

# Introduction

On June 24, 1968, the makeshift housing that Martin Luther King Jr. had dreamt of, built on the Mall in Washington, DC, and known as Resurrection City, was wiped out. Police tear gas filled the air. Hundreds of people were arrested. Bulldozers smashed the plywood shacks. A sign on one of them read, “No more Hunger.”

The erasure of the activists’ encampment is a dramatic metaphor for what is left in our collective memory of the concern for economic justice as a civil right during the black liberation movement. The “insurgent democracy” King had fought for and his Poor People’s Campaign’s dramatization of the dispossessed were lost in the smoke of the burning cities of the late 1960s. As racial resentment simmered, the campaigning Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon allegedly uttered, after a visit to the shantytown, “those people out there are electing Richard Nixon.”<sup>1</sup>

The “voice of the poor” was silenced and “the voice of the unheard”—the way King named the uprisings—was suddenly strident and subjected to political maneuvering. The egalitarian economic demands of an interracial Poor People’s Campaign (PPC), overshadowed by King’s death, quickly faded from popular political memory. Most historical interpretations of

his last crusade have tended to emphasize its utopian and delusional features, its doomed fate, only minimally exploring its underpinnings so as to insulate King's reputation from disgrace for this final campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Here is what King had pictured. Masses of the "truly disadvantaged," precisely because of their multiracial makeup, would gather in Washington to exert pressure on the White House and Congress, forcing the reform of an unjust system and the relocation of power toward those disenfranchised either by race or class. The campaign would, as King envisioned it, challenge a flawed liberal democracy which had thrived on a racially divided working class as well as those unemployed or underemployed. Following social democratic principles, he expected to substantiate democracy by extending it from the political sphere into the economic and cultural realms. King's last campaign, consistent with his simultaneous involvement with striking sanitation workers in the city of Memphis, was an embrace of the poor and the working classes of all races and ethnicities afflicted by injustice, exploitation, misery, and disenfranchisement.<sup>3</sup> He was indignant at the dramatic wealth inequality that plagued an oblivious nation and exacerbated racial disparities. Underneath the veneer of American prosperity, such a view of real income discrepancies was hardly farfetched. Although still marginal, a U.S. household belonging to the top one percent in the early 1960s possessed 125 times the wealth of an average family.<sup>4</sup> The poverty rate was 19 percent.<sup>5</sup>

If today Americans are fully aware that the United States exhibits impressive disparities of wealth between rich and poor, this recognition was not the case in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>6</sup> In those early postwar decades of sustained economic growth, American families enjoyed the shared prosperity of an egalitarian society in which income, savings, and wealth were not so starkly concentrated in the hands of a few top wage earners. Yet, precisely because everyone seemed to benefit from a fair distribution of wealth, King and others worried about the invisibility of those left behind.

King perceptively called for strong federal policies and national recognition of the extent to which the nation had become divided, not only along the lines of race but also the lines of wealth. The PPC claimed that the unequal access to opportunity and wealth that Americans of color experienced more than anyone else not only offended sacred American

values but corroded the social fabric of the nation. A peaceful “army of the poor” would try to send the message previously clearly articulated by Ralph Ellison: “first, something happens to us and then, just wait, it happens to every other group in America.”<sup>7</sup> Ellison referred to black Americans and King would not disagree with such a statement. But he expanded the framework of “us” to all the disinherited, the forgotten, the exploited. The poor who would be brought together in Washington by King’s campaign were indisputably the “miner’s canaries” of the American people.<sup>8</sup>

By denouncing “the tenacious poverty which so paradoxically exists in the midst of plenty,” King was prescient: the growing divide between the haves and have-nots, between a handful of the extremely wealthy and a growing impoverished population, put the very idea of democracy at risk.<sup>9</sup> His analysis of the destructive effects of a growing concentration of wealth and power was sound but provocative. He pointed out the limits of a liberal, capitalist democracy in the absence of substantive justice and economic security for all. On December 4, 1967, the leader unraveled his new undertaking in a long and strongly argued statement, in which the purpose of the PPC as well as its motive and revolutionary significance are clearly explained:

The SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] will lead waves of the nation’s poor and disinherited to Washington DC next spring to demand redress of their grievances by the United States government and to secure at least jobs or income for all. . . . Affluent Americans are locked into suburbs of physical comfort and mental insecurity; poor Americans are locked inside ghettos of material privation and spiritual debilitation; and all of us can almost feel the presence of a kind of social insanity which could lead to national ruin . . . a nation gorged on money while millions of its citizens are denied a good education, adequate health services, decent housing, meaningful employment, and even respect and they are told to be responsible. The true responsibility for the existence of these deplorable conditions lies ultimately with the larger society, and much of the immediate responsibility for removing the injustices can be laid directly at the door of the federal government.<sup>10</sup>

King did not live to see his ultimate crusade materialize. The Poor People’s Campaign and the initiatives associated with it turned out to be a living memorial for the leader who was assassinated just weeks before its

starting date. For more than a month though, thousands of poor people of all races poured into the capital, by foot, train, or from mule wagons, camping out on the Mall in a shantytown they named Resurrection City. They occupied the space for six weeks and attempted to get the powers that be to take notice. Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Hosea Williams, James Bevel, Walter Fauntroy, Joseph Lowery, and Jesse Jackson strived to carry on their missing leader's grand scheme. Although physically absent, King and his vision were omnipresent as his co-visionaries spawned and sustained the forty-five-day march and the six-week encampment in Washington. Although not as confrontational as initially planned, the protesters took disruptive actions, hoping to seize the momentum of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty in order to break into the national consciousness. The main rally of the campaign, held on Solidarity Day (June 19, 1968), managed to draw fifty thousand people to Washington, with demands to combat runaway inequality and, in the words used by Coretta King Scott that day, "the violence of poverty."

Following King's beliefs, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) hoped, through a sensational march and occupation of the Washington Mall, that a "second phase" of the civil rights movement would bring about *real* equality, giving full substance to the legal accomplishments of 1964 and 1965. Civil rights meant little, they argued, without the substance of economic power behind them. King had been also hopeful that, in the post-Watts context, a nonviolent march and protest would deflect national attention away from the urban uprising of disenfranchised blacks which had erupted just months before in Detroit and Newark. A younger generation of blacks was growing increasingly vocal in their discontent with civil rights legislation—albeit hard-won—which had failed to bring about their own full-scale incorporation into the promise of social justice. Scores of young activists, acting in a more radical tradition of black protest, now demanded self-determination and a real liberation. King hoped to contain their frustration and despair. He too was disquieted by the flawed and lopsided nature of racial progress in the post-civil-rights-legislation years. Chief among the campaign's demand was to wipe out the ghettos, symbols of an ongoing exploitation. Organizing a "revolution" against an intrinsically unjust system was also on his horizon.

Yet, as he explained at length in his late writings, King could not and would not endorse former comrade Stokely Carmichael's rallying cry nor the politics of the thriving Black Power movement. Among King's motives was his strongly held belief that bridging the racial gap and building interracial coalitions were still essential components of the struggle. To some extent though, he shared Carmichael's concern with unfair and sustained asymmetries of power, stating that "there is nothing essentially wrong with power. The problem is that in America power is unequally distributed."<sup>11</sup> King was also cognizant of the definition of American inequality along arbitrarily assigned lines of race and class. With regard to economic disparities, race was indeed a tremendous determining factor: in 1963, whites held seven times more wealth than African Americans (as much in 2013 as in the aftermath of the Great Depression).<sup>12</sup> But the plague of inequality of wealth and power crossed racial lines and King expected to tackle it as such. Disputing the nationalistic rhetoric of the Black Power movement, he claimed:

