

**“Rethinking the American Dream: Lessons from Martin  
Luther King, Jr’s Notion of Democratic Service”**

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In 1994 the US federal government sought to underscore the importance of serving others to both King's historical legacy and to the democratization of America when it transformed the national holiday in his honor into a day of nationwide service with the passage of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday and Service Act. Differentiating King's holiday from the other two holidays commemorating individuals,<sup>1</sup> the 1994 bill provides an interpretation of who King was, what he stood for, and then calls citizens to collective action based upon his ideas.<sup>2</sup> By labeling this form of collective action "service," the 1994 legislation models the link between critical reflection and action that King worked tirelessly to establish on a national level. In other words, King's notion of democratic service requires that we, as citizens of a democracy, critically reflect upon who we are or want to become as a society, what it is that we most value, and then calls upon us to work together in order to create a society that upholds these values.

King often used the metaphor of the American dream to articulate America's most deeply held values. He consistently called upon his fellow citizens to join him in a critical reflection upon their collective identity in order to force an articulation of their vision of the American dream. King's articulation of the American dream, however, became increasingly radicalized as he came to grips with the fact that it would require a collective effort aimed at completely restructuring American society in order for the least well off to enjoy full citizenship. Although we celebrate King's "dream" we have largely rejected his radicalized notion of the American dream, in favor of a more palatable American dream that Jennifer Hochschild describes as simply referring to the idea that America is a land of promise "where anything can happen and

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<sup>1</sup> The other two being George Washington and Christopher Columbus.

<sup>2</sup> The Corporation for National and Community Service, who was charged by the federal government to lead the effort of encouraging citizens to engage in a day of service, identifies the King holiday as the call "for Americans from all walks of life to work together to provide solutions to our most pressing national problems. The MLK Day of Service empowers individuals, strengthens communities, bridges barriers, creates solutions to social problems, and moves us closer to Dr. King's vision of a 'Beloved Community.'" This content was found on their website at: <http://mlkday.gov/about/serveonkingday.php>

good things might.”<sup>3</sup> The good that could happen is most commonly understood in terms of the market economy, which defines success in the form of earning a high income, securing a good job, and obtaining overall economic security. This watered down version of the American dream is more attractive because it does not require that we interrogate our individual roles in structural injustice. It is, at heart, an individualistic doctrine that, as Hochschild notes, “leads one to focus on people’s behaviors rather than on economic processes, environmental constraints, or political structures as the causal explanation for social orderings.”<sup>4</sup>

For those interested in creating a more just, democratic society the current understanding of the American dream in the public imagination should be very troubling. Particularly, because the term has become so prevalent that it has practically formed “the most immediate component of an American identity,”<sup>5</sup> and yet it elicits very little critical reflection about the role of structures in determining the outcomes of individual’s lives. There appears to be three options open to those who are concerned with correcting structural injustice: first, we can choose to embrace the American dream as it exists in the belief that American society is fundamentally just, and that inequality amongst individuals is the result of a difference between an individual’s talents, traits and characteristics. I take this to be the option that is largely adopted by the GOP, and has been articulated several times over the course of the Republican presidential nomination campaign. The cost of ignoring the role of structural injustice in the lives of individuals has been well documented by leading economists even before the recent Great Recession. The leading economic indicators show that rather than a fundamentally just society, where anyone who works hard can rise out of poverty, America is increasingly becoming an economic caste society;

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Hochschild, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 5.

consequently denying those who are in the lower classes the chance to pursue the American dream.<sup>6</sup>

The second option is that given the prevalence of the American dream, and its centrality to our identity, we should embrace its fundamental commitments to equal opportunity and fair play, but that we should also engage in critical reflection. Upon reflecting, proponents of this option suggest that we will conclude that American society has some flaws. Oftentimes the prescribed remedy to these flaws is for the federal government to tweak a few laws here and there in order to allow for fairer play in pursuing the American dream. I take this to be the basic claims being made by those associated with the Occupy Movement that has recently emerged in various cities across the US. While more promising than the first, this option still falls short of what it will take to make America a fundamentally just society. The first problem with this approach is that, like the first option, despite making certain corrections to the basic structure of society it would still allow for gross inequalities that will, in turn, continue to over-determine an individual's life chances. Secondly, while it temporarily focuses our attention on the basic structure of society, it ignores the role that we, as individual citizens, must continuously play in achieving and preserving justice. In sum, this interpretation of the American dream is still too individualistic. For its goal is to correct the basic structure of society, so that an individual's talents, traits and character alone are the sole determinates of one's outcome. This approach does not call for a continual need for critical reflection by democratic citizens, nor does it call upon democratic citizens to assume a sense of shared responsibility for correcting structural injustice.

The third option which is the approach offered by King in his notion of democratic service is to embrace the American dream, but to radicalize our understanding of it. Rather than viewing the American dream as an uncritical appeal to the status quo, King incorporated it into

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<sup>6</sup> See Paul Krugman, (2005, January 5) The Death of Horatio Alger. *The Nation*.

his notion of democratic service as a means to reshape American society. For King, the American dream became a mechanism by which Americans could articulate their most deeply held values. He then used the American dream to call upon democratic citizens to critically reflect upon how best to uphold these values. Once articulated and reflected upon, the American dream became a means by which King could hold his fellow citizens accountable for not sharing in the responsibility of either upholding the values of the nation or for not doing the work necessary to create the conditions that can nurture these values. Finally, the American dream was a resource to draw upon in order to inspire and sustain the action necessary to uphold these values. And so King incorporated the American dream into his notion of democratic service by requiring that Americans critically reflect upon their identities and then work together to make this dream a reality for all. The goal of this paper is to explore the ways in which King's use of the American dream in light of his notion of democratic service can be a vital tool in our current struggle to correct structural injustice.

