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# Martin Sostre on the Radical King

Austin McCoy

Two years after Dr. King's assassination, political prisoner Martin Sostre penned a tribute to the fallen leader. In "Martin Luther King was a Lawbreaker," Sostre waged a struggle against the mythologization and deradicalization of Dr. King that ensued in the wake of his murder. Instead of praising a distorted Dr. King that focused on his religious nonviolence, Sostre called for the preservation, and study, of a more complicated King that was religious, secular, and an evolving radical. Not only did Dr. King seek radical change, Sostre emphasized, but he did so by confronting the "white man's 'law and order'" with transgressive tactics.

This mythologizing, deradicalization, and whitewashing of Dr. King began the night of his assassination, April 4, 1968. In the wake of Dr. King's death, President Lyndon B. Johnson and Senator Robert F. Kennedy issued statements calling on Black Americans to adhere to Dr. King's nonviolent principles to squelch a violent national uprising. In a televised address to the nation, Johnson asked Americans "to reject the blind violence that has struck Dr. King, who lived by nonviolence." What is ironic about President Johnson's response was that Dr. King's speaking out against the U.S.'s escalation of war in Vietnam angered Johnson. Now, Johnson thought it was fit to use Dr. King to call for nonviolence at home. Even Dr. King's successor, Rev. Ralph Abernathy,

invoked his memory to stem an uprising in Memphis: “If a riot or violence would erupt in Memphis tonight, Dr. King in Heaven would not be pleased.” Even though Dr. King had recently called the U.S. government “the greatest purveyor of violence” in the world, political leaders used the fallen leader to discipline Black Americans reeling from racist violence. This initial effort to mobilize a narrow and “safe” version of Dr. King failed, as Black people across the country took to the streets in 120 cities in protest and to destroy property and symbols of structural racism.

Sostre pointed out political leaders’ attempts to sever the fallen leader from his politics. He noted “that King, like most of us, was steadily evolving and maturing ideologically.” This maturation was most evident in the final years of Dr. King’s life. In response to the intractable nature of structural racism and the U.S.’s escalation of its imperial war in Vietnam, Dr. King advocated for raising the temperature tactically and strategically. In his speeches and writings, Dr. King outlined a strategy for what he called “mass civil disobedience.” By this he meant engaging in massively disruptive forms of protest. In the context of the 1968 Poor Peoples’ Campaign that Dr. King helped to plan, this entailed “transportation tie ups and school boycotts,” and even jamming up hospitals with poor Americans seeking medical care. While Dr.

King interpreted the urban rebellions of the mid-to-late 1960s as responses to structural racism, massive civil disobedience represented a more strategic alternative, and one that would rely upon multiracial and class-based solidarity.

And while Dr. King expressed a radical politics well before the mid-1960s, his critique of U.S. racism and empire grew more strident in the last two years of his life. In addition to speaking out against the war in Vietnam, Dr. King also began speaking out against the “great triplets” of racism, militarism, and materialism while calling for a “revolution of values” grounded in more social democratic principles. Essentially, with his effort to organize the Poor Peoples’ Campaign and to stand in solidarity with Memphis sanitation workers, Dr. King had decided to wage a struggle against a violent society – a violent empire, a violent state, a violent capitalist economic system, violent culture, and white Americans who continued to demonstrate a willingness to inflict violence against those who struggled for human rights. Sostre acknowledged Dr. King’s radical trajectory: “Had it not been for his militant involvement in the struggle against white racist oppression: the Montgomery Bus Boycott, his civil rights marches, street demonstrations and confrontations with the pigs. . .his condemnation of U.S. racist aggression in Vietnam, and his demonstrations in support of labor strikes, King might have been just another

McNeeley T. Davis or some other petty, sell-out preacher-politician like those we have here in Buffalo-Mississippi.”

Sostre’s tribute to Dr. King two years after his assassination reminds us of the importance of examining the “radical King” instead of the man frozen in time at the March on Washington in August 1963. Sostre wrote that “only by carefully examining the life and works of Martin Luther King will one see how much King’s image has been distorted by the oppressor and kneegrow Toms. It will then become clear why it is precisely those racists who advocate ‘law and order’ that counsel us to emulate Martin Luther King – that is, the religious nonviolent King.” Sostre’s essay was even more vital as the nonviolent wing of the movement seemed to splinter while police departments continued their repressive campaigns against Black radicals, the US expanded its military campaign in Southeast Asia into Cambodia and Laos, and student protesters were murdered at Kent State and Jackson State. In “Martin Luther King Was a Lawbreaker,” Sostre reminds readers that powerful people and institutions abhor radicals. Nearly 75% of Americans viewed Dr. King unfavorably towards the end of his life. But, as Sostre illustrates, radicals prove useful to those in power upon death. The only way to oppose such cooptation is to wrestle with their deeds and

actions collectively, consider their ideas in all their complexity, and to uphold their legacy through continuous political struggle.