One unfortunate thing about [the slogan] Black Power is that it gives priority to race precisely at a time when the impact of automation and other forces have made the economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike. In this context, a slogan of "Power for Poor People" would be much more appropriate.<sup>13</sup>

Still, unlike social democratic leaders to whom he was close, such as A. Philip Randolph, King refused to publicly condemn Black Power activists or to fuel the divide between integrationists and nationalists. The Poor People's Campaign was envisioned as an inclusive, class-based project that, to him, would transform the black liberation movement into the vanguard of a universal revolution on behalf of the dispossessed. Like most radicals of the struggle, he thought the abolition of racism would remain illusory unless a profound transformation of the economic structures occurred. By no mean a wholesale repudiation of black radicalism, the campaign sought to combine the nonviolent struggle for racial justice with the fight for universal economic equality, asserting their bound fates. He echoed reformist liberal social scientists and the Kerner Commission (appointed by Johnson in 1967 to investigate the uprisings),<sup>14</sup> which advocated for quickly proceeding "beyond civil rights" toward economic

equality to quell social unrest.<sup>15</sup> But King envisioned the campaign as uncompromising and disobedient. Welfare rights activists' presence, instrumental to the campaign, embodied his desire to reconcile various forms of black protest on behalf of an overarching cause. King had invited Carmichael and many Black Panther chapters to join the campers and refused to ostracize them. Still, he felt the urge to reach beyond racial civil rights, "for our program calls for a redistribution of economic power" he asserted.<sup>16</sup> King was concerned about the plight of the "other America."

Mark Twain talked about two Americas divided by race. One America was committed to real equality while the other America was subjugated and oppressed.<sup>17</sup> In 1962, Michael Harrington described the "other America" as invisible and subjugated. His eponymous book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, sent shock waves through political circles, which "rediscovered" that poverty in the midst of plenty was real *and* multiracial. Appropriating Harrington's metaphor and purpose, King in his late writings deplored an American economic "dualism," a "schizophrenia" which offered "the milk of prosperity and the honey of opportunity" to the affluent while it condemned an "other America" to misery. While most were black, King claimed this "other America" also included Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans. and "millions" who were "Appalachian whites." This "other America," burdened by economic oppression, was still unfree.<sup>18</sup>

To King, race and class were not mutually exclusive imperatives, and he was fully aware of the racialized construction of class in the United States. According to him, race should not be subsumed under class, or simply function as an addition to the real burden of class. As many before him, his analysis of race and class was dialectical and their relation was evolving and reciprocal. A social fiction but an historical reality, the ideology of "race" (and racism as a social practice) has ensured the unfair distribution of wealth and power. The campaign's radical egalitarianism formulated a class framework in which exploitative socioeconomic relations were instrumental to the racial subordination of black Americans. Charles Mills calls "black racial liberalism" an attempt "to combine the racial justice political project with a larger social justice project," highlighting the staggeringly unequal distribution of wealth and income of the country.<sup>19</sup>

Generations of activists before King had analyzed racial inequality in socioeconomic terms, denouncing systemic material deprivation, the

scarcity of jobs available to blacks, poor medical care, and lack of decent housing. The economic program of civil rights organizations and their commitment to alleviating black poverty, from the National Urban League to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was substantial. They pursued a “dual agenda” (legal equality *and* economic justice) that only if fully achieved would stand for “civil rights.”<sup>20</sup> Their lobbying effort seemed to be successful when President Johnson publicly contended in 1965 that the country should aim for “not just equality as a right and a theory but as a fact and as a result,” connecting his War on Poverty to racial progress.<sup>21</sup> But a national dedication to eradicating poverty and achieving substantive racial equality was nowhere in sight when King planned the Poor People’s Campaign.