It is necessary to place an emphasis upon the link between critical reflection and action because this component of King's notion of service is overlooked by a majority of Americans. For instance, many Americans view the federal holiday honoring King's legacy as little more than a day to encourage others to engage in an act of private, supererogatory volunteerism. While encouraging others to volunteer should be lauded, we, as a nation, run the risk of developing a national understanding of King as championing a notion of private service that merely promotes doing good deeds. The promotion of doing good deeds is helpful in cultivating an admirable ethos of democratic citizenship, but it only captures one portion of King's notion of democratic service. It does not get to the core of King's belief that serving others is a shared responsibility that we all have to create a more just, democratic America.

What is needed, then, is a better understanding of King's conception of service. With a better understanding of King's conception of service, the goal will be to replace the current private, supererogatory notion of service held by many Americans with one that urges a shared responsibility for creating a more just, democratic society. In this paper, I contend that King's notion of democratic service, properly understood, is helpful in our contemporary struggle for democratic justice where the effects of structural injustice are apparent, but the causes prove to be elusive. Ultimately, my claim is that by critical reflection to action in his notion of service, King has provided us with a vital tool in our attempt to cultivate a democratic citizenry that is attuned to the deceptive nature of contemporary structural injustice and is better equipped to carry out the necessary actions of structural reform. A better understanding of King's notion of service is not only necessary in order to accurately honor his legacy, but, more important, it is a key component in our contemporary struggle to create a more just, democratic society.

King is the focus of this paper because he was one of the foremost proponents of the role of service in the proper functioning of a democratic society. For King, service was not just a way of theorizing about politics, but was a necessary way of life for democratic citizens. Turning to King, I believe, will greatly enrich our contemporary discussion about the significance of service to our conception and practice of democracy. In what follows, I begin with a discussion of how King and his wife Coretta Scott lived out the link between critical reflection and action in their personal dedication to service. This is followed by a discussion of how King used the American dream as a means to extend his notion of service from his personal life to the struggle for justice in America. I then show how King's thought expanded to the realm of structural injustice. I conclude by considering how King's use of the American dream in his notion of democratic service could be helpful in thinking about our contemporary struggle for justice.

## Returning South

Several years after making a decision that would carry him and Coretta Scott to Montgomery, Alabama, where they would participate in the black community's boycott of the local bus company, King offered insight into their thought process in his first manuscript *Stride Toward Freedom*. In it King introduced us to the 1950's version of himself as a graduate student who was finishing up his PhD and weighing his career options. He went on the job market deciding between either working in a university or becoming a preacher. He was invited to give several job talks, and at one particular talk he waxed philosophical about the perils faced by modern society. Having impressed the search committee, he was offered the job. Like many young philosophers King continued to develop his critique of modernity. The catch, of course, was that he did not choose to philosophize within the ivy covered walls of a university, or to the north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Instead, at a crossroads in his life, King decided that he could best serve humanity by opting to speak out against the ills of modern society within the stained-glass windows of a church in the heart of the Jim Crow South—a decision that has forever changed the way in which American democracy is practiced.

It is only in hindsight that we can credit this decision as one of the most crucial decisions that King and his newlywed wife Coretta made in helping transform the democratic landscape of America. However, it is also important to keep in mind that King also conveyed this image of himself to us in hindsight. It is telling that the hardback cover of King's first book reads: "A leader of his people tells The Montgomery Story: *Stride Toward Freedom*." While we don't know how much input King had in the wording of the cover, or whether he was even comfortable with it, the one thing that is certain is that King is telling a story. In this sense he is conscious that he is conveying his identity as a leader in the bus boycott by way of narrative to

his readers. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, it is very useful for us to focus in on how it is that King portrayed the story that he was a part of in order to gain an understanding of what it is that he thought it important for him, and those who he sought to influence, to do. For this reason, I pay special attention to the narrative that King lays out in *Stride Toward Freedom*.

King, seemingly uneasy with the spotlight thrust upon his individual efforts in the civil rights movement, would often remind others that even if he had not come along the civil rights movement would have still existed. He was attempting to convey that he happened to be in the right place at the right time, and that he was being pulled along by the *Zeitgeist*. However, in *Stride Toward Freedom* King provided us with a different interpretation of these attempts to deflect attention away from his self. In it he created a narrative that showed that the decision to be in the right place (the South) at the right time (against the backdrop of a fomenting challenge to Jim Crow laws by blacks) was the result of a conscious decision by the Kings to sacrifice their most desired outcomes in order to pursue what they viewed as their most valued outcome—a more just society.

In this narrative King confessed that initially he and Coretta had been wary about returning to the South where both of them had grown up in the throes of segregation. Part of their hesitation was a matter of personal ambitions. Having both attended college in the North they had the chance to take advantage of many opportunities previously denied them in the South. In particular, Coretta was convinced that a northern city would afford her more of an opportunity to

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<sup>7</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 201.

pursue her music career than any city in the South would have. Meanwhile, Martin<sup>8</sup>, whose childhood experiences under the Jim Crow laws had hardened into an abhorrence of the unjust system, saw his impending career decision as a “chance to escape from the long night of segregation.”<sup>9</sup> More importantly to them, as future parents they had to consider whether or not they wanted to provide their future children with a childhood different from their own. This meant a future that was free of the burdens of legal segregation that they would inevitably have to endure in the South.

As Martin recounted his conversations with Coretta, he articulated two competing desires. One set of desires were comprised of the ability to pursue their personal aspirations and to make a better life for their children. The other desire was to live a life of service. After carefully weighing the options, Martin recalled the decisive moment thusly, “Finally we agreed that, in spite of the disadvantages and inevitable sacrifices, our greatest service could be rendered in our native South. We came to the conclusion that we had something of a moral obligation to return—at least for a few years.”<sup>10</sup> While deciding between their competing desires the Kings were engaged in a moment of critical reflection during which they were attempting to articulate what it was that they held most valuable in their lives.

