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THE MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. (1929-1968) 50TH ANNIVERSARY: THE COMMODIFICATION OF MEMORY

The[1] widespread celebrations on the 50th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. provide a timely opportunity for reflections on the process through which King has been constructed as a mythical figure, having been purged at the same time of his most radical features. The process used in fact is not new. With the ultimate goal to blunt the sharpest points of a protest movement, a common pattern has been established: first, eliminating its leader; then, turning him into a martyr; and, finally, transforming him into both a myth and a commodity.

CANONIZATION OF THE MARTYR-SYMBOL

Right after April 4, 1968, when King was assassinated on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, a process of canonization

1 This article is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the conference "Fifty Years and Counting: The Global Memory and Legacy of Martin Luther King" (University of Turin, April 12-13, 2018).

started to transform him into the martyr-symbol of the war against racism and racial discrimination, constructing a mythical figure, purged of the features more in conflict with the image of the incorruptible American hero.

Every process of canonization poses complex problems of interpretation, and in the case of King it is not easy to understand how a black Baptist minister could have become the "Holy Martin" of a Byzantine style icon, with an inscription in Greek, and appear in several other sacred images, like the one in the stained glass window of St. Edmund's Episcopal Church in Chicago. King's consecration is confirmed by the inclusion of his name, as "*renewer of society, martyr, 1968*", in the Lutheran *Book of Worship*, which includes the liturgical calendar of the two main Lutheran denominations (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod), and as "Civil Rights Leader" in the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church[2].

According to Keith Miller, the language used by King himself has been the main source of inspiration for this process[3]. In fact, in his speeches King often identified himself with biblical figures and made use of biblical metaphors, leading his audience to consider the civil rights movement as a modern reenactment of the Exodus, and to look upon him as a new Moses. However, King's actions were as important as his language in transforming him into a national icon and symbol of the civil rights movement. The mass media played a crucial role in making King the leader of the movement[4], thus overshadowing all other leaders, and obscuring the fact that it was a grass-roots movement supported by the vast majority of the Southern black population. Actually, King was not a prime mover behind any of the civil rights campaigns between 1956 and 1968 for which he is known. Moreover, the "King-centric" version fails to acknowledge that the movement was only one part of a much broader

2 On King's canonization S. W. Hoffman, *Holy Martin: The Overlooked Canonization of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, in "Religion and American Culture", n. 10, 2000, pp. 123-148.

3 K. D. Miller, *The Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Source*, Maxwell Macmillan, New York 1992.

4 R. Lenz, *Symbols, the News Magazines and Martin Luther King*, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge 1990.

struggle and a much longer "civil rights era"[5], and it has become central to a civic mythology of racial progress.

If King's canonization has facilitated the integration of the myth into a powerfully presented and advocated national memory, on the political level the construction of the myth of King as the apostle of nonviolent action against racial discrimination, who suffered martyrdom for his words and activities, has served more than one goal: emphasizing the utopian and nonviolent aspects of his message helped to diminish the importance of aspects which were more openly critical of American society and politics, and at the same time put him in opposition to Malcolm X, assassinated three years before, whose memory could not be adapted to the American dream (on the progressive convergence of perspectives of the two leaders)[6]. In order to reach these goals, it was necessary to freeze King's public image at the August 1963 march on Washington, focusing on the speech delivered on that occasion, especially the famous conclusion, which presented his "dream" – to be sure a great example of the homiletic tradition of black preachers. That speech is now universally known and referred to as "I Have a Dream"[7] and is quoted and eulogized as the apex of the life and message of the Baptist minister. Quite often, in official celebrations of King, nothing is mentioned between that speech and his death, as if in those five years – from August 28, 1963, to April 4, 1968 – nothing noteworthy had happened. Therefore, in his reevaluation of King's significance and influence on American society, Michael E. Dyson has urged a moratorium on playing the speech[8]. Why was it necessary to identify King's message with the last part of that speech? Because, while the first part denounced as a nightmare the intolerable condition of millions of black people who lived "on a lonely island

5 N. P. Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2004.

6 J. H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America.: A Dream or a Nightmare*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll (N.Y.) 1992.

7 M. L. King, "I Have a Dream", in J. M. Washington J. M. (ed.), *A Testament of Hope. The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Harper Collins, New York 1986, pp. 227-230.

