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From Athens to Atlanta and Beyond: Reshaping Ourselves for a New World Through King's Living Legacy

Review: Tommy Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, eds.
To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.
(Cambridge, MA; London, England: Belknap Press, 2018), 463 pages.

The Many Faces of MLK

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, Harvard professors Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry have produced a masterful reappraisal of King's legacy, specifically as a political philosopher. More importantly, the book can be read as a mirror through which we can see King's struggles and resistance, that led him down a "dangerous road," having strong parallels with the dangerous road we face with current political and social upheavals (SNW, 1, 15).[1] Negative reactions against globalization have heightened the sentiments of fear, paranoia, and partisanship. Racial tensions are reaching a boiling-point in the U.S. after the 2017 Charlottesville protests and a pattern of discrimination and senseless killings from the privileged campus of Yale to the country roads of Minnesota or Georgia, by law enforcement and civilians alike. One of the tendencies growing in this distressing hour of world history entails the rise of personality and celebrity cults forming around "strong" leaders. A mobocracy mentality is forming the way we think about politicians,

1) Tommy Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, eds., *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.,* (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Belknap Press, 2018), 1, 15. Hereafter referred to as SNW using in text citations.

judges, or even health specialists like chief U.S. immunologist Anthony Fauci. Celebrity fetishizing has infected Americans' sense of reality, including the ways in which politics are practiced and interpreted. Engulfed in the quagmires of identity politics, our attempts to legitimate who has the right to fight for social justice have been paralyzed by these *performative gestures* of social change and action. It could be argued that the aesthetic presentation and the skills of rebranding have, in a certain sense, replaced the philosophical and moral concerns explored in the sections on "Traditions," "Ideals," "Justice," and "Conscience," respectively. What King teaches us philosophically has, more often than not, been glossed over by a superficial publicity or aesthetics of infotainment destined for the tabloids. For this reason, King's iconic image is both a blessing and curse. In order to appreciate the full thrust of King's thinking, we have to go deeper morally and philosophically to supplement our aesthetic religious values and interests, and that is what these fifteen essays deliver.

Two immediate qualities standout about this volume that make it special. First, it brings together the voices of some of the most internationally renowned philosophers and scholars in African American studies, political theory, and the history of political and religious thought. Not only are the benefits of interdisciplinary scholarship demonstrated in these essays, but the work as a whole aims to look past popular depictions of King and "romanticized" histories that fail to capture the seriousness of King, as a philosopher. Historical analyses, just like half-hearted responses to anti-black racism, have stalled and frustrated our understanding of all that practicing black politics entails. Such narratives have long held that black political thought "can be reduced largely to *strategic* thinking concerning how best to advance black interests by exploiting convictions and sentiments widely held among whites, and the *rhetorical* identification of black interests with the most deeply cherished American ideals and practices" (SNW, 3–4).[2] This line of thinking merely *aestheticizes* the fight for racial justice and equality and echoes Paul Taylor's complaint that when it comes to considering the complexities of King's moral stand "we seem determined to reduce [him] to an empty signifier of generalized good will." But there is a need to include alongside the Radical and Dreamer King of public consciousness, the Perfectionist, who is committed "to reckoning with the depth of the challenge that King's perfectionism poses to democratic societies and citizens" (SNW, 57).

Moral Acrobatics and Conscientious Citizens

In her chapter "From Anger to Love," Martha Nussbaum emphasizes how this perfectionism should not be equated with either stoicism nor Gandhi's asceticism and preaching *brahmacharya* (sexual renunciation). There is a peculiar kind of ethical perfectionism at work in King's political philosophy; indeed, in the African American experience in America, as such, it culminates personally, professionally, and civically: "he must certainly be attentive to white paranoia about the black man as sexual aggressor: so he must walk a careful line, and for the most part King succeeded brilliantly in representing himself as neither unmanly nor a predator" (SNW, 126). This is evidence of a peculiar perfectionism in its own right. Tip-toeing the line between these pulling forces, while traveling down a "dangerous road" demands that one, more times than not, resist the moral resignation of complacency and proclaim a willingness to be a social agitator. This ethics takes the suffering of black people and their brethren as a call to conscience, recognizing one's own "othering," wrestling with self-respect while recognizing an inability to not simply take it for granted. A moral disease persists in a nation bent on perfecting itself militarily and technologically while a deafening moral indifference festers, neglecting our higher intellectual and spiritual needs.