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# Martin Luther King Was A Lawbreaker

Martin Sostre

Special Supplement, April 1970, *Black News*

A note on  
*Black News*:

*Black News* was a newspaper edited and published by Martin Sostre from Walkill Prison in 1970, with logistical support from the Workers World Party (WWP). Sostre intended the paper to be Buffalo's first radical Black newspaper, written by and for the Black and Puerto Rican communities within the city. He planned to recruit young writers and editors from Buffalo and pay "newsboys" to distribute the paper on the East Side. Although originally intended to be a monthly newspaper, Sostre discontinued *Black News* and broke with his defense committee in May 1970 after they refused to publish an article he wrote calling for the capture and exchange of state agents with Black prisoners of war. The full run of *Black News* only lasted two full issues with a couple special supplements, including the following essay on Dr. King.

On the second anniversary of the murder of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., BLACK NEWS joins the nation and his family in mourning the irreparable loss of this great Civil Rights leader.

But since the examples that King set for us in defying and breaking the white man's "law and order", in willingly "paying dues" by going to jail, in being brutalized, and in finally making the supreme sacrifice in the cause of Black liberation from white racist oppression, are now threatened by a conspiracy between the oppressors and their willing Black tools, to minimize, pervert and suppress King's militant acts of defiance to white authority, it is my duty to alert my people to this plot for mass deception now being executing through the enemy's controlled news media.

As publisher and editor of BLACK NEWS - the only Black revolutionary newspaper in Western New York free to tell it like it really is - I offer this article as a tribute to the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. and to protect his legacy from our enemies who, not satisfied with having taken King's life, now seek to rob him in his grave of his greatest deeds and contributions to the Black liberation struggle: his militant mobilization of the Black masses for the purpose of confrontation with the white racist oppressor, violating white "law and order", undermining white authority, and radicalizing the Black masses.

The crush of work prevents me from delving into the impact that King's massive confrontations and defiance to white authority had on the consciousness of the youth and how in turn, the radicalized youth escalated the struggle and forced King to become more militant. I can only say that King, like most of us, was steadily evolving and maturing ideologically. A comparison of King's deeds

and speeches toward the end of his life with those following the Montgomery victory shows that he was much more militant in 1966, 1967 and 1968 than in the three years following the 1955 bus boycott. In fact, following the rebellion in Memphis of March 28 and 29, 1968 King threatened the white establishment with another demonstration of the type that led to the rebellion, if they didn't accede to the demands of the sanitation workers.

Getting back to the original subject, here are some questions that all thinking sisters and brothers should be asking the kneegrow preachers and politicians who on this second anniversary of King's murder, praise and eulogize King, his works and non-violent philosophy and advise us to incorporate in our lives King's philosophy and deeds: Since you claim to subscribe to the philosophy and ideals of Martin Luther King, how come you've never rebelled against, resisted and disobeyed the white man's unjust laws? King did. How come you've never been to jail? King did. How come you've never led a violent demonstration against the oppressor? King did in Memphis. How come you've never been brutalized? King was.

No, these local sell-out, power-structure kneegrow preachers and politicians are not followers of Martin Luther King; if they were, they would be rebels like King was. They would be out in the streets agitating and exhorting our people to disobey the white man's unjust "law and order", instead of hiding inside their churches and offices preaching safe, white-approved sermons and passing the collection plates to finance their high living. King was not assassinated for preaching disobedience to the oppressor's unjust laws, he was assassinated for embodying that disobedience by personally leading his people in street demonstrations in defiance to the cracker's law

and order.

Martin Luther King's fame was based on an act of rebellion against the white oppressor's law: Rosa Park's refusal to obey the law requiring Blacks to sit in the back of the bus. King took over leadership of the successful boycott which the Black colony of Montgomery, Alabama organized against the white bus company. His many other acts of resistance to and defiance of the oppressor's law and order are too well known to require repetition. It will suffice to say that Martin Luther King Jr. was a rebel and lawbreaker. Study the photographs of King being escorted down the street to jail by two cops, his arm twister behind his back; study another photo showing King inside the police station being booked before a counter with a pig twisting his arm; study still another showing King sitting down the numbers across his chest being mugged; then study the one showing him dead on the balcony just after being shot. If he wasn't a rebel and lawbreaker, why did those pigs brutalize him, put him in jail, and murder him?

The white racist power structured their kneegrow helpers seek to play down the militant deeds of King to focus our attention on his religious sermons. They deliberately play down the fact that he was arrested several times for breaking the white oppressor's laws. They deliberately play down the above described photographs showing him being arrested and brutalized by the pigs for resisting the white man's "law and order". You'll notice in the photos the pain reflected on King's face and the way his body is contorted by the pig's combination of vicious arm twisting and shoving. Having personally experienced this identical type of brutality, I know exactly what King felt in having his arm viciously twisted behind his back and lifted toward his

head, while at the same time being bodily pushed forward. No, they do not sell this photograph in color and framed - it reveals too much. Nor did they use it on the jacket covers of King's books or albums, or on the front covers of magazines; nor do they blow this photograph up for posters for memorial services, tributes, window displays, etc.

