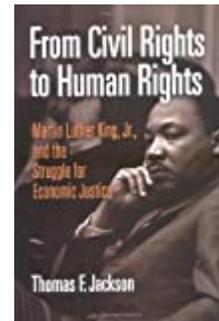


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Thomas F. Jackson. *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 459 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3969-0.



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A Vital New Look at Martin Luther King Jr. and His Place in History Martin Luther King Jr. is perhaps the most revered American of the second half of the twentieth century, an American who, like Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, symbolized for people throughout the world “another America” committed to the struggle for social progress and social justice. This image stood in sharp contrast to the way that many abroad have come to see the U.S, that is, a nation whose cavalry at home and gun boats abroad cleared the way for the “manifest destiny” or “American dream” of limitless wealth and power without social responsibility. King has also been honored in recent years in the United States, even by those who fought against the civil rights movement that he led and today “spin” his teaching to attack affirmative action as “reverse racism” and abandonment of his “dream.” In public schools and through mass media, King is regularly praised as a “great man” who preached and practiced non-violence—the “good” black leader, because he was non-violent, measured against “bad” black leaders, such as Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, and others who are associated with violence. The danger exists that King will become, in the twenty-first century, what novelist Sinclair Lewis cynically called Abraham Lincoln in the 1920s, “the Patron Saint of America,” a symbol to be honored and forgotten. Earlier generations of Americans believed that once slavery had ended noth-

ing more needed to be done to promote racial justice; similarly, will later generations remember King for helping to end *de jure* segregation and conclude that nothing more has to be done? In *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, Thomas Jackson deals with King’s economic social philosophy and the relationship of that philosophy to ideas, ideals, and movements that have been called socialism since the mid-nineteenth century. Unlike most other works (with the exception of Manning Marable’s treatment of King’s socialist leanings in his cogent and brilliant short history of African Americans after the Second World War, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006* [2007]), Jackson suggests that both a socialist analysis of the African American condition and socialist solutions to the larger problem of racism in U.S. society are central to an understanding of King. Jackson’s work, if it is read widely and its insights and evidence “trickles down” into public education, will help students understand King and both the American and global context of events that both influenced him and that he helped to change.

In analyzing holistically King’s economic social philosophy, Jackson helps scholars and students see a much more fully rounded and developed Martin Luther King. Like most successful leaders who challenged powerful establishment forces, he understood that successful po-

litical action is centered on strategies and tactics to both win over and change the political center; that successful actions are worth much more than emancipation proclamations or revolutionary manifestoes; and that successful “pragmatic” politics is always about maintaining both principals and long-term strategies while shifting and adapting tactics to changing conditions. Although the ideas of Mohandas K. Gandhi and the influence of the tactics and strategies of the Indian National Independence movement on King are widely and sometimes ritualistically cited, Jackson connects both the international anti-colonial context of the 1950s and King’s application of internationalism to U.S. institutional racism in a way that others have not. Most biographers of King and historians of the Civil Rights movement have portrayed him as a mass leader, but Jackson shows specifically how King developed a socialist and internationalist oriented ideology and applied it to American conditions. In effect, King became for the mass movement something like a great “center” in basketball (to use a sports metaphor), through which both offensive and defensive action flowed. Others were the practical organizers, the playmakers or point guards. But, without the center, without his ability to absorb punishment and keep the action around him moving, particularly the players without the ball (the masses of African American people and their civil rights movement allies), and the team would fail. Although some historians have stressed the limitations of the Southern based civil rights movement, especially its lack of any program beyond the elimination of *de jure* segregation and the establishment of elemental citizenship rights that northern blacks already enjoyed, Jackson shows clearly that King always viewed economic and social rights as essential components of civil rights. For King, the defeat and destruction of segregation in the South was a necessary condition to the establishment of broad economic and social rights for Northern blacks, other minorities, and the white poor. King’s larger socialist orientation, Jackson shows, led him to understand that racism directed against African Americans both obscured and intensified class oppression. While he always saw himself as a southerner, he pointed to the poverty of the white South which segregation and institutional racism had buttressed. Against those who, in the 1950s and afterwards, saw poverty and public assistance as a “Negro problem,” King answered that it was a much larger social problem, because the great majority of those on public assistance were white. Jackson portrays King both maneuvering politically and broadening his philosophy of economic and social justice into the necessary foundation of both domestic and international peace from the

mid-1950s to his murder in 1968. In the process, he examines King’s relationships with a wide variety of activists and allies, from Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison to John Lewis and James Foreman, in a fresh way. Unlike Taylor Branch and other King scholars, Jackson transcends the Cold War framework of the time which portrayed J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI as an anti-Civil Rights police force (which the evidence supports massively) and Communists and former Communists as either marginal or self-seekers. Jackson shows King as a mass leader who developed bonds with people of the broad left whose experiences in the Communist Party, USA, and other socialist groups and organizations had made them not only skilled and experienced organizers, but coworkers and friends whom he could trust because his larger vision and theirs had much in common, even if their earlier social background, work, and political associations had been very different. Jackson’s framework, as he applies it to the larger political narrative of King’s life and work, helps scholars and students to understand the worldview that King developed as he led the most significant American mass movement in the second half of the twentieth century. This movement whose achievements, however however incomplete, continues is the subject of debate and controversy today on such issues as the enforcement of civil rights legislation, affirmative action, and equal justice under the criminal justice system.