King knew all too well the violence of race-based socioeconomic inequalities. In 1966, he moved into a tenement on Chicago’s West Side to “help eradicate a vicious system which seeks to further colonize thousands of Negroes within a slum environment.”<sup>22</sup> That same year, he broke down while visiting the black sharecropping community in Marks, Mississippi, whose children were starving. Haunted by them, he would make sure the campaign’s march would depart from the town of Marks.<sup>23</sup> And although he made the case for greater economic benefits for all in a more egalitarian system, King never relegated his quest for racial equality nor succumbed to a reductionist position. While asking for universal public policies, he also explicitly requested preferential compensation for blacks, modeled on the GI Bill, a previous “preferential treatment” policy; his proposal, he stressed, would not only be far less costly than the veterans’ program but would “certainly be less expensive than any computation based on two centuries of unpaid wages and accumulated interest.”<sup>24</sup> Influenced by W.E.B. Du Bois and also by welfare rights activists, King recognized the preponderance of class and economic position in his analysis of race.

But, in order to successfully put poverty on the national agenda, in a context of racial fatigue, budget cuts by the embattled Johnson administration, and widely shared misrepresentation of black destitution as an entrenched “pathology,” disentangling poverty from blackness was a prerequisite.<sup>25</sup> Besides, “the poor” King wished to mobilize in 1967 were not a proxy for blacks. The have-nots of the nation were of all stripes and

colors, poverty-afflicted Appalachians as well as Latinos and Native Americans, and to King, only an interracial coalition of the poor could gain political leverage. The strategy was to make poverty conspicuous but also to coercively “expose Congress” and its lack of answers.<sup>26</sup> Although not a Marxist upheaval against capitalism, nor a call for the overthrow of the existing institutions or the establishment of a people’s government, the Poor People’s Campaign hinged on the revolutionary potential of a unified, multiracial, and multiethnic coalition of the poor. “The only real revolutionary, people say, is a man [or woman] who has nothing to lose. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose,” King argued.<sup>27</sup> Without brushing racism aside, King intended to expand the scope of the civil rights revolution, progressing through and beyond race toward a just and fair society for all. In a 1965 interview with Alex Haley, King explained his belief in the power of a transracial coalition:

The unemployed, poverty-stricken white man must be made to realize that he is in the very same boat with the Negro. Together, they could exert massive pressure on the Government to get jobs for all. Together, they could form a grand alliance. Together, they could merge all people for the good of all.<sup>28</sup>

History did not oblige. The SCLC and its allies had hardly finalized the campaign when King was shot. Although the campaign was carried on posthumously, its fate was sealed. The army of the poor was seen as yet another source of public disorder by mainstream media and former allies, and King’s hope that Resurrection City and its nonviolent inhabitants would provide a counter-narrative to burning cities proved illusory. Many pundits expressed their utter contempt for what one portrayed as a “revival meeting within a carnival within an army camp.”<sup>29</sup> As with many other projects carried out after 1965, the widely accepted narrative points to the ineffectiveness of King’s late nonviolent strategies as a means of confronting social and economic problems and to the lack of tangible policy accomplishments, be they in Chicago or Resurrection City. Although the tradition of dissent in America comprises as many unfinished tasks as it boasts enshrined accomplishments, the civil rights movement’s unfulfilled agenda, particularly in the post-1965 era, is read in retrospect as evidence



of its irrelevance. Most historians and civil rights leaders have dismissed the PPC as an unfortunate mistake, calling it “a Little Big Horn,” a “Waterloo,” an utter “debacle.”<sup>30</sup> This book argues that, in reality, the question of whether the Poor People’s Campaign was a “failure” has to be reframed.

