

Martin Luther King, Colorblind Radical

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By Coleman Hughes

NEW YORK, N.Y.—Monday [Jan. 21, 2019] marks Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which means it’s time for the political commentariat to fight its yearly battle for King’s legacy.

For critics of identity politics on the left and right, King’s appeals to common humanity over racial division are a rebuke not only to white supremacy but also to the racial ideology of today’s progressives.

Progressives wince at “colorblind”

In this view, King’s dream of a colorblind America—where the content of our character matters more than the color of our skin—is hampered by progressives’ focus on checking white privilege and stoking black grievances.

To progressives, such critics have sanitized King’s legacy, erasing its radical elements to avoid acknowledging persistent racial inequality. Progressives highlight his opposition to the Vietnam War, his advocacy for a full-employment policy and a guaranteed minimum income, and his contempt for the materialism spreading through American culture.

King’s progressive admirers see “colorblindness” as a pretext for apathy about the plight of black Americans—apathy that King fought vehemently in his day.

Radical on nonracial issues

The refrain that “King was a radical” is less an argument against the colorblind ideal than a way of changing the subject. King was a radical, but by today’s standards only on nonracial issues.

Yes, he opposed the Vietnam War, flirted with democratic socialism and abhorred materialism. But he framed these radical positions as elements of a common human struggle. What policy could be more colorblind than guaranteed income for all Americans?

Resisted racial identity

With regard to the role that racial identity should play in politics, King was unequivocal.

First and foremost we are human beings, not members of races. The verbal tic of modern racial-justice activists—"As a black man . . ."—would sound foreign on his lips. Even when fighting explicitly racist policies, he deployed universal principles rather than a tribal grievance narrative.

Oppression, not oppressors

"The problem is not a purely racial one, with Negroes set against whites," King writes of the civil-rights movement in his 1958 essay "Three Ways of Meeting Oppression."

He added that "nonviolent resistance is not aimed against oppressors but against oppression. Under its banner consciences, not racial groups, are enlisted."

Neither supremacy

King's contemporary counterpoints were the Nation of Islam and the black-power movement, which emphasized racial division over common humanity. King didn't mince words when addressing these movements in a 1960 speech at DePauw University.

"Black supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy, and God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men," he said. "God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race and in the creation of a society where all men can live together as brothers."

Clue about Black Lives Matter

While no one can know what King would have thought about the Black Lives Matter movement, we can take a clue from his speech "Where Do We Go From Here?" given in 1967, a year before his death.

He said: "Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout 'White Power!'—when nobody will shout 'Black Power!'—but everybody will talk about God's power and human power."

If conservatives whitewash King's opinions on economics and foreign policy, then progressives whitewash his views on race.

Gangs in Chicago

King discussed many topics that now are considered taboo, if not racist, on the left. Consider the problem of violence in the black community. King lamented "frequently and consistently" seeing "brutal acts and crimes by Negroes against Negroes."

"In many a week in Chicago," he observed in 1966, "as many or more Negro youngsters have been killed in gang fights as were killed in the riots there last summer."

A glance at today's homicide statistics in Chicago shows that little has changed since King made that observation, yet such violence gets scant attention from racial-justice activists.