The critical reflection that the Kings were engaging in is what political theorist Charles Taylor calls a “strong evaluation.” According to Taylor’s definition strong evaluations do not just take into account the outcome, but also the “quality of our motivations.” In other words, in the case of strong evaluations we are “concerned with the qualitative worth of different

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<sup>8</sup> I use “Martin” in paragraphs where I also mention Coretta, so as not to confuse the two. Otherwise, “King” is a referent to Martin King.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1958), 21. Hereafter cited as, “STF.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

desires.”<sup>11</sup> Those, who make decisions based solely upon preferences are said to be weak evaluators. Weak evaluators, despite possessing a will and having the ability to reflect and evaluate, lack what Taylor calls depth. The issue of depth is important to Taylor for it signals a level of articulacy about our decisions. As he explains, “Strong evaluation is not just a condition of articulacy about preferences, but also about the quality of life, the kind of beings we are or want to become. It is in this sense deeper.”<sup>12</sup>

Although Taylor does not believe that a strong evaluation is solely about being able to articulate one’s preferences, he stresses its importance in the process of a strong evaluation. For, as Taylor notes, our desires are not simply given; instead: “We give it a formulation in words or images. Indeed, by the fact that we are linguistic animals our desires and aspirations cannot but be articulated in one way or another.”<sup>13</sup> This is because “articulations,” according to Taylor, “are attempts to formulate what is initially inchoate, or confused, or badly formulated. But this kind of formulation and reformulation does not leave its object unchanged. To give a certain articulation is to shape our sense of what we desire or what we hold important in a certain way.”<sup>14</sup>

For the Kings, undergoing the process of a strong evaluation helped them to become more articulate about their desire to return to the South. Upon completion they were enabled to claim with confidence that returning to the South to bring about more just conditions by serving others was a far more superior decision than remaining in the “comforts” of the North. We see that the process of critical reflection helped the Kings reach a new level of depth about the types of people they wanted to become when Martin explained, “The South, after all, was our home.

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, “What is Human Agency,” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985) p. 16. Emphasis in original. Hereafter cited as, “HA.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Despite its shortcomings we loved it as home, and had a real desire to do something about the problems that we had felt so keenly as youngsters. We never wanted to be considered detached spectators.”<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the language of detached spectator is meant to convey a lack of action. Therefore to gain depth, for Martin, meant not only to articulate one’s values, but to act in a way that reflects these values.

Yet, the challenge of moving beyond the role of detached spectator raises the question of whether or not articulation is in any way instrumental to bringing about action. Martin believed that the practice of becoming more articulate about one’s most deeply held values could help one change himself or herself as a necessary first step toward changing their society. This would be especially necessary for the Kings, since their hesitancy to serve in the South was deeply influenced by their past experiences of living under an oppressive Jim Crow regime. Initially, these experiences disallowed them to have an open disposition toward the South, which would have prevented them from moving south to serve. However, according to Martin’s recounting of their decision to move to Montgomery, the process of critical reflection had a profound impact upon Coretta’s outlook. Martin observed, that since Coretta had lived outside of the South since her teens, when they returned to take a visit of their soon to be new city, she “looked at Montgomery with fresh eyes.” The South that she returned to was still governed by the same Jim Crow laws that she had deplored growing up. Despite this fact, Martin noted that although the conditions she lamented in the South had not changed, she had. “And with her sense of optimism and balance...she placed her faith on the side of the opportunities and the challenge for Christian service that were offered by Dexter and the Montgomery community.”<sup>16</sup> Martin was making a link between critical reflection and action by suggesting that Coretta had undergone a post-

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> STF, 23; emphasis mine.

decision evolution, which enabled her to overcome those past experiences that previously would have prevented her from acting.

From his observations about Coretta, we know that Martin was sympathetic to the way in which our environment can place limits on our ability to do the work necessary to change that environment, but that he also had a firm belief that the process of critical reflection could help one overcome the effects of a society. This became instrumental to Martin as a leader in the civil rights movement, when he would consistently encounter audiences who seemingly could not overcome, or even recognize, the stultifying effects of their present conditions. This is why he was able to have compassion for whites who grew up in a racist society that told them that they were superior to blacks and resulted in their discriminating against blacks.<sup>17</sup> Likewise he was also able to have patience for those blacks, who, having grown up in a racist society that sought to deny them political agency, failed to exercise their agency. However, while exhibiting this compassion and patience based upon past experiences he also held both groups responsible for failing to change themselves by engaging in critical reflection. And so Martin's notion of democratic service required that a responsible citizenry consistently engage in critical reflection in order to break hold of their current conditions and cultivate the dispositions conducive to democratic action.

King built upon this notion of understanding and responsibility over the course of his public career. This is especially true in the case of one of his most widely read tracts, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." While King was engaged in a form of critical reflection about the identity of his interlocutors throughout, his ability to be both compassionate and yet hold others responsible is on full display when he turned his attention to the Christian church. In this letter

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<sup>17</sup> Throughout I use "black" and to refer to what King either called, "black," or "negro," and we today would call "African American."

King expressed great disappointment at the church's overwhelmingly timid stance on the injustices faced by blacks in the South. Yet, instead of simply condemning the church, King provided a wonderful model of the process of critical reflection for the church and all citizens to emulate.

King began by questioning the identity of the church. He asked, rhetorically, of the churches he encountered all throughout the South, ““What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?...”<sup>18</sup> After questioning the values of the church he then compassionately extended his love to it: “Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church...”<sup>19</sup> But King seemed to love a particular church, one that did not simply reflect the values of an unjust society. He reminded the current church: “There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”<sup>20</sup> According to King, the church had changed. It no longer critically reflected upon its values, and therefore it was often the “archdefender of the status quo.” Instead of challenging the unjust structures of society that did not comport with its values, King claimed that “the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.”<sup>21</sup> By showing the church both compassion and reprobation King was acknowledging

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<sup>18</sup> King, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *Testament of Hope*, 299. Hereafter cited as “Letter,”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

the ways in which environments can inhibit our recognition of how far we have strayed from our values, but also, how we can get back on track by way of critical reflection.

By analyzing the role of service in King's private life we are now prepared to gain a better understanding of how the Kings' process of critical reflection and action was the foundation of what Martin would later do as a leader in the civil rights movement. In the next section, I discuss how King used the American dream as a means by which he would seek to awaken the nation to action on behalf of the most vulnerable populations.