Unsurprisingly, the crusaders against poverty made little headway. Public support for civil rights had already begun to falter but without King, the SCLC was unable to cultivate sympathy. Among the youngest campers, a general distrust toward journalists turned to bitterness, antagonizing the press, who questioned the relevance of the slain pastor’s last crusade. Bringing populist discontent to the doors of those who presided over and sustained the glaring contrast between poverty and wealth, demanding redistribution but also condemning the ongoing war in Vietnam, the campers’ enterprise was undermined by the FBI, who framed it as a subversive communist-inspired uprising.<sup>31</sup> The poor’s insurgency and their “American Commune”<sup>32</sup> were all the more intolerable in the context of activism by white leftist radical groups such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).<sup>33</sup> Many civil rights opportunities to build broad cross-racial grassroots movements tying together economic justice and racial equality had already been crushed by malignant FBI activities, and the defamation of the PPC stood as an indisputable example of such political malice.<sup>34</sup> From the moment he began voicing his rebuke of the Vietnam War, King had been vilified as an anti-American member of an international criminal conspiracy.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the FBI made sure that misrepresentation of the campaign dominated public opinion and prevailed among law makers. Intimidation, defamation, and repression were used to brand Resurrection City as a subversive nest and a threat to national security, and to sever the coalition. The sabotage proved effective. From the beginning of the campaign, which they labeled POCAM, intelligence services spread false rumors about the criminality and depravity of PPC participants and provided the government with misleading and mendacious reports on Resurrection City.<sup>36</sup> For most officials, the encampment was nothing but a place of lawlessness.

Furthermore, despite their shared belief that the symbolic struggles for black civil rights and American democratization could not be separated

from material struggles over unequal distribution, most of King's partners were unsettled by the project. From James Farmer to Bayard Rustin and Marian Logan, the campaign was viewed as unfortunate. They judged the PPC, like King's indictment of the war in Vietnam, as ill timed and off topic for a "civil rights" leader. The main assumption then, for his associates as well as in the mainstream press, was that King's late positions undermined black moderates by discrediting the civil right movements' activities. Indeed, in July 1968, *Time* magazine claimed that "the shantytown capital and symbol of the Poor People's Campaign had long since become an ugly, anarchic embarrassment to their cause."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, mainstream media silenced the multiracial makeup of the campaign, ignoring its unprecedented militancy.<sup>38</sup> To them, it was yet another civil rights march.

The widely accepted narrative was, and still is to some degree, that the PPC diverted the fervor for further civil rights to less fruitful channels and would have failed where the 1963 movement had succeeded—specifically by dismantling the liberal coalition of churches and synagogues, government bureaucracies, labor unions, universities and foundations, and parts of the media that had supported the pre-1965 progress toward greater equality. Today, despite countless studies rebuking it, this line of argument still accompanies the assertion that the fecund postwar liberal consensus fell victim to urban riots, Black Nationalism, and the New Left.<sup>39</sup> The civil rights struggles of late 1960s and early 1970s have therefore been long marginalized from the grand narrative of the movement, if not presented as its downhill path,<sup>40</sup>

This mainstream rendering overlooks the contingency that allowed for the civil rights insurgency to achieve major progress and ignores the fact that during every step along the way from 1954 to 1964, the black liberation struggle in the United States had consistently been dubbed "illusory," "ill timed," "impractical," and doomed to fail. Likewise, since the 1930s, black radicalism was commonly deemed inconsistent with the American "universalist" tradition and accused of having failed blacks.<sup>41</sup> Not only are these views inaccurate (to the extent that scholars agree on how to measure *failure* or *success* with regard to social movements),<sup>42</sup> as well as dismissive of local activists and more radical struggles such as that of the Black Power movement, but they also curtail King's thought and legacy.<sup>43</sup>