8 M. E. Dyson, *April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Death and How It Changed America*, Basic Civitas Books, New York 2008.

of poverty" and were "in exile in [their] own land"[9] the last part simply reflected King's trust in the American dream and praised it notwithstanding its unfulfilled status. In King's words, the appeal to the American dream, unrealized but still possible, resounded high and enticing: "Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. 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"[10]. It could not be otherwise, because this is the "manifest destiny" of the American nation. One should not forget that the utopian component has been part of the American ideology from the very beginning – from John Winthrop's famous reminder to his fellow travellers to the Promised Land that their experiment "shall be as a City upon a Hill", a light and a model for the World, and from Tom Paine's proclamation, at the outset of the American Revolution: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again"[11].

The dream of a new society, offering new possibilities to everyone, has resisted the erosion of history, the extermination of the natives, the slavery of blacks, and the hardships of the Great Depression. But even when the dream has revealed itself to be a nightmare, it has not lost its capacity to stir the hopes of those who want to continue to believe in a nation which could be different from what it is. As the poet Langston Hughes, one of the main representatives of the "Harlem Renaissance", wished in "Let America Be America Again", written in 1938:

> Let America be America again.
> Let it be the dream it used to be. […]
> Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed.

However, that dream is less and less traceable in King's speeches and writings in the period between the 1963 march on Washington and his death, because his protest was becoming more and more oriented toward a rigorous denunciation of the connections between racism, poverty, and

9 M. L. King, *"I Have a Dream"*, cit., p. 217.
10 Ivi, p. 219.
11 Th. Paine, *Collected Writings*, The Library of America, New York 1995, p. 92.

injustice. Therefore, it has been considered necessary to reconstruct his memory on the basis of "I Have a Dream".

DOMESTICATION OF KING'S PUBLIC IMAGE

On this premise is founded the conventional image presented at most celebrations of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the federal holiday instituted in 1983 by the United States Congress during Ronald Reagan's first presidency, in spite of attempts by some conservative representatives and senators to prevent its approval. Jesse Helms, Republican Senator from North Carolina, criticized King's stand against the Vietnam War and accused him of collusion with communists[12]. John McCain, Republican candidate for the 2008 presidential elections, also spoke out against the Congress's decision initially, but subsequently admitted that he had made a mistake. This holiday has been observed from 1986 on the third Monday of January. In 2000, 32 years after King's death, South Carolina became the last state in the Union to formally recognize MLK as an official holiday.
The first proposal to institute a national holiday commemorating King's birthday was presented to the House by John Conyers only four days after King's death. Later, on January 15, 1969, the King Center of Atlanta, created by King's widow, Coretta Scott, promoted the first annual celebration at the local and national levels. However, the bill would most likely have become stranded in a House committee, "had it not been for thousands of working-class Americans – most of them black, but also white, Asian and Latino – who risked their jobs over the next fifteen years to demand the right to honor a man they viewed as a working-class hero"[13]. But this long struggle of many American workers is almost ignored and the credit for the institution of the national holiday is assigned to the campaign launched by the King Center with the support of famous figures like musician Stevie Wonder, who dedicated the song "Happy Birthday" to King in 1980, and of politicians like Rep. Katie B. Hall[14].

12 H. Dewar, *Helms Stalls King's Day in Senate*, in "Washington Post" (Oct. 4, 1983), A1.
13 W. P. Jones, *Working-Class Hero: The Forgotten Labor Roots of the Martin Luther King Holiday*, in "The Nation" (Jan. 30, 2006), pp. 23-24.
14 L. V. Baldwin, *To Make the Wounded Whole. The Cultural Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1992, pp. 286-301.

RACISM, INJUSTICE, AND POVERTY

On December 5, 1955, at the start of the boycott of the Montgomery urban transportation system, in an address given in the Holt Street Baptist Church, King declared that "the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right" and this firm belief sustained him throughout his short life.

King's thought constantly interacted with the social and political problems of his time and his actions and words were deeply affected by this interaction. In other words, King constantly adapted and reworked his message, which combined a substantial continuity based on the search for justice, with a change and enlargement of the original perspective.