### **The American Dream**

The importance of the American dream idea to King's notion of democratic service cannot be overstated. It is present in some variation throughout his entire public career from his first address as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association to his last sermon delivered in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968. However, it does not remain unchanged from his first iterations to his last. The American dream served several functions in his various speeches, and it will be worth taking a look at how King used it in his quest for a more just, democratic society so that we may be able to draw upon it in our own present struggles to correct structural injustice. The theologian James Cone provides one of the most thorough accounts of what it is that King meant when he invoked the American dream in his work *Martin and Malcolm and America*. To gain a better understanding of how King used the "American dream" to encourage democratic service it will be helpful to take a look at Cone's account.

According to Cone, King's use of the American dream was derived from the "liberal democratic tradition, as defined by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and the biblical tradition of the Old and New Testaments, as interpreted by Protestant liberalism and the

black church.”<sup>22</sup> King used the Declaration of Independence, in particular, says Cone, “in order to challenge Americans to implement the idea of freedom that existed from the beginning of the nation.”<sup>23</sup> In regards to audience, Cone argues that King’s articulation of the American dream “was primarily for the white public.” He contends that King “wanted to prick their consciences and motivate them to create a society and a world that were free of racial discrimination.”<sup>24</sup> Later, he acknowledges, “Although blacks were not the primary audience for his addresses on the American dream, King believed that they also had a large role to play in its realization. Unlike whites, blacks did not have to be convinced that America reneged on its promise of freedom to its citizens of color.” While this observation might have some truth to it, Cone perhaps goes too far when he claims that all blacks “knew from personal experience what it meant to be insulted, kicked in the seat of the pants, and spat upon by white people. What they needed was to be inspired and taught the most effective way, morally and practically, to fight for justice.”<sup>25</sup> Despite his overstatement Cone provides us with a good starting point for understanding King’s use of the American dream as a tool in his quest for correcting structural injustice—albeit with a little tweaking.

For starters, as we will see, King’s use of the American dream was to achieve not only freedom for black Americans, but also equality. Secondly, it is not entirely clear that King’s use of the American dream was primarily for white audiences. We should be more suspicious of this statement given the fact that King’s use of the term in the two speeches that Cone, himself, singles out—“The Negro and the American Dream” and “The American Dream”—were delivered before predominately black audiences. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is

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<sup>22</sup> Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America*, p. 66.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 69.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

more important to focus on Cone's identification of the multiple functions that the American dream served for King, despite the race of his audience.

King's use of the American dream served four primary functions: as a means to articulate values; as a yardstick by which to critically evaluate America's commitment to those values; as a basis upon which to hold Americans responsible for enacting those values, and, finally as a resource to inspire and sustain action. It will be helpful to examine some of King's speeches and writings in which the American dream is a prominent component in order to see his use of the idea and its evolution over time. For starters, we should consider one of King's most explicit early uses of the American dream. In 1961 King delivered an address to a group of young men who were set to embark on a path beyond their academic institution of Lincoln University fittingly titled, "The American Dream." King began this speech by engaging in a public articulation of American values. In this commencement address he referred to America "as essentially a dream." The dream, according to King, can be found in the values contained in the Declaration of Independence—that every human being was equal and that they all have God-given human rights. King summarized these values by noting that, "[t]he American dream reminds us that every man is heir to the legacy of worthiness," and should therefore be treated with equal respect.

After King articulated these values, he then began to critically evaluate America's commitment to them by drawing upon Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma*. King used Myrdal to argue that instead of upholding these values white Americans were schizophrenic when it came to extending equality and human rights to black Americans. "On the one hand we have proudly professed the principles of democracy, and on the other hand we have sadly practiced the very antithesis of those principles." He continued, "Indeed slavery and segregation have been

strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal.”<sup>26</sup> Once King laid out these values, and America’s failure to uphold them, he then challenged the young men to take up the responsibility of carrying out the action of serving humanity. King said, “...I believe that we will be able to make a contribution as men of good will to the ongoing structure of our society and toward the realization of the American dream.” Invoking the same language he used to describe his and Coretta’s decision to move South, King implored the graduating class, “And so, as you go out today, I call upon you not to be detached spectators, but involved participants, in this great drama that is taking place in our nation and around the world.”<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to note that in his “American Dream” speech King does not draw upon the idea as a resource in the struggle. One plausible reason could be the great optimism that King possessed during this period, which, as Cone points out, had a lot to do with his not having participated in any major campaigns since the success of the Montgomery bus boycott.<sup>28</sup> However, by the end of 1961 King got involved in the Albany movement and we can begin to track a subsequent change in his use of the American dream. In an address that King delivered before the National Press Club in 1962, he started by citing the fact that he recently was convicted for participating in a march that protested the segregated conditions in Albany, Georgia and that he was assessed a fine. King consciously objected to paying the fine, but to his surprise a “mystery donor” paid the fee for him. King, of course, often went to jail to dramatize the deplorable conditions that black Americans were forced to deal with every day in the South. To King, the fact that the fee was paid to kick him out of jail was evidence that white Americans were determined to find any way to stall the push for full integration. The early part of the

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<sup>26</sup> King, *American Dream*, in *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James Washington (New York, Harper Collins Paperback Edition, 1991), pp. 208-209.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 215

<sup>28</sup> See Cone, 80-81.

speech is then dedicated to articulating the need for integration and also to a critical evaluation of whether true progress was being made on this front.