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2) The editors remark that "many political philosophers cleave to [this] old idea advanced by the Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal in his enormously influential tome *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*" (1944).

Michele Moody-Adams' chapter "The Path of Conscientious Citizenship," explains how the "achievements" of King's ethics of nonviolence can be better understood and appreciated "as part of a larger view about the moral obligations of conscientious citizens to resist injustice in a manner that makes the beloved community possible" (SNW, 270–271). A commitment to civil disobedience and "a true revolution of values" has already broken through any illusions of moral neutrality and evasions of personal accountability. Conscientious citizens support an attentiveness of mind that fights "racism, persistent poverty, unbridled materialism, and militarism," aiming to be a source of meaningful and creative social change.[3] Without personal transformations, however, no improvement of the social order will be actualized. "We need to work," as Danielle Allen writes, "not on our hearts only, but even more immediately on a transformation of the practices and protocols of our organizations" (SNW, 160). Focusing on King's essay "The Ethical Demands for Integration," Allen argues that American democracy cannot simply shift from "pursuing a 'stagnant equality of sameness' to 'a constructive equality of oneness'," without reinterpreting "oneness" in a dynamic way, as *wholeness*. The move from oneness to wholeness, is designed to reorient ourselves to the "socially meaningful or impactful decisions that frame the horizons of possibility of our *shared world*" (SNW, 157, emphasis added).[4] There is deep redemptive value in King's political philosophy through a model of conscientious citizens, committed to a "revolution of values" and the perfectionist imperatives of "compassion and nonviolence" (SNW, 286–288).

A key tenet no philosopher can afford to abandon is the following statement: "the global is never the universal." In other words, exclusivity dressed up as universalism passes as being tolerant and respectful of non-white cultures. To reject the falsehoods of global racism is to see things for what they are; King's political philosophy is about exposing injustices and evil openly, wherever they find refuge ("injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere!"). But it is not for the sake of shaming and blaming, or the popular retaliatory pressure of cancel culture, but an ethics of charity: find the cause for which you deem it worthy to be perfect and set yourself to it, while striving for perfection. The power of King's approach, and this comes through in each chapter, lies in the aim to achieve redemptive transformation within all persons involved. Acknowledging one's own complicity in injustice is an essential step on the road to self-emancipation. The power and value of personhood is essential for King, but only as seen in the drama of history in relation with the divine purposes of community. Imperialism and slavery reformatted the globe to the West, making the East no longer the center of the world. Now the world is wanting to squeeze into the western crystal palace against the newly found values of the U.S. and Europe, causing increasing panic and fear. King's philosophy moves beyond these global reformattings of superpowers and works on the size and scale of the Beloved Community.

Black History Month as Layaway Diversity

Americans expect to go through the motions every February for black history month. It feels less like a celebration and more routine; for many, the occurrence does not even register:

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3) Moody-Adams notes how King made a direct link between compassion, nonviolence, and democratic accountability, telling a group of young ministers: "every man of human convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, but we must all protest" (SNW, 288).

4) Building on her previous book *Talking to Strangers*, which emphasizes the *ethical* meanings that "can transform our daily practices of interaction with others," Allen writes, "Therefore, my argument, like King's, is open to criticisms that I fail to concretize adequately the institutional and organizational forms necessary to bring nondomination genuinely into being. Similarly, both our arguments have been criticized (although wrongly, I think) for an excessive reliance on a utopian fantasy of a prospective emergence of something like spiritual affinity." I would contend that integration is vital to democracy, but it is no real use if those getting together are unwilling to share and use, in their co-existence. A virtue of sharing or blending, in the sense of generosity, may bring nondominant forms of order to a reality.

> The occasion has always felt too narrow to me. We are eager to celebrate our favorite figures and their trailblazing achievements – Barack Obama is the latest – but less eager to examine the fact that their heroism was based more often than not in fighting an American system that fought – and still fights – against their status as full Americans. Perhaps it's because black people don't want to ruin the Black History Month party and white people would rather not examine their role in the racism that made the month necessary in the first place. I've grumbled for years about the shortcomings I see, but have always come down on the side of celebration. We deserve it.[5]