If it was right to protest against racial segregation in Montgomery, during the following years King's nonviolent struggle focused on racism and the non-implementation of the abolition of every form of racial segregation, as called for by the Supreme Court decision on *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954. This period culminated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, as it was officially called, whose chief organizer was the labor leader A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the largest black union in the country.

Thereafter, King became increasingly concerned with the interrelation between racism, injustice, and poverty. In 1964, he participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer (during which three young black people were killed), was arrested in St. Augustine on a trespassing charge, and was involved in lobbying Congress for the civil rights bill. In February 1965, he went to Selma, Alabama, where he was arrested and thus could not meet Malcolm X – the former Black Muslim leader who had been critical of the nonviolent method adopted by King but was in the process of revising his position – until he was killed a few days later. From March 21 to 25, King participated in the march from Selma to Montgomery, the city where his nonviolent struggle against racial segregation had begun ten years earlier. There he launched once more his call to fight for the accomplishment of the American dream:

"Let us […] continue our triumphant march to the realization of the American dream"[15].

On August 11, 1965, a few days after the Voting Rights Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, racial violence exploded in the Watts area of Los Angeles. By that time King had already decided that he could not avoid confronting the reality of urban ghettos and that he had to take up Malcolm X's inheritance. For this reason, he immediately went to Watts and, a few months later, to Chicago, where another riot had erupted.

Finally, beginning early in 1967, it became time "to break the silence" on the Vietnam War and to expose the militarism that pervaded American society and politics. In his first speech fully devoted to Vietnam (Los Angeles, February 25, 1967), King declared that "the bombs in Vietnam also exploded at home; they destroyed the hopes and possibilities for a decent America"[16].

In his addresses against the war and United States foreign policy, the American dream was no longer mentioned. It had once again been transformed into a nightmare by a war for which "the poor of America […] are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and death and corruption in Vietnam"[17]. The rhetoric of the dream was replaced by a heartfelt appeal to act for peace and justice. In the villages destroyed by napalm the dream had been shattered once again. But there was "something even more disturbing," that is, the fact that "the war in Vietnam [was] but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit. […] A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death"[18].

King's address at the Riverside Church of New York on April 4, 1967,

15 M. L. King, "Our God is Marching On!" in J. M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope. The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, cit., pp. 227-30.

16 Committee of Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. John C. Bennett, Dr. Henry Steele Commager, Rabbi Abraham Heschel Speak on the War in Vietnam*, New York 1967, pp. 5-9.

17 M. L. King, J. C. Bennett, H. Steele Commager, R. A. Heschel, *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. John C. Bennett, Dr. Henry Steele Commager, Rabbi Abraham Heschel Speak on the War in Vietnam*, Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, New York 1967, pp. 10-16.

18 *Ibidem*.

in which he most fiercely attacked American foreign policy, was defined by *Life* magazine as a "demagogic slander that sounded like a script [for] Radio Hanoi" (April 21, 1967 and, according to *The Washington Post*, "[King] diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country, to his people" (April 6, 1967)[19].

During the last part of his life, King also continued and intensified his struggle for the rights of the working class, which had characterized all of his public life since the bus boycott of Montgomery in 1955. In a speech delivered to the state convention of the Illinois AFL-CIO in 1965, he claimed:

> The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old age pensions, government relief for the destitute, and above all new wage levels that meant not mere survival, but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation; they resisted it until they were overcome[20].

As then Senator Obama also recalled in a speech celebrating the 40th anniversary of King's death, he was killed while in Memphis assisting striking AFSCME sanitation workers who demanded recognition of their union, because he was convinced that "the struggle for economic justice and the struggle for racial justice were really one – that each was part of a larger struggle for freedom, for dignity, and for humanity." Obama observed that "the struggle for economic justice remains an unfinished part of the King legacy, because the dream is still out of reach for too many Americans"[21].

When King was assassinated, he was on the verge of launching a campaign, the Poor People's Campaign, to end poverty in America, stressing the need for a radical redistribution of wealth and guaranteed basic income.

19 *Dr. King's Error*, editorial in "New York Times" (April 7, 1967).