King argued that the South was not moving any closer to any real form of integration; instead, he warned, that the greatest danger facing those concerned with achieving full justice for black Americans was “institutionalized tokenism.” He observed, “Many areas of the South are retreating to a position which will permit a handful of Negroes to attend all-white schools or the employment in lily-white factories of one Negro to a thousand employees.” King’s diagnosis of the situation was that America had “advanced in some areas from all-out unrestrained resistance to a sophisticated form of delay embodied in tokenism.”<sup>29</sup> While King’s attention was largely focused on the struggle for racial justice in the South he was adamant that “no section of our country can boast of clean hands in the area of brotherhood. Segregation may exist in the South in overt and glaring forms, but it exists in the North in hidden and subtle forms. Housing and employment and discrimination are often as prominent in the North as they are in the South.”<sup>30</sup> King argued that America could not fully uphold its values if citizens simply relied on new government laws to be enacted. What was needed was for individuals to take up their share of responsibility in conjunction with the enactment of new laws. King explained that those who have committed themselves to engaging in action “recognize that legislation and court orders tend only to declare rights; they can never thoroughly deliver them. Only when people themselves begin to act are rights on paper given lifeblood. A catalyst is needed to breathe life experience into a judicial decision by the persistent exercise of the rights until they become usual and ordinary in human contact.”<sup>31</sup> Here we see King expanding his notion of shared responsibility beyond the idea that democratic citizens should pressure government officials to

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<sup>29</sup> King, “An Address Before the National Press Club,” p. 100

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 102.

enact laws that were necessary to protect citizen's rights, toward the idea that citizens also had a continued obligation to exercise those rights.

King's expansion of shared responsibility was partially a practical argument. The logic of the practical argument is that if black Americans are only granted rights on paper, but they are not allowed to exercise them, then this is no right at all. However, King is also making an argument for active participation as a central component of democratic citizenship. He first introduced his call for active participation in his initial address as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. In explaining why it is that the black community of Montgomery decided to come together to protest the bus lines he said, "We are here in a general sense because first and foremost we are American citizens, and we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning." Applying citizenship to the fullness meant becoming active democratic citizens who exercised their "right to protest for right." For King, active participation of democratic citizens was the safeguard of liberty not merely negative rights written in the law books. To emphasize this point, King claimed in the very next sentence, "We are here also because of our love for democracy, because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth."<sup>32</sup>

Active participation for an oppressed population required inspiration, and King needed to find a resource to draw upon to motivate citizens to remain active. Unlike his glowingly optimistic "American Dream" speech, King did not start out his address to the National Press Club by announcing that the rights that he was speaking of were articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Instead he invoked the American dream at the end of his speech in order to use it as a resource to inspire and to sustain those working to make America more just. However, this is not the first time King has invoked the American dream in this fashion. We can see another

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<sup>32</sup> Holt Street.

parallel between King's address before the National Press Club and his initial address as the president of the MIA. As he prepared to wrap up the latter speech, he told the audience that they will have to collectively "work with grim and bold determination to gain justice." He followed this call to action by giving them an injection of motivation by assuring those in attendance that justice was on their side. King's claim was rooted in the belief that they would eventually persevere since all that they were attempting to do was exercise the rights extended to them by the Supreme Court and the Constitution of the United States."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in his 1962 address, after confessing to his audience that a great struggle for justice lay ahead, King assured them that they, too, would prevail because justice was on their side. "We feel that we are the conscience of America—we are its troubled soul—we will continue to insist that right be done because both God's will and the heritage of our nation speak through our echoing demands."<sup>34</sup> By the "heritage of the nation" King, of course, was referring to the American dream, which he said they were "simply seeking to bring into full realization."<sup>35</sup>

But bringing the American dream into full realization had broadened beyond the principles embedded in the Declaration of Independence. In fact, King does not even make reference to the Declaration; instead, he adds the following new values to equal respect and equal worth: "equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed..."<sup>36</sup> King was making the case that in order to secure the necessary conditions of freedom and equality for all of its citizens the American dream needed to move beyond the vague notion of equal opportunity to a more substantive form of equality that took into account the fact that white Americans enjoyed a privileged status in society in reference to black Americans. Notice, however, that

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<sup>33</sup> Holt Street.

<sup>34</sup> National Press Club, 105.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

King stops short of calling for the equal distribution of property, opting instead for the demand that property become more widely distributed. King never calls for equal distribution of all property, but, as we will soon see, he does make demands for the universal provision of certain forms of property such as housing and income.

By the time King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech a year later, he had just participated in another major campaign in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. In Birmingham, King got a first-hand look at the lengths that the likes of Eugene “Bull” Connor<sup>37</sup> were willing to travel in order to preserve segregation. However, he also got to see the power that non-violent direct action could have in breaking the back one of America’s most thoroughly segregated cities. The speech that he delivered before a largely integrated audience during the 1963 “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” reflected both the sobering reality of the racists’ intransigence and the promise of direct action’s ability to transform structures of injustice.

One first glimpses King’s dual outlook by noticing the different openings he used for the “American Dream” speech and the “I Have a Dream” speech. In the former speech King began by drawing upon the Declaration of Independence, but, in the latter he opened by drawing upon the Emancipation Proclamation. While King may have had symbolic reasons for opening with the Emancipation Proclamation—the speech was delivered during the 100th year anniversary; and the location of the speech was at the Lincoln Memorial—it was the way in which he drew a contrast between that great historical moment, and the condition of black America in 1963 that highlighted King’s dualism of optimism and realism. For King it was the great promise of freedom in Abraham Lincoln’s executive order that provided a “great beacon light of hope” to

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<sup>37</sup> The Public Safety Commissioner of Birmingham, Alabama, who famously ordered that water hoses and police dogs be used as a means to forcibly break up “illegal” protests to integrate Birmingham.

millions of African-American slaves. But, he then chastens this moment of soaring optimism with the crushing reality faced by the ancestors of those slaves:

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free; one hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination; one hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity; one hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his land.<sup>38</sup>

King's use of the refrain "one hundred years later" was no mere rhetorical device, for time was an important facet of King's political thought. In 1957 King's first major address before the nation was also delivered at the Lincoln Memorial. Here King made a passionate plea for the federal government to take up the civil rights issue, and warned that the "hour is late. The clock of destiny is ticking out. We must act now, before it is too late."<sup>39</sup> Six years later King again stood before the nation, but this time he declared that time had finally run out. In contrast to his "American Dream" speech, King's articulation of America's values contained in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, were not described as a dream yet unfulfilled; they had now become a "promissory note," to all of its citizens. The imagery of the promissory note enabled King to make the case that so much time had elapsed without America making good on this promise, that it must be concluded that the nation had "defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned."<sup>40</sup> America, in essence, had issued black Americans a "bad check." Unlike checks that bounce because of a lack of sufficient funds in one's account, King argued, that America had simply refused to honor their promise.