Although the Poor People's Campaign did not usher in the redistributive policies that it had demanded, placing exclusive blame on the campaign itself rather than the chaotic events of the year 1968 would be to dangerously simplify history. The racial backlash which King continually condemned was in the making for many years and reached its boiling point in the months preceding Nixon's election. African Americans' ongoing demands for full equality, including in the North, did alienate former allies among affluent white liberals and the white suburban working class. King's reframing of a populist and progressive constituency based on a diverse grassroots movement was clairvoyant, although premature. His outreach to many groups, including urban black youth, Latino farmers, welfare mothers, Native Americans, black and Latino nationalists, and white Appalachians is worth considering because it foretold further progressive tactics.<sup>44</sup> Along with the union-affiliated white-collar workers, southern black sharecroppers, and gang members from inner cities who congregated in Resurrection City, the inclusion of these diverse social groups suggested a new, larger coalition of the American disenfranchised. A diverse "socially conscious" movement, King reasoned, would regenerate the American social contract, giving voice and rights to those who had been excluded from democratic participation.<sup>45</sup> Its unprecedented protest for social justice envisioned universal rights that would benefit the nation as a whole. Labor unions were expected to be strong proponents of the campaign and, if the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) rejected it because of its antiwar rhetoric, King believed the United Auto Workers and many small unions would enthusiastically support it.

Despite the documented internal squabbling, lack of money, and poor infrastructural organization which crippled the campaigners' ability to mobilize, some scholars have begun to take note of the obscured campaign.<sup>46</sup> Admittedly, they have documented how most participants grew discouraged as the campaign failed to gain political leverage, a defeat rendered almost irremediable after the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, who, while running for the Democratic presidential nomination, had expressed sympathy with the PPC. But for all its limitations, most participants recognized afterwards that the Poor People's Campaign was nowhere near worthless.<sup>47</sup> The strategy, although chaotically conducted, was framed not

only by its policy impact but also by its ability to dramatize for the public the urgent need to remedy wealth inequalities and to offer an alternative. Furthermore, the campaign's demands, the most salient of which was an "Economic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged" and a robust antipoverty blueprint, delved into ambitious policy proposals, such as a ten-year, \$20 billion-per-year federal plan to eradicate slums, unemployment, subpar education, and entrenched poverty through a guaranteed annual income. The latter proposal had already been forcefully advocated by King in 1967, in his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community?*, and in "The Other America," a speech he gave at Stanford University on April 14, 1967.<sup>48</sup>

However familiar to a progressive-minded audience, these demands for universal economic rights challenged the collective acceptance of pervasive racial and increasingly stark class inequalities. Moving away from the common economic wisdom of the era—the virtues of individualism, the belief that economic growth "lifts all boats," the efficiency of corporate liberalism—the campaign was an act of dissent and a claim for a real social democracy. King wanted to converge economics, race, and social and political equality.

Not only was the call for the enshrinement of economic security in the Constitution not unheard of in American history, but it could have successfully capitalized on the political momentum. The urban uprising and King's death influenced public opinion; according to a poll conducted by Lou Harris and published in the November 20, 1967, issue of the *New York Times*, a majority of Americans supported the idea of a "decisive Federal action to raze slums, establish work programs to provide jobs for the unemployed, create a Federal rat extermination program and provide summer camps for poor children." What's more, almost 60 percent endorsed "a Federal program to tear down ghettos in American cities" and to "provide jobs for the unemployed of the ghettos."<sup>49</sup> But the campaign unleashed more hostility than support, and a biased depiction prevailed. Its radical thrust has been buried under the falsifying celebration of King "the healer," the dreamer of 1963, fervently committed to racial reconciliation.<sup>50</sup> Another way to dismiss his call has thus been to cast it as the symptom of a "radicalized" King, blinded by resentment. A post-1967 lonesome King, the mainstream narrative goes, had grown disgruntled

with the slow pace of reform, the war in Vietnam, and his own inability to contain black violence. Turning away from the formal conquest of citizenship rights, he is said to have resorted to subversive methods and demands formerly alien to him, abandoning the American creed in favor of an extremism close to that of political radicals. Precisely because King has been misremembered by a bowdlerized narrative as unconditionally devoted to the reformist, integrationist, middle-class oriented liberal paradigm until 1966, his reframing of the civil rights revolution on economic and redistributive terms appeared as a derailment, a departure from his longstanding middle-of-the road approach.<sup>51</sup> To challenge such distorting views, this book argues that the Poor People's Campaign and King's democratic-socialist statements have been inaccurately trivialized. His last project was neither a gesture aimed at revamping his declining aura, as mainstream commentators pretended, nor the reflection of his deep change of mind.

