whose refusal to abide by the laws of segregation and subsequent arrest King described in Burkean terms:

> She was not 'planted' there by the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], or any other organization: she was planted there by her personal sense of dignity and self-respect. She was anchored to that seat by the accumulated indignities of days gone by and the boundless aspirations of generations yet unborn.[39]

Like Parks, King's example is one of *character* at the service of nurturing *cultural commonwealths* within and across nations that binds people together as citizens, neighbors, friends, colleagues, and brothers and sisters in faith. Central to this are *dignity* as the intrinsic worth of everyone and *discipline* as a means to mitigate human vice and sinfulness that are the sources of conflict. But without power there is no freedom or hope, just as freedom is necessary to people's participation in power. Influenced by Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel teaching on capitalism as a threat to democracy and Christian ethics, King fought for both political and economic *democracy* – including cooperatives, mutualized business, syndical-based unions, socialized banks as well as mixed models of worker and community ownership.[40]

Without economic democracy, political democracy is becoming hollowed out, and that is a lesson the Democrats and other parties in the labor tradition would do well to heed at a time when monopoly power through corporation consolidation destroys open markets and undermines democratic debate that is awash with money.[41] More than half a century ago, King warned that "our unswerving devotion to monopolistic capitalism makes us more concerned about the economic security of the captains of industry than for the laboring men whose sweat and skills keep industry functioning."[42] In other words, missing from capitalism is a proper balance of interest between capital and labor.

Linking together the cultural commonwealths, the polity and the economy is *faith* in a personal Creator God and the possibility of a *fellowship* of love among humankind that balances individual *freedom* with mutual obligation. King was adamant that

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[39] Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Stride Toward Freedom (1958),' in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 424.
[40] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907) and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Abington Press, 1917).
[41] Barry C. Lynn BC, *Cornered: The New Monopoly Capitalism and the Economics of Destruction* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).
[42] King, 'On Being a Good Neighbor,' p. 23.

> there is no separate white path to power and fulfillment, short of social disaster, that does not share that power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity. We are bound together in a single garment of destiny. The language, the cultural patterns, the music, the material prosperity and even the food of America are an amalgamation of black and white.[43]

And by blending self-love with love of others and mutual forgiveness of sins, hitherto bitterly divided communities can come together in a shared quest for justice. That is the paradox of love: "while abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationists. This is the only way to create the beloved community."[44]

Key to building such a community are a tough mind and a tender *heart*, just when our cultural *habit* tends towards being soft-minded and hart-hearted. As King writes, "rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think."[45] This is of particular relevance in our age when political debate oscillates between technocratic facts and post-truth "fake news" while both the left and the right are intellectually threadbare. King insists that soft-mindedness is not limited to politics but extends to religion, leading to dogmatism and intolerance, but in reality faith and science are complementary: "Science keeps religion from sinking into the valley of crippling irrationalism and paralyzing obscurantism. Religion prevents science from falling into the marsh of obsolete materialism and moral nihilism."[46]

Crucially, to be soft-minded is to indulge in complacency and complicity with evil – a dereliction of duty which America and the rest of the West cannot afford. With his prophetic voice, King puts this brilliantly: "The shape of the world today does not permit us the luxury of softmindedness. A nation or a civilization that continues to produce softminded men purchases its own spiritual death on an installment plan."[47] At the same time, tough-mindedness without tenderheartedness slides into a cold, utilitarian instrumentalization of others as means to selfish ends. Therefore, King enjoins us to emulate as far as possible the reality of the personal Creator God in the lived experience of Jesus as a balance of *head* and *heart* that changes bad *habit* – "like H. G. Wells's lovable God in *God, the invisible King* [… who] is toughminded enough to transcend the world; he is tenderhearted enough to live in it."[48]

So at the heart of King's political vision lie the dignity of the person and the dignity of labor. Work is our vocation in this world and, like family and faith, it involves sacrifice and thereby

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[43] King, 'Where Do We Go From Here?,' p. 588.
[44] King, 'Loving Your Enemy,' p. 53.
[45] Martin Luther King, Jr. 'A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,' in *A Gift of Love*, p. 2.
[46] *Ibid*., p. 4.
[47] *Ibid*., p. 5.
[48] *Ibid*.

gives us agency. Through labor we sustain the household and we associate with others to meet needs. Free and democratically self-governed associations are the bedrock of self-government that is vital for a vibrant democracy. This vision provides guiding principles and practices that can help the labor tradition in the USA and across Western countries to renew its intellectual project (purpose), its political project (leadership), and its organizational project (power) at a time when both social-democrats and the socialist left are losing power or struggle to govern in the national interest.