King's move from a dream unfulfilled to America's refusal to honor its promise is a seismic shift with great implications. It shows that King was shedding his liberal optimism that

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<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr, "I Have a Dream," in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 217.

<sup>39</sup> "Give us the Ballot—We Will Trasnfrom the South," 199

<sup>40</sup> "I Have a Dream", 217.

he possessed in his “American Dream” speech where he described the gulf between what America proclaimed and what it practiced as “strange paradoxes.” By using the check metaphor, King meant to highlight the fact that white America was guilty of intentionally denying black Americans their full rights as citizens. King’s coming to grips with the reality of how unwilling white Americans were to part with their position of privilege over blacks was intimated in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” which was written a few months prior to his “I Have a Dream” speech. In it he lamented, “I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action.”<sup>41</sup> But King had not lost all hope; he believed that, although guilty of defaulting, it was not too late for white Americans to make good on the American dream. This is evidenced in his claim that the marchers had “come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”<sup>42</sup>

In a pattern that the reader should recognize by now, King then called upon citizens to take up their share of responsibility in making America more just. He once again acknowledged that many of them had endured “excessive trials and tribulations,” and that many more lie ahead. It is here, at the nadir of his speech, that King eschewed his prepared remarks and drew upon a familiar resource—the American dream. “So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, 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.”<sup>43</sup> After rattling off a concatenation of manifestations of his dream, King explicitly appealed to the American dream

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<sup>41</sup> “Letter,” 298.

<sup>42</sup> Dream, 217.

<sup>43</sup> Dream, 219.

for sustenance: “This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with.” But the American dream was not just to sustain him, it was to sustain everyone: “With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”<sup>44</sup>

The hope with which King ended his “Dream” speech would be soon be put to the test. Two weeks after the “March on Washington,” a bomb blast killed four young, black citizens of Birmingham. As might be expected King struck a different chord from his speech just two weeks earlier; but not in the obvious manner. During his “Dream” speech he had no qualms about calling white Americans guilty for their trespasses against black Americans, but remained hopeful. During his eulogy, one would have been justified in anticipating that King might have taken the opportunity to not only blame whites for their complicity in the murder, but to finally admit that their intransigence was too much to overcome. Instead, King shifts the blame away from individual wrong doers to a macro focus on systemic wrongs. Discussing lessons learned from the deaths of the victims King instructed, “They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about *WHO* murdered them, but about the system, the way of life and the philosophy which *PRODUCED* the murderers.”<sup>45</sup> King was teaching his fellow citizens that their critical reflection must broaden to the level of analyzing their role in systems of injustice. King then tied this new form of critical reflection directly to action, and the American dream. For, in the very next sentence he continued, “Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly to make the American dream a reality.”<sup>46</sup> In the next section I will explore how King’s use of the American dream in his notion of democratic service demanded that citizens

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Eulogy, 221

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

critically reflect upon their roles in structural injustice, and held them responsible for working to make America more just.

### **Social Responsibility and Structural Injustice**

In recent years there has been a misrepresentation in American public discourse that King's use of the American dream is synonymous with the way in which we commonly invoke the "American Dream" today. An example of this can be seen with the many proud declarations that King's dream has finally been fulfilled with the election of the US's first African-American president. What those who make this claim typically mean is the fact that a person of color has reached the highest political office is proof that America is a fundamentally just nation in which all individuals possess freedom and are treated equally. By freedom they mean that there are no legal barriers oppressing individuals and by equal they mean that all citizens are equal before the law. Holders of this view, appear to be on strong footing, as they point to King's "I Have a Dream" speech in which he claimed that he had a dream that was rooted in the "American dream." In particular they highlight a sentence toward the end of his speech in which he said, "I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."<sup>47</sup>

Yet, as we have seen in the last section, King was slowly broadening his understanding of equality beyond the basic claim for equality of opportunity to a more substantive form of equality that included equality of privilege and that property be widely distributed. And while King would have certainly acknowledged that a black American reaching the highest political office is evidence that many legal barriers have been removed in their quest for freedom, we should not lose sight of his warning in 1962 that the greatest danger facing those concerned with achieving justice for black Americans was "institutionalized tokenism." However, as the 1960's

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<sup>47</sup> I Have a Dream, 219.

wore on, and as many of the legal barriers to justice were removed King became greatly concerned with what he called structural injustice. Those who claim that King's use of the American dream is synonymous with the way in which we have come to use the American dream in our popular discourse fail to recognize King's critique of any notion of the American dream that denies the role of structures in determining an individual's life chances.

King began his final manuscript *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* by recounting the day President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Bill of 1965 into law. Before a joint session of Congress, Johnson declared, "Today is a triumph for freedom as huge as any victory that has ever been won on any battlefield." Stressing the importance of the victory Johnson differentiated between those who came to America in pursuit of what we, today, would call the American dream and blacks, who were brought against their will. The former group pursued the dream by mingling "fear and joy, in expectation that in this New World anything would be possible to a man strong enough to reach for it." Blacks, however, arrived in the Americas under very different circumstances; "they came in darkness and they came in chains." In spite of their bleak past, he assured Americans that with the signing of the bill "we strike away the last major shackle of those fierce and ancient bonds." In essence, he was suggesting that black Americans were now free to pursue the American Dream when he proclaimed, "Today the Negro story and the American story fuse and blend."<sup>48</sup> It is telling that Johnson did not suggest that at this grand moment in American history that the stories of white and black America were now fusing together. Instead, he acknowledged the racialization of America as white, and blacks as the other who were to be absorbed into the white structure.