Let me conclude with some interpretive differences with Jackson, which in no way should be seen as negative criticism of this major work. Jackson mentions that King used anti-Communist “cold war liberal” rhetoric to advance the movement, particularly in the early years. As someone whose writing has been associated with the use of that concept, I would not apply it to King, as I and others have to politicians Harry Truman and Hubert Humphrey; labor leaders like Walter Reuther; post-war organizations like the Americans for Democratic Action; and influential intellectuals like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. King certainly maneuvered in a political landscape where the support of the Cold War influenced a wing of the Democratic party; labor leaders like Reuther, who by the late 1950s represented the left of a purged AFL-CIO; and, at crucial times, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. But his vision and even his use of the Soviet Union and the Communist movement as a negative reference group in his rhetoric was very different from theirs. Cold War liberal politicians and labor leaders in the 1950s and 1960s often paid lip service to the New Deal heritage, while they fought the Cold War, managed “economic growth” centered on military spending, and saw

bargaining among the representatives of various interest groups as the basis of an “open democratic society.” In contrast, King used a version of Cold War liberal ideology against its leading practitioners in the Democratic Party. These practitioners said the United States was a “free,” rather than a “totalitarian,” society. King turned their rhetoric against them by insisting that if this were Russia or China he might understand the brutal denial of basic Civil Rights in the South; but in the image of the United States that Cold War liberals claimed to believe in, all of that was intolerable. When they emphasized the need to end segregation to win over the people of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, King said over and over again that we had to end economic and social injustice to be true to our best selves, not as a political ploy to defeat revolutionaries in the Congo. Jackson also uses the term “democratic socialist” to explain King’s economic social philosophy in a way that no one else has in a larger monograph. The analysis of King’s egalitarian, socialist, and internationalist orientation makes the use of this term understandable and an advance over previous work, but it brings with it some baggage when used in the American context. In the 1950s and 1960s, those who called themselves members of a “democratic left” or “democratic socialists” were in effect the left-wing of the Cold War coalition, whom activists in groups like SNCC and SDS rebelled against while they continued to respect King. These were the sort of people who were captured brilliantly in the 1960s satirical song, “Love Me, Love Me, I’m a Liberal.” They wrote for *Dissent* magazine and other publications that criticized U.S. mass society for its consumption and conformity, rather than relating theory to practical politics. Those who defined themselves as “democratic socialists” in the 1950s and 1960s were overwhelmingly white and middle class. They were also ambivalent to the sort of mass action that the civil rights movement revived in the United States. I would call King, like many of the people (black and white) who saw him as both a great man and their most important leader, a “socialist of the heart,” a term used by the distinguished U.S.

historian William Appleman Williams. King believed in and sought to live by the values and ethics of socialism, where personal relations and political ends are merged in the attempt to achieve and live social equality and social justice. Like King and the masses of people who were the civil rights movement, “socialists of the heart” are not sectarian preachers of one position, theory, or party that the call the exclusion of all others. King saw socialism in both egalitarian mass movements and in specific and focused commitments to achieve economic social justice through policy.

Jackson’s work gives scholars and students new insight into the importance of Martin Luther King Jr. to U.S. history and his place in the larger global context. No doubt some will challenge Jackson’s use of his broad definition of socialism as a central factor in understanding King, but the author has made a strong and compelling case. Many have speculated what the postwar world would have been like if Franklin Roosevelt had not died in 1945; similarly, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights* should encourage many readers to think what the United States might have been like if King had not been assassinated in 1968. Were there possibilities (with King continuing to play a leading role to end the cold war with the Vietnam War and fight seriously the war on poverty) to implement policies to eliminate, in deeds rather than words, institutional and ideological racism and sexism, and lead the American people toward a new politics in which egalitarianism, a much higher level of economic and social security, and a democracy based on popular participation, would become realities? Of course no one can answer such questions. But Thomas Jackson has shown that this was the course which King was on when he was assassinated, one very different than the tragic hero using non-violence to fight against all forms of prejudice in a polarizing society which had already largely rejected him. The more widely *From Civil Rights to Human Rights* is read, the more students of U.S. history will both understand Martin Luther King’s philosophy and work to keep his legacy alive.

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