Purpose

Historically, the purpose of the Democrats and their sister parties in the West was to represent the labor interest and to redress the power of capital. Today the left is either on the side of capital or has retreated to a form of protest politics, both of which King anticipated in his day when he spoke of the danger of automation and the powerlessness of militant movements. Even though King's critique of automation concerned industrial capitalism, his defense of labor is just as valid today in the face of automating robots and the rise of Artificial Intelligence.[49] The militant left (including the UK Labour leadership and many continental European hard left parties) favor automation and AI as a liberation from wage labor and they advocate a Universal Basic Income financed by taxing the Big Tech giants as a means for individuals to be and to do what they want. By contrast, work for King is indispensable for people's fulfillment, their contribution to society and in return the source of recognition and self-esteem. Labor is central to an economy and an ethics of reciprocity that binds people together. A Universal Basic Income would weaken social solidarity by handing yet more power to big business and big government.

King's alternative to the devaluation of labor, which entails a loss of financial reward and social status, is to build an economic democracy based on renewing the trade union movement as one embodiment of reciprocity. In the words of King, "as co-workers there is a basic community of interest that transcends many of the ugly divisive elements of traditional prejudice,"[50] which applies as much to racism and segregation then as it does to differences of class and gender or between young and old as well as native and immigrant today. Another element to achieve greater

[49] "Labor today faces a grave crisis, perhaps the most calamitous since it began its march from the shadows of want and insecurity. In the next ten to twenty years automation will grind jobs into dust as it grinds out unbelievable volumes of production. This period is made to order for those who would seek to drive labor into impotency by viciously attacking it at every point of weakness", quoted from Martin Luther King, Jr., 'If the Negro wins, Labor wins (1962),' in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 203. King may have been wrong about the overall impact of technology on jobs, but he was right about the loss of employment in certain sectors and the decline in labor power. Indeed, in 1967, he correctly predicted that "automation is imperceptibly but inexorably producing dislocations, skimming off unskilled labor from the industrial force. The displaced are flowing into proliferating service occupations. These enterprises are traditionally unorganized and provide low wage scales with longer hours", in King, 'Where Do We Go From Here?,' p. 601.

[50] *Ibid*., p. 600.

democratic control over capital is distribution – not just redistribution of income, but above all the distribution of assets by introducing forms of worker- and community-ownership, including in the area of housing. Other examples are paying workers a living wage, creating a high-quality and accessible system of vocational training that gives workers assets in the form of knowledge, skills and vocational ethos, as well as setting up regional banks that distribute capital across the whole economy. Alongside economic distribution is political distribution – the sharing of power by putting workers on company boards and involving workers in the running of public corporations through a tripartite structure (managers/funders, consumers, and workers). King anticipated some of these ideas in his adoption and adaption of Catholic distributism in the tradition of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, which he does not cite but whose ethos he shares: "The dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his own hands, when he has the assurance that his income is stable and certain, and when he knows that he has the means to seek self-improvement."[51]

In relation to purpose, the other main battleground on which the left is currently losing is identity politics. Historically the labor tradition stood for national renewal in solidarity with patriotic workers across borders. But in recent decades the left has repudiated proud patriotism in favor of metropolitan identity liberalism exemplified by students, middle-class feminists, and a new professional class of managers, accountants, and auditors. Common to them is a disdain for the working-class that is socially more conservative and a celebration of open-border progressive cosmopolitanism. Mark Lilla has suggested that "in recent years American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism's message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing."[52] But the problem goes much further than a simply distortion of liberalism. The liberal tradition itself lacks an account of truth and goodness, which it has replaced with a fact-value separation and a set of rights guaranteed by the social contract that regulates humankind's worst instincts of selfishness, greed, distrust of others and a seemingly natural disposition to violence. But such a pessimistic anthropology ends up becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the central state and the free market encourage vice over virtue.[53] Since liberalism assumes incompatible and incommensurable conceptions of the good, it concludes that we must 'agree to disagree' and put in place impartial procedures (as in the Rawlsian model of justice as fairness). Therefore the liberal left is unable to offer a shared vision of the good life.

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[51] King, 'Where Do We Go From Here?,' p. 616.
[52] Mark Lilla, 'The End of Identity Liberalism', *New York Times*, 18 November 2016, available online at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html?_r=0, expanded as *The Once and Future Liberal. After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).
[53] See Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, pp. 13-67.