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<sup>48</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks on the Signing of the Voting Rights Act." (August 6, 1965). Retrieved from <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4034>

King chose this moment as a starting point for his final book because he interpreted Johnson's overtures as being essentially an offer for blacks to integrate into an oppressive structure. This is because despite the extension of civil rights to black Americans, white American's had been unable to shake their commitment to racial hierarchy. King observed that from slavery to Jim Crow to the post-civil rights era white Americans had claimed an allegiance to liberal democracy's principles of liberty and equality for all while denying them to their black counterparts. King emphatically declared that "it is necessary to refute the idea that the dominant ideology in our country even today is freedom and equality while racism is just an occasional departure from the norm on the part of a few bigoted extremists."<sup>49</sup>

King was not suggesting that each individual white American was a racist committed to the oppression of black Americans. In fact, he seemed to imply that many white Americans were bolstering this oppressive structure unknowingly. He observed, "The majority of white Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro. They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and to steady growth toward a middle-class." But, he dismissed out-of-hand whites' belief in the truth of these claim as a "fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity." Whites were deluded, according to King, because there is "not even a common language when the 'term' equality is used. Negro and white have a fundamentally different definition."<sup>50</sup> For blacks equality meant complete social, political and economic equality. For whites, on the other hand, "equality [was] a loose expression for improvement."<sup>51</sup> And seeing as how the black American's definition of equality was one of substantive equality, white Americans took comfort in affirming mere equality of opportunity. In the end, King offered a damning assessment about the gulf between the blacks' concept of full

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 69.

<sup>50</sup> King, "Where," p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

equality and whites' commitment to status quo gradualism: "White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap—essentially it seeks only to make it less painful and less obvious but in most respects to retain it."<sup>52</sup>

King argued that a true commitment to justice would require that whites "assume guilt for the black man's inferior status," and to redouble their efforts to eradicate oppression. To reiterate, King was not suggesting that all whites as individuals were racists. Rather, he charged that whites were guilty because they participated in the structures of injustice that privileged some (whites) and prohibited others (blacks) from flourishing. While acknowledging guilt is a backward looking process, he also wanted members of society to be forward looking by assuming responsibility.

King's demand that whites assume responsibility for blacks' inferior status since they participated in structures of injustice marked the complete shift that he made to engaging in critical reflection on the systemic/structural level. We first got a glimpse of this shift in 1963 when King, in his eulogy for the victims of the church bombing, tried to shift society's concern away from the question of who murdered the victims toward a macro inquiry into what produced the hateful conditions that could lead to such heinous crimes. In 1965 he applied this structural gaze to matters of injustice when he said of the typical black, northern, ghetto resident, "He remains throttled, as he has always been, by vague, intangible economic and social deprivations."<sup>53</sup> King was not suggesting that the northern, ghetto resident did not feel the effects of deprivation; rather, that the causes of this deprivation are vague in ways that they weren't for southern blacks. Understood in this way, these intangible deprivations that King described call to mind Iris Marion Young's description of contemporary manifestations of structural injustice,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> *Playboy* interview, in *Testament of Hope*, 362.

which she says often are not “the wrongful action of an individual agent or the repressive policies of a state.” Instead, she explains, “Structural injustice occurs as a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting to pursue their particular goals and interests, for the most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms.”<sup>54</sup> What Young is trying to get us to see is that the nature of structural injustice today is such that as members of society we are all participants in the social processes that create unjust conditions for others. Consequently it is all of our responsibility to do the work necessary to correct structural injustice.

With this understanding of structural injustice King was advocating a notion of responsibility that required a shift away from a question of who is responsible for structural injustice, to an understanding of the responsibility that we all have in correcting this form of injustice. King’s notion of democratic service is helpful in our contemporary moment because it holds that it is all of our responsibility to engage in critical reflection and then to collectively work to correct structural injustice. The reason that we have to engage in critical reflection is because the elusive nature of structural injustice challenges us to become attuned to a form of structural injustice that has devastating effects, but the causes of which are not always readily apparent. This will require that we articulate the values that we would like to uphold as a society, and then begin to act in ways that will bring about this society even if it means working to change our behavior and the behavior of others.

### **The American Dream and Democratic Service for our Contemporary Moment**

King, even in his final book-length manuscript, still appealed to the American dream in his attempt to get America to engage in critical reflection and subsequent action. He does this by comparing America to a character in one of Jesus’ parables—the prodigal son. In this parable Jesus tells a story of a young man who comes of age and decides to leave his father’s house in

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<sup>54</sup> Young, 52

search of adventure, but the farther he moved away from the house the more he met with despair. The young man eventually ran out of money, and became so desperate for food during a famine that he sought a meal in a pig's trough. One day the young man came to his senses and realized that he must return to his home. In King's words, "The prodigal son was not himself when he left his father's house"; the young man would only become himself when he returned home.<sup>55</sup>

For King, America was the prodigal son who had drifted to the "far country of racism," and who had left behind a home that was "solidly structured idealistically." Referring to the values that compose the American dream, King lamented, "Its pillars were soundly grounded in the insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage: all men are made in the image of God; all men are brothers; all men are created equal; every man is heir to a legacy of dignity and worth; every man has rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state, they are God-given." King continued to affirm his belief that it was not too late to make democracy a reality for all. "If America would come to herself and return to her true home, 'one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,' she would give the democratic creed a new authentic ring, enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men."<sup>56</sup>

Despite finding America's racism appalling and unjustifiable, King was equally as concerned about those who inhabited the bottom rungs of the socio-economic ladder no matter what color their skin happened to be. King ultimately concluded that if America was to return home to the just, democratic nation that upheld the principles of liberty and equality for all, all American citizens would need to engage in critical reflection and share in the responsibility of upholding their values.

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<sup>55</sup> King, "Where," p. 83.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 84.

