

SEEING BACKWARD TO LOOK AHEAD

- Bart Schultz*

The sum of Martin Luther King's four catastrophic forces—militarism, materialism, racism, and poverty—point to something larger in the American empire, namely, the spiritual blackout in the country. This spiritual blackout is the relative eclipse of integrity and honesty, trust and courage, in the dominant cultural life of the nation. We live in an age of impunity and mendacity—where fewer have responsibility for what they say and do and where the end justifies the means (success trumps character). King foresaw this deadly spiritual disease as a sign and symbol of the unraveling of the American empire.— Cornel West

The original 1892 version of the American Pledge of Allegiance, which appeared in the family magazine *The Youth's Companion*, read simply “I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands: one Nation indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.” The specification that the flag in question was that of the United States of America only came in the aftermath of World War I, apparently out of a reactionary fear that a nation of immigrants might pledge to their home flags rather than their new one, and the addition that this was ‘one Nation, under God’ was added even later, the better to distinguish the U.S. from the regimes of godless communism.¹

Of course, even from the start, the Pledge was a piece of nativist patriotic gore, designed, like the World's Columbian Exposition, to help commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas by trumpeting national greatness. Although *The Youth's Companion* was not at this point a conspicuously political or even youth-focused publication, and featured writings by Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, and other notables, the Pledge appeared as part of a program for a ‘National School Celebration of Columbus Day,’ with the command to: ‘Let every pupil and friend of the Schools who reads *The Companion*, at once present

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¹ Some of the above facts about the history of the Pledge are sketched in the very helpful work by Randall Curren and Charles Dorn, *Patriotic Education in a Global Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 52

personally the following programme to the Teachers, Superintendents, School Boards, and Newspapers in the towns and cities in which they read.' The program involved, in addition to the flag raising and Pledge (accompanied by a rather too Nazi-like salute, dropped during World War II), the reading of a Proclamation by the U.S. President, a Prayer, a Song, an Address, and even an Ode, with the whole ritual to be launched 'simultaneously with the dedicatory exercise of the World's Columbian Exposition grounds in Chicago' in order to 'give an impressive unity to the popular celebration.'² The Pledge, though not the rest of the commemoration, steadily caught on, and U.S. public schools have had schoolyard flagpoles ever since.

Although the Pledge is no longer a constant of civic education in the U.S., it obviously still has many champions, the latest being President Donald Trump and his followers, who tout it, along with the rituals of the National Anthem, as a litmus test of patriotism. That this invention of tradition had its source in the mind of a nineteenth-century critic of plutocratic capitalism is a fact that, like most facts of political history, seems to have eluded the President. But the original version, for all the patriotic excess of its context, was in fact penned by Francis Bellamy, an ardent social reformer and Christian socialist minister who headed the Boston Nationalist Club, devoted to realizing the utopian ideas of his cousin Edward Bellamy, the author of the wildly popular 1888 utopian novel *Looking Backward*. *Looking Backward* features a young Bostonian named Julian West who wakes up from a hypnotically induced sleep one hundred and thirteen years, three months, and eleven days later, in the year 2000, and is shown around a transformed Boston by a Dr. Leete, who explains to him how the nationalization of the economy has eliminated inequality, reduced working hours, allowed for early retirement, and liberated women. Apparently, the bit about 'Liberty and Justice for all' carried some weight in the family, even if this was mainly on the domestic side, as part of a Nationalist program for the U.S.

Although Edward himself waffled about using the term 'socialism,' preferring to appeal to the respectable middle and upper classes in other terms, there can be little doubt that his work, with its sharp attacks on inequality and the injustices of capitalism, and soothing visions of a smoothly run future egalitarian state, did a great deal to advance the socialist cause, despite or because of his eschewal of violent revolution in favor of top-down reform facilitated by the increasing concentration of corporate power. Increasing monopoly, the Nationalists held, would build the economic apparatus that the state could then appropriate ready-made. Cousin Francis, like many other admirers of *Looking Backward*, had fewer scruples about the term 'socialism' when agitating for justice for all, and he happily applied the term to Jesus, which did not help his clerical career.

² For the above quotations and the entire program, see http://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/wp-content/uploads/satevepost/1892_09_08-446_YouthsCompanion.pdf

At any rate, the form of ‘Nationalism’ in question — the favorite Bellamy ‘ism’ — was primarily about taking egalitarian economic reformism and control of productive resources to the national level, rather than stoking a belligerent, self-assertive approach to other nations, though it was scarcely devoid of racism and nativist prejudice. The Bellamy cousins worried about both plutocracy and immigrants of color. As