As the Catholic commentator Ross Douthat hints at, identity liberalism is a reaction against this abstract formalism of procedural liberalism, i.e. ground-rules of fairness instead of a substantive conception of justice. Identity liberalism privileges minority values over majority interests. But neither strand of the liberal tradition will regain popular trust and win majority support, since

> people have a desire for solidarity that cosmopolitanism does not satisfy, immaterial interests that redistribution cannot meet, a yearning for the sacred that secularism cannot answer […]. A deeper vision than mere liberalism is still required — something like "for God and home and country," as reactionary as that phrase may sound. It *is* reactionary, but then it is precisely older, foundational things that today's liberalism has lost. Until it finds them again, it will face tribalism within its coalition and Trumpism from without, and it will struggle to tame either.[54]

Thus, missing from the contemporary left and the labor movement is a politics that can reach beyond either individual or group identity to articulate a vision of national renewal that mobilize new alliances around a sense of shared belonging – family, work, faith, places people inhabit, and love of country.

Leadership

50 years ago, King already grasped this failure of liberalism and he articulated an alternative vision based on satisfying common needs and defending shared interests in pursuit of the common good, which combines individual fulfillment with mutual flourishing as "we are bound together in a single garment of destiny."[55] King's genius was to translate this vision into action and his legacy has much to teach the contemporary left when it comes to its political project (leadership) and its organizational project (power). Flowing from his politics of belonging is an emphasis on building new alliances that can mobilize majority support. Here it is instructive to recall King's opposition to Black Power, which – like Black Lives Matter today – militated in favor of a minority politics that divided the civil rights movement and the African-American community and also prevented progress towards economic justice for all working men and women in the US:

> What is most needed is a coalition of Negroes and liberal whites that will work to make both major parties truly responsive to the needs of the poor. Black Power does not envision or desire such a program. […] To succeed in a pluralistic society, and often a hostile one at that, the Negro obviously needs organized strength, but that strength will only be effective when it is consolidated through constructive alliances with the majority group.[56]

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[54] Ross Douthat, 'The Crisis for Liberalism,' *New York Times*, 19 November 2016, available online at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-crisis-for-liberalism.html

[55] See note 43.

[56] King, 'Where Do We Go From Here?,' p. 586.

Again and again King insists that identity politics is both wrong in principle and counterproductive in practice. By contrast, a politics that emphasizes a shared struggle for greater economic justice is one where minority groups take their place as an equal partner in a common endeavor. Instead of losing autonomy, each group uses their independence for mutually augmenting gains.

Power

For King, this approach marks the difference with the amoral realism of Machiavelli and Hobbes: "I refuse to be driven to a Machiavellian cynicism with respect to power. Power at its best is the right use of strength. The words of Alfred the Great are still true: "Power is never good unless he who has it is good"."[57]

Concrete ways of transforming monopoly capitalism and segregationist politics include participation in the labor movement and in trade unions, consumer boycotts (pioneered by Operation Breadbasket whose action foreshadows community organizing), as well as building new political alliances to change the major parties. As King explains, this is neither utopian in outlook nor marginal in its effect:

> A true alliance is based upon some self-interest of each component group and a common interest into which they merge. For an alliance to have permanent and loyal commitment from its various elements, each of them must have a goal from which it benefits and none must have an outlook in basic conflict with the others.[58]

King's legacy is to show that unless the contemporary left can abandon its support for cartel capitalism and identity politics, there is little prospect of forging a new alliance to win majority support and govern in the national interest. Indeed, he himself recognized that the Civil Rights movement needed to evolve from being a crisis program for explosive events towards being a set of "organizations that are permeated with mutual trust, incorruptibility and militancy. Without this spirit we may have numbers but they will add up to zero."[59] If King was hopeful, it is because he drew inspiration from the inheritance of voluntary, free and democratically self-governed associations built by Black and other communities, as well as the Black churches: "we will create it as we managed to create underground railroads, protest groups, self-help societies and the churches that have always been our refuge, our source of hope and our source of action".[60]

A longer essay would explore some of the limitations of King's political theology, including his reliance on a Weberian dualism between means and ends as well as a lack of engagement with

[57] *Ibid*., p. 592.
[58] *Ibid*., p. 607.
[59] *Ibid*., p. 614.
[60] *Ibid*.

Catholic Social Thought to which his Christian democratic socialism was closer than perhaps he acknowledged. But there is no doubt that his legacy is central to any revival of the labor tradition. Then as now, we are all at sea. At the same time, we live on dry land and are social creatures who are embedded and embodied. King reminds us of our attachment to people, place and common purpose. You could call it a socialism that is as radical as it is conservative. And through word and deed he renewed the promise of the American Dream that remains unfulfilled: "America must be a nation in which its multiracial people are partners in power. This is the essence of democracy."[61]

[61] *Ibid*., p. 589.