King explicitly laid out this process of critical reflection: “As a first step on the journey home, the journey to full equality, we will have to engage in a radical reordering of national priorities.” The way to do this was simple; we must first ask ourselves, “Are we more concerned with the size, power and wealth of our society or with creating a more just society?” King firmly believed that without reordering society’s priorities the nation would become engulfed by “a withered sense of justice” that would be so pervasive as to lead to the “corruption of the lives of all Americans.” King observed that this had already had a numbing effect upon the way that Americans look upon the plight of their peers. “All too many of those who live in affluent America ignore those who exist in poor America; the affluent Americans will eventually have to face themselves with the question that Eichmann chose to ignore: How responsible am I for the well-being of my fellows?”<sup>57</sup>

Answering questions about one’s responsibility to one’s neighbor is a painful process. This is because assuming responsibility for ones neighbor may require that we act in a way troubles values that we previously thought of as sacrosanct. For instance, King believed that if we truly value the equality of all citizens then we may have to temporarily violate those values that make up our contemporary understanding of the American Dream:

It is...important to understand that giving a man his due may often mean giving him special treatment. I am aware of the fact that this has been a troublesome concept for some liberals, since it conflicts with their traditional ideal of equal opportunity and equal treatment of people according to their individual merits. But this is a day which demands new thinking and the re-evaluation of old concepts. A society that has done something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special *for* him, in order to equip him to compete on a just and equal basis.<sup>58</sup>

King also thought that when we begin to engage in critical reflection about structural injustice, it would cause us to rethink much of our market-driven moralism. King dismissed this form of moralism, which is a central feature of our contemporary understanding of the American

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<sup>57</sup> King, “Where,” pp. 85-6.

<sup>58</sup> Where, 90; emphasis in original.

dream as a relic of a bygone period when he said, “At that time economic status was considered the measure of the individual’s abilities and talents. In the simplistic thinking of the day the absence of worldly goods indicated a want of industrious habits and moral fiber.” King believed that even in the 1960s we had enough evidence to “realize that dislocations in the market operation of our economy and the prevalence of discrimination thrust people into idleness and bind them in constant or frequent unemployment against their will.”<sup>59</sup> With an understanding of the way the market economy unjustly pushes some down the socio-economic ladder he stressed “Our economy must become more person-centered than property and profit-centered.”<sup>60</sup> Yet, five decades later we have yet to fully acknowledge what King viewed as the fool heartedness of the market-driven morality that underscores our contemporary notion of the American Dream. Consequently, the status quo remedies to our global recession and many of the alternatives proposed deemphasize the role of social responsibility in the lives of individuals, and instead stress the need to create an economic structure more responsive to individual responsibility.

King argued that if Americans truly wanted to secure justice for their fellow citizens then they would seek to provide them with the basic means to survive. Furthermore, he argued, in a nation with as large of a wealth gap as that which existed and currently exists in America, citizens would need more than their basic needs covered in order to have an adequate sense of self-respect. For this reason, King made a demand for a national income that was not to be based upon the lowest possible income, but one that was pegged to the median income. It was also to be dynamic, meaning that it would not remain stagnant, but would rise as the total national income grows. Cognizant that self-esteem does not stem merely from receiving income, but also from engaging in meaningful work, King also called upon the federal government to create full-

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<sup>59</sup> Where do we go, 162-3.

<sup>60</sup> Where, 133.

employment. But even in his proposal for full-employment King did not embrace the notion that the only meaningful jobs are those that contribute to the market economy. Instead, he challenged the government to create “[n]ew forms of work that enhance the social good will...for those for whom traditional jobs are not available.”<sup>61</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting that while King believed it was everyone’s responsibility to work for social justice he stressed the need for those who were oppressed to take action on their own behalf. This means that King’s notion of democratic service was not merely a theoretical exercise in ideal theory, or a passive call for government handouts; it demanded action. As we saw with the 1963 March on Washington, King believed that even those who are marginalized and powerless can serve as a catalyst not only to articulate values, but to change them. Consequently, in his final manuscript, King implored of blacks seeking justice: “Let us, therefore, not think of our movement as one that seeks to integrate the Negro into all the existing values of American society. Let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humaneness.”<sup>62</sup> King was not making an essentialist claim for blacks as the redemptive population; he just recognized that as an oppressed people, they would need to exercise the meager power they had at their disposal.

King concluded that the oppressed had a responsibility to study the levers of power, and to consistently challenge them. “In our society power sources are obscure and indistinct. Yet they can always finally be traced to those forces we describe as ideological, economic and political.”<sup>63</sup> In the case of economic power King called upon blacks to boycott companies that exploited black Americans and to pool their money in banks that invested in black communities. In the

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<sup>61</sup> Where, 163.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 138.

case of political power, King called upon blacks to exercise their right to vote, and to form political organizations that would remain consistently active in supporting an agenda that would help secure justice for black Americans. But how could blacks possibly battle such a seemingly elusive target as ideological power? King acknowledged the limited influence black scholars had been able to exert on mainstream American thought through their writings alone. Rather than lamenting the fact, King highlighted the way in which they had created an anti-elitist marriage of theory and practice between the scholar and the ordinary citizen. “Nevertheless Negroes have illuminated imperfections in the democratic structure that were formerly only dimly perceived, and have forced a re-examination of the true meaning of American democracy.” King observed, “By taking to the streets and there giving practical lessons in democracy and its faults, Negroes have decisively influenced white thought.” Being shut out of traditional channels of power, “Negroes have had to write their most persuasive essays with the blunt pen of marching ranks.”<sup>64</sup>

Democratic service means collectively exercising what little power individuals have in order to challenge the levers of power. According to King, power, especially ideological power, sets the values, norms and the ends that society lives by. If these values are just, then they promote a more just society. However, if they are unjust as they are in contemporary understanding of the American Dream ideology they create an unjust society. If those who are committed to social justice are to remake society that is more in line with true democratic values then they must do so by using the tools of critical reflection and active participation. This may seem to be an overwhelming task by those who are oppressed. It is an even more daunting task when one considers that those who actually decide to speak truth to power are even fewer. In the face of such adversity King’s words ring out to us today: “It will take such a small committed

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<sup>64</sup> Where, 138-9.

minority to work unrelentingly to win the uncommitted majority. Such a small group may well transform America's greatest dilemma into her more glorious opportunity."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Where, 96.