King's black radical critique of the liberal paradigm and his indictment of America's systemic flaws with regard to economic injustices and imperialism did not develop after 1965 although his views were perhaps more trenchant than two decades before. For years, King had indeed hammered the issues of poverty and misdistribution of wealth; economic justice was, to him, a prerequisite for racial equality. As Thomas Jackson brilliantly demonstrates, King's concerns about the inconsistencies of the American system and his critical theoretical framework had developed very early on.<sup>52</sup> In June 1956, months before the Montgomery boycott was even set in motion, he stressed the perils of economic injustice as being as harmful to inclusion as was racial prejudice, asserting, "I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes the necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes."<sup>53</sup> In 1968, when a journalist, pointing to the transracial nature of the PPC, told him that he was not "within civil rights" anymore, the preacher replied, "but you can say I am in human rights."<sup>54</sup> To accurately historicize such a comment, one should bear in mind that King's concern for universal human rights had been present consistently throughout his life.<sup>55</sup>

Of course, his thoughts continued to evolve, and to teleologically essentialize King's thinking on class and its relationship to race would be dismissive of major evolutions in his worldview. But I concur with Robert Birt's

statement that “the themes of economic justice versus exploitation and indeed the need for a global struggle against poverty and imperialism, are to be found even in the pre-movement expression of his thinking.”<sup>56</sup> The simplistic “radicalization” thesis should therefore be dismissed if it suggests a sudden shift toward new extreme beliefs, the disavowal of integration, or a sudden embrace of socialism as a new framework. His understanding of a truly liberal democracy as a site of power and revenue reallocation had remained constant, and it crystallized when the context made such a stance urgent. His evolution should therefore not be misunderstood as an unfortunate intellectual perdition that estranged him from his lifelong commitment to the liberal tradition. But it had to be a refurbished one.

The principles of redistribution and solidarity that he fleshed out during the Poor People’s Campaign entailed drastic structural reform of liberal democracy but not its utter repudiation. As had many activists before him, King grew distressed with the limits of a liberal ideology wherein blacks were almost the only ones to remain dedicated to the redistribution of wealth and resources.<sup>57</sup> Although it would certainly take King some time to distance himself from reform-minded liberalism and to articulate his *aggiornamento*, his evolution is neither an embittered deviance nor an abnormal evolution in black political thought. Skepticism about the limits of U.S. liberal democracy and subsequent disenchantment is itself a black tradition.<sup>58</sup> The rich legacy of radical visions of an egalitarian democracy and its influence on the freedom movement has been unearthed by “long civil rights movement” scholarship, and my book has benefited tremendously from it. Taking this tradition into account, we should not question whether King became “radicalized” but rather whether he was a “black radical,” cogently defined by Minkah Makalani as “those who considered restructuring the dominant political economy a central feature of ending racial oppression and considered some form of socialist economic organization essential to racial liberation and national self-determination for colonial Africa and Asia.”<sup>59</sup>

Considering such insights, a nagging question has hampered a deep and fair examination of King’s thought and last campaign: to what extent was he influenced by Marxist ideology? Was he placing class above race, anti-imperialism above patriotism, expecting the American proletariat to join left-wing activism and embrace its use of coercive means?

The anticommunist hysteria that characterized a major part of the American twentieth century, and which King himself deplored and suffered from throughout his life, has cast a shadow of suspicion on King's commitment to restructuring the American economic framework in a radically egalitarian yet democratic fashion.<sup>60</sup> That he privately called himself a "socialist," a statement vilified by his opponents, who used it to discredit his endeavor, is critical to comprehending King's explicit rejection of the basic underpinnings of the capitalistic economic system.<sup>61</sup> His brand of socialism is more accurately described as "democratic socialism" or social democracy, oftentimes associated with northern European countries.<sup>62</sup> But the Poor People's Campaign, envisioned as a mass movement seeking a massive redistribution of wealth and power, was the fruit of a companionship with socialist leaders and ideas which, far from being alien to American culture, shaped its intellectual and social history.