And they suppress the photographs and facts concerning the last demonstration led by King on March 28, 1968, one week before his death. This resulted in the greatest rebellion of the Black colony of Memphis against the white oppressor. It was repressed only after a full division (12,000) of white troops were called by the Governor to reinforce the thousands of pig cops, sheriffs, state troopers and their deputies which had been defeated by the heroic Black revolutionaries. Only by such massive reinforcement and the imposition of a 7 P.M. to 5 A.M. curfew was the rebellion finally repressed. One Black youth was killed, 50 persons injured, 300 arrested and 150 white-owned building and stores in the Black colony burned.

By projecting his speeches instead of his lawbreaking deeds, the oppressor seeks to conceal from our people, particularly the youth, the militant side of Martin Luther King - the side the white man feared the most. Only the non-violent, religious side is presented. Thus a one-sided, distorted image of this great leader is deliberately projected by the white-controlled communication media. Like they project the high-sounding phrases on Liberty and Equality for all men, mouthed by the so-called "founding fathers" George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, et al, but concealed the fact that while they talked this shit, they oppressed Black slaves on their plantations, on land stolen from the Indians. Like they

project the image of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, while concealing the fact that Lincoln was a white racist who stated that he believed in white supremacy and that the only reason he freed the slaves was not because of the inherent evil of slavery, but because there was no other way to save the Union of Southern and Northern states.

Can anyone deny that it was King's militancy, his willingness to pay dues by going to jail, getting brutalized and killed defying whitey's unjust "law and order" that distinguished him from the ordinary jack-leg preacher? Had it not been for his militant involvement in the struggle against white racist oppression: the Montgomery bus boycott, his civil rights marches, street demonstrations and confrontations with the pigs, his defiance and violation of court injunctions, his condemnation of U.S. racist aggression in Vietnam, and his demonstrations in support of labor strikes, King might have been just another McNeeley, T. Davis or some other petty, sell-out preacher-politician like those we have here in Buffalo-Mississippi.

The difference between King and the kneegrow so-called leaders in the Buffalo is that King was for real while the Buffalo kneegrows are bullshitting. These spineless cowards are afraid of the white man's jail. All the cracker's got to do to keep Buffalo's house kneegrows in line when they get a little uppity, is to have one of the robed pigs sign a paper ordering them to get back in line, and the scared kneegrows bust their own asses running obey boss-man's law. The white man's "law order", whether in the form of statutes, court orders or pig's verbal commands, did not scare King. He disobeyed them all and provided the personal example for his people. King had no fear of the white man's jail. He was a true



leader. He was a man.

So don't let the white racist establishment and their house kneegrows deceive you by their one-sided projection of the religious, non-violent King, while playing down, concealing and suppressing the image most relevant to the Black liberation struggle: the secular King engaged in street confrontations, the rebel, the lawbreaker, the agitator, the brutalized by the pigs, the assassinated - all for the cause of Black liberation. King's militant actions spoke louder than his words, and it was for his acts of defiance to the white man's unjust laws unlawfully and forcibly imposed upon us - and not for his sermons - that he was assassinated.

To reject the rebel, lawbreaker King image in favor of the religious non-violent image of King, is to reject King and his deeds, not only because the real King was both religious and secular, but because he performed his greatest deeds not in the church preaching about what Jesus said 2,000 years ago, but in the streets, taking part in the contemporary struggle against the white racists' oppressive law and order.

Only by carefully examining the life and works of Martin Luther will one see how much King's image has been distorted by the oppressor and his kneegrow Toms. It will then become clear why it is precisely those racists who advocate "law and order" that counsel us to emulate Martin Luther King - that is, the religious non-violent King. This, of itself, is the coat-puller, for we instinctively know that when our oppressor tells us to do something, we should do the very opposite.

Those not yet ready to join the revolutionary vanguard and go all the way in the struggle for Black liberation by picking up the gun, bomb and Molotov and by capturing foreign diplomats of NATO countries, Israel,

South Africa and other U.S. allies, to exchange for the release of Black revolutionaries like Fred (Ahmed) Evans, Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, Panther 21, etc. kidnapped by the enemy, can at least follow the example set by Martin Luther King and refuse to obey the oppressor's "law and order" based on the U.S. Constitution which was drafted by slave-owning oppressors of our people and imposed on us by force. We the vanguard of the revolutionary struggle in the Black colony of Buffalo who are getting our shit together for June 1st and thereafter, will Viet Cong the pigs and their loyal kneegrow dogs. All we ask you to do is to follow the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. - that is, the rebellious, lawbreaking King.

Brother Martin, Political Prisoner #9273

March 24, 1970  
Wallkill Concentration Camp  
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Wallkill, New York 12589

Martin Sostre (1923-2015) was a revolutionary anarchist and anti-imperialist political prisoner and jailhouse lawyer. He advocated for prisoners' rights to religious freedom, political expression, and due process regarding prison censorship and solitary confinement. He was also a teacher and mentor, as owner of the radical Pan-Africanist Afro Asian Book Shop in Buffalo, New York and a community organizer with the Juvenile Education and Awareness Project in Passaic, New Jersey.

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