More on Obama in a moment. Black history month has been practiced like a seasonal discount item that needs to be checked off the "must have" list. A pale multiculturalism has brought us a paltry credit line and a "flavor of the month" kind of diversity consumerism. The point is observed that months and weeks have been normalized in a manner that King would find unsettling. What I call "layaway diversity," offers empty hopes without any personal commitments or sacrifices to work on behalf of social change. It is as if we continue to pay on a dysfunctional product with no assurances it will be delivered, while being looked down upon for protesting this "favor" being done on our behalf. What should we make of these "special" traditions that have been institutionalized by a culturally secured normalization process for preserving things? Ironically, culturally sanctioned remembrances work to solidify the meaningful into the meaningless, or being moved from satisfaction to emptiness. It is the difference that ends up not making much of a difference. King knew this kind of window-dressing justice is unfulfilling and does not give one the empowerment that comes with equal rights! Much more than commemorating the heroes and triumphs of the Civil War or the civil rights movement are needed. Social justice is not a one-time deal, but a process of continued striving. A cheap optimism pays in increments, while King's radical demand is a courage in the service of a "costly hope," "enacted hope" rather than merely promised hope, and willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice (SNW, 337). King's is not a smooth ascetic brand of civil disobedience, but represents a rugged perfectionism in the Thoreauvian and Emersonian senses, not in the "fixed, teleological" Rawlsian picture of perfectionism: "A dynamic, persistently critical, continually revisable quest to improve both self and society" (SNW, 40). As Bernard Boxill's shows in "The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery,"

> On King's view, civil disobedience can sometimes impose economic costs – though never violence – on others in order to move them to make necessary reforms. The explanation of this difference in the two theories is probably that Rawls designed a theory of civil disobedience to be used only in nearly just societies, whereas King designed a theory of civil disobedience to be used in southern states of mid-twentieth-century America. (SNW, 76)

Challenging the conventional wisdom that King's "I Have a Dream" speech is merely extending the original vision of the American republic during the founding, rooted in liberty, equality, and justice, Shelby and Terry suggest that the direction of influence may be more reciprocal than the events of a historical chronology would indicate – in our uncertain times, effects often precede the causes. Are we not obligated to critique our intellectual and cultural heroes, despite our sympathetic loyalty to their legacies? Such "tough love" was not foreign to King who traveled down a "dangerous road." Personal, political, and philosophical tragedy, as Cornel West details in the final chapter, beset King's constant struggle with increasing despair and nihilism. These struggles ensued

5) Erin Aubry Kaplan, "Opinion | Seeing Black History in Context," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2020, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/19/opinion/black-history-month-america.html.

both inside and outside the movement. Terry challenges traditional interpretations dealing with the tension between the problem space of Black Power and King's vision of civil disobedience by, showing how the latter "often relied upon a number of misguided sociological, ontological, and political claims," especially regarding gender relations (SNW, 230). Blackness is affiliated with "keepin' it real" culture, which means straight talk, no sugarcoating and other means of evading the realistic conditions of African-Americans' plight. There are a few "keepin' it real" chapters in this anthology, the sentiment involved in wanting to transcend two-facedness, or the motivation to talk about social relations in bad faith. What is striking in the "Gender Trouble" chapter is the accounts given by female members of the SCLC who felt dismissed after not being taken seriously at all. I do not want to spoil it for readers but King and his associates did not rise above the *Mad Men*-esque world of the 1950s and 60s.

Would King have listened to a present-day Cassandra? Probably not! Threadcraft and Terry's essay challenges us to "think with King against King" on the issue of gender politics and the presupposed patriarchy (SNW, 232). There is no question that "King and his colleagues expended an unsettling amount of energy trying to demonstrate that nonviolence did not actually involve unmanly submission to white domination" (SNW, 219). These concerns encompass the vague background of each essay. Shelby's "Prisons of the Forgotten" concludes by taking seriously those who would challenge King's relevance in fighting for socioeconomic justice today:

> A social movement to abolish the ghetto would probably look quite different, in terms of the demographics of its principal constituents, from the one King envisaged. For instance, it would likely have to include many Latinos and disadvantaged undocumented workers, and black elites would probably have to play a smaller leadership role… [King] did not address questions of gender inequality, with the same sophistication that he tackled racial and economic inequality, and he largely viewed the situation of black women and children through a patriarchal lens. He had not absorbed the insights of black feminists. (SNW, 202–203)

On this point, I would have liked to see the volume address Alain Locke's influence on King's political philosophy. After all, it was King who famously declared a year before his assassination: "We're going to let our children know that the only philosophers that lived were not Plato and Aristotle, but W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke came through the universe." By anyone's standards, that is high praise! Surely, the new world can find common ground with Locke's New Negro? Aside from no discussion of Locke, I anticipated reading more about the possibility of a "creative synthesis" between King and Baldwin's calls for racial justice and harmony.