20 M. L. King, *Speech to the State Convention of the Illinois AFL-CIO*, Oct. 7 1965, in "Life", April 21, 1967, p. 4.

21 B. Obama, *Remarks by Senator Barack Obama on Martin Luther King Jr.*, in "The Boston Globe" (April 4, 2008), url: http://bit.ly/2Y5Ne5u

COMMODIFICATION AND MARKETING OF KING'S LEGACY

With this reality staring us in the face, the myth of King continues to be constructed, backed up by his heirs who, also in their own interests, acquired the exclusive right in 1982 to exploit his image for commercial aims, even in military bases both within the United States and in the rest of the world. From 1996 onwards the King Center grants licenses for the sale of his personal effects and the use of his writings. The Lorraine Motel, where King was shot to death, was turned into the National Museum of Civil Rights in 1991; a new section, "Exploring the Legacy", was opened to the public on September 28, 2002. Statues of King have been erected in various parts of the United States: Raleigh, North Carolina, Stockton, California, Portland, Oregon, and Austin, on the campus of the University of Texas.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial, which lies between the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials in Washington, was inaugurated in 2011. This mausoleum marked the ultimate consecration of King as a prophet of the American dream, which consists of "Freedom, Democracy and Opportunity for All"[22]. A large granite statue of King, designed by the Chinese sculptor Lei Yixin, stands at the center of the Memorial, which is a new temple of American civil religion, a new shrine for the pilgrimage made every year by millions of Americans to visit the monuments dedicated to Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, and the Holy Writings (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights), on display in the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom of the National Archives.

In 2001, the efforts to build the memorial were stalled because Intellectual Properties Management Inc., an organization operated by King's family, wanted the foundation to pay licensing fees to use his name and likeness in marketing campaigns. In 2009, the Associated Press revealed that the King family had negotiated an $800,000 licensing deal with the Memorial Project foundation for the use of King›s words and image

22 M. L. King Jr. National Memorial, *Vision Statement*. Access: April 10, 2008, url: https://stanford.io/2H6px7t

in fundraising materials for the memorial[23].
The words written by the poet Carl Wendell Hines in 1971 seem prophetic:

> Now that he is safely dead,
> Let us Praise him.
> Now that he is safely dead,
> Let us Praise him.
> Build monuments to his glory.
> Sing Hosannas to his name.
> Dead men make such convenient Heroes.
> They cannot rise to challenge the images
> We would fashion from their Lives.
> It is easier to build monuments
> Than to make a better world.
> So now that he is safely dead,
> We, with eased consciences, will
> Teach our children that he was a great man,
> Knowing that the cause for which he
> Lived is still a cause
> And the dream for which he died
> Is still a dream.[24]

CONFLICTING VERSIONS

Besides being commodified for a wholesale market, King's name has also been used to defend gun ownership, racial discrimination, and the Republican Party.
Recently, various images of King with his hand over his heart in respect for the American flag have been used against the black NFL players kneeling to protest police killings and racism during the national anthem. However, January 15, 2018 cover issue of *The New Yorker* features a kneeling Martin Luther King Jr., with NFL players Michael Ben-

23 E. Haines, *After long struggle, MLK has home on National Mall*, Associated Press, 2011, url: http://bit.ly/2YfaCOe
24 C. W. Hines, *Now That He Is Safely Dead*, Cit. in V. G. Harding, *Beyond Amnesia: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Future of America*, in "Journal of American History", n. 74, 1987, p. 468.

nett and Colin Kaepernick beside him.
The last example of the marketing of King's legacy is the commercial for Ram Trucks – a company owned by FCA (Fiat Chrysler Automobiles) – featured during the last Super Bowl on February 4, 2018. The ad used a portion of a sermon ("*Drum Major Instinct*" based on Matthew 23:11-12, "The greatest among you will be your servant") King delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta 50 years ago, on February 4, 1968 to promote the selling of a pick-up. What the ad doesn't include is the part of King's sermon in which he warns against the dangers of spending too much when buying a car and condemned the exploitation of the drum major instinct by advertisers, particularly car advertisers.
Meanwhile, scholars continue to produce important new books that criticize this manufactured mythology surrounding King – as well as Rosa Parks and other figures of the civil rights movement – that seems to dominate both public opinion and the media[25].

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25 J. Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*, Beacon Press, New York 2018; M. K. Honey, *To the Promised Land: Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 2018; J. Sokol, *The Heavens Might Crack: The Death and Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Basic Books, New York 2018.

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