This book argues that a close examination of King's political thought entails a dismissal entirely of the assumption that King was a procommunist Marxist—although the definition of "Marxist" is still up for debate as even the German philosopher himself denied being one. King remained a democrat and a Christian to the core, committed to the individual's natural rights, at odds with basic Marxist premises. He never entertained the overthrow of American democracy or the replacement of it by a regime in which the State would own the means of production (before it too vanished). However, he was certainly "Marxian" in most of his systemic analysis, which was predicated on the conviction that deep historical structures had shaped American history and both the black and the poor experience.<sup>63</sup> King also thought that uniting the oppressed regardless of their racial and ethnic identities was imperative. This Marxian assumption was constantly mobilized by King to analyze race and oppression in America, and the Poor People's Campaign resulted from such creed.<sup>64</sup>

Rather than a sideshow or a deviation, the Poor People's Campaign is brought to center stage in these pages and cast as the culmination of King's lifelong thinking on the nature of justice. I explore its significance, considering a particular subset of issues regarding how King's thoughts on equality were the product of his own maturation on substantive justice and liberal democracy, and of an intellectual environment that had preceded and has outlived him.

King's highly egalitarian, social democratic vision of society was neither new nor marginal. The first part of this book, "The Long March," examines the intellectual roots of King's radical egalitarianism, showcasing the many influences that propelled him toward it. Indeed, in formulating the redistributive demands of the Poor People's Campaign, King drew inspiration from figures and social movements oftentimes belittled although their views on the entwinement of race and class and their deep concern for the unequal distribution of wealth in the United States shaped the contours of King's coalition of the poor.

The first four chapters trace the history of race and class dialectics as debated by Black America very early on, showing how it foreshadowed the 1968 campaign. The three chapters in the second part of the book, "The Campaign," chronicle the project from its remote inception, how it was carried out despite King's death, and investigate how its interracial encampment of the poor was spearheaded by the National Welfare Rights Organization, welcomed Black Power advocates, and reconciled cultural nationalists' demands from the Chicano and Native American movements with a class-based indictment of economic exploitation and unbridled capitalism. The third part, "The Vision," seeks to speculate about the many political ideas, scholarship, and theories on social justice that vindicated the relevance of the campaign. Major academic works have echoed the campaign's groundbreaking insights, namely its concern for the dynamics of structural inequality and a demand for a social citizenship embedded in an Economic Bill of Rights that redefined the scope of justice.

By way of conclusion, I assess the radical political and intellectual potentialities of the Poor People's Campaign in light of today's major concern about inequality. I suggest that its insightful castigation of unfair distribution of resources helps us to understand how missed opportunities shape our present and still inspire us to keep fighting for economic justice and substantive equality. Reclaiming King, as some have demanded, is a good way to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his death.<sup>65</sup>

Ironically so, the anniversary is celebrated under the presidency of Donald Trump, whose election engendered the current debates about white working-class politics in America. The resurgence of concern for the intricacies of race and class following the election of 2016 and the controversial rhetoric of identity politics illustrates how the idea of universal



emancipation remains constrained by race. Assigning, as Nell Irvin Painter notes, “class only to Trump voters and identity only to people who are not white,” we forget that it has always been so misconstrued.<sup>66</sup> King’s Poor People’s Campaign was an attempt to overcome this “reluctance to see people of color as people with class status” but also to challenge the color line that has separated the poor. This book hopes to resurface King’s thoughts on race and class, and his perceptive concern over wealth inequality, and to foreground the Poor People’s Campaign’s inspiring suggestions at a time of great anxiety over these issues.