Bearing the Cross and Tough-Love Critique

Robert Gooding-Williams does a marvelous job showing how King operates with a Platonic touch, putting Washington and Du Bois in dialogue with each other. Disagreeing with the latter's "apparent resignation" philosophy and Du Bois' elitist views of how black leadership should look, King calls on us to pay heed to the "urgency" of our historical moment and the need for outreach through grassroot politics and mass mobilization (SNW, 31–34). While expressing the human "dignity" of African Americans, Du Bois and Washington can be criticized for going too far in the directions of individualism and collectivism. But King is concerned with both dismantling *and* fusing all that contributes to the tradition of black spiritual integrity. "Thus, we ought to neither privilege one nor be to choose between the two. King believed that the *creative synthesis* is found in 'a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism'" (SNW, 341, emphasis added). Similarly, King refused to adopt what he took to be another version of the depravity of human

nature in theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's realism, but he did not outright reject the tragic tone of his thought. Both thinkers recognized the unique role America plays in the symbolisms for world peace and justice. But it can only do so in partnership with other nations and institutions. The animus of King's philosophy is driven by the need to forge "creative syntheses" in the pursuit of justice and equality. Perhaps more so than even in King and Niebuhr's time, this cooperative spirit and willingness to harmonize is lacking in the U.S. and other western nations. A global order of competing superpowers has led us to the reemergence of a dark nationalism. King's philosophy of human rights puts a high premium on the value of dignity toward persons in our "deliberative capacity" and rational autonomy of self-government. What Derrick Darby in "A Vindication of Voting Rights," calls "an expressive commitment to dignity," weaves together a morality of voting, social activism, and preaching. Grounded in this commitment to dignity we can see how King, the moral and political philosopher, *updated* Niebuhr's realism as Darby claims: "King espoused *mature realism*, a methodological approach to achieving racial injustice under non-ideal conditions, animated by the plausible insight that agents, whether individuals or governments, must sometimes be moved to action by appealing to their abase interests, notwithstanding the possibilities of love as a political emotion" (SNW, 164).[6]

As a signature of his philosophical approach there was a diplomatic effort to come to grips with Niebuhr's warnings. King followed this procedure of intense reading in his evaluations of Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Niebuhr, and even the problem-space of Black Power as Terry shows persuasively in his chapter "Requiem for a Dream." King's philosophy engages morally and intellectually through "intimate critique,"[7] which "entails careful listening and respectful, sympathetic dialogue that is less interested in the total demolishing and unmasking of the truth claims of one's interlocutors, than cultivating forms of critical reflection on our needs, interests, identities, and self-understandings that might open up new conceptual and practical possibilities on all sides for our future together" (SNW, 323). On the question of a post-racial society, again, we do not find a wholesale rejection in either direction, only the stirrings of a calm, hospitable soul: "King's dream has color-blind aspects, but King most certainly did not advocate for color-blind practical politics" (SNW, 133).

One of the many refreshing things about *To Shape a New World*, especially in our time of hyper-polarization, is its willingness to be self-critical. In many black churches across the U.S. you will often find next to an image of Jesus, pictures of King and Barack Obama. Despite the unrivaled support and popularity of Obama among black voters, and the reality that his return would be a vast improvement over the current white house, scholars Lionel K. McPherson and Cornel West repudiate this popular portrait of black elite representation. Behind Obama's Nobel speech and campaign promises to end the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is the ugly reality of sophisticated drone killings and unrivaled military budgets. King's worldly pacifism and pragmatic politics of Christian personalism, gives way under Obama's administration to "faith in the constructive power of killing… U.S. foreign policy after World War II demonstrates that a lot worse can be done than to refrain from war – as implied by the so-called 'Obama Doctrine' of 'Don't Do Stupid Shit,' which evidently wasn't applied to drone strikes" (SNW, 258). Compared with America's approach to war and counterterrorism, King already understood the inherently self-destructive nature of political violence and the importance of accountability for any use of political violence (SNW, 255, 266). A key difference between bravery and courage exists that cannot be overlooked. Americans tend to conflate the two for the purposes of a nefarious patriotic militarism. For example, it is common to think of courage as a trait of the military class or those on the "front lines." Hegel argues this in the *Philosophy of Right* and makes courage the *foremost* political virtue. But this is akin to bravery. Courage

6) See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013).

7) See Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 270.

must include conscience and a desire for reconciliation through justice. King followed Plato's political dialogues in ranking the virtue of courage below prudence and justice. Not just war, but peace, too, has its own heroes through the sacrifices of nonviolence. Like Gandhi's example of resistance to British imperialism, King looked to the symbol of the Christian cross and its timeless lessons of integrity and courage:

> His cross – like Du Bois's ideals of his Black Preacher and Teacher – enacts and embodies unarmed truth and unconditional love… This courageous form of black *parrhesia* – fearless speech, frank speech plain speech, and unintimidated speech – will fuse eloquence with remembrance, reverence and resistance. His revolutionary piety will serve as a strong wind at his back even as the catastrophic forces bombard him. (SNW, 332)

Recounting his phone calls with candidate Obama, West had reservations about whether or not the democratic party establishment was committed to the standards of revolutionary justice envisioned by Dr. King's political philosophy. It would make no difference to have the first African American in the White House if he:

> Also deploys blackness as a form of patriotic solidarity that renders class inequality, poverty, and U.S. war crimes abroad invisible. In short, black people become Barack Obama-like flag wavers rather than Martin King-like cross bearers. We become seduced by black faces in high places and mesmerized by black elite success – even as black social misery becomes more and more an afterthought in public discourse. (SNW, 333)

Over time, West became unable to separate Obama from his "uncritical supporters" or policies of U.S. militarism disguising itself as counterterrorism. Instead of taking seriously West's intellectual critique of Obama's alleged continuation of the tradition of Dr. King, a culture bent on the low hanging fruit of "superficial spectacle" that largely ignored ethical and political issues. West protests at the end of his essay: "Unfortunately, these public matters of principle and integrity were tainted with personal matters regarding three tickets for my mother, brother, and myself to attend the inaugural events. In typical American fashion, the personal issues eclipsed the public ones, and my moral and political standards of critique and resistance to Obama's neoliberal and imperial rule were easily lost" (SNW, 334). As we witness unabashed pandering to celebrities and our willingness to concede cultural and political power to them, this volume offers a rare feat in its ability to avoid that kind of sycophancy for its hero, and creatively overcomes the stale and hostile moods of our times.

Genes, Culture, Goodness

Echoing Dr. King's famous remark similar to nineteenth century abolitionist Theodore Parker – "the moral arc of the universe is long, but bends toward justice"[8] – Yale's sociobiology professor Nicholas Chirstakis adopts an amended version of this principle as the basis for his *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society*: "The evolutionary arc of the universe is long, but bends toward goodness." He argues that it has been

8) Shelby and Terry make it clear in a detailed endnote: "It is often assumed, even by careful biographers, that King's quote is taken *directly* from the nineteenth-century abolitionist, but this is incorrect… King frequently paraphrased this section of Parker's sermon for dramatic effect, but his rendering often suggests a more assured grasp of transcendental ethical truth as well as the moral direction of 'History'" (TSNW, 354). See, Theodore Parker, "Of Justice and Conscience," in *Views of Religion* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1885), 151.

short-sighted to claim that humans pass on and inherit genes alone without cultures. The opposite is the case: they go together. "Genes affect culture and culture affects genes."[9] Christakis' style and method resembles King's blended thinking and philosophizing. Like in Plato's *Republic*, King's fight for equality, justice, and well-being within the community is radiated by such *goodness*. Shelby and Terry's outstanding book shows that King's dream is our *shared world* as the beloved community, grounded in an ethics of *agape* and a view of personhood that "human worth lies in relatedness to God."[10] King's is not some abstract, intellectual dream, nor is it guided by a utilitarian calculus. It is, as Ronald Sundstrom concludes, "a process that involves the recognition of the sacredness of personhood, the limitations of human judgment, the condition of human suffering and oppression, the virtue of charity, and the role of grace. Judging the content of a person's character is hardly the faceless, ahistorical, quantifiable, and meritocratic calculation that some have misconceived it to be" (SNW, 136). What is most vital is that oppressed peoples, or those engaged in the struggle for social reform, do not succumb to the many destructive emotive forces that "Can produce myopic forms of self-pity, indiscriminate racial paranoia, and a politics and culture of nihilism" (SNW, 312).

9) Nicholas Christakis, *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2019), 367.

10) See King, "The Ethical Demand for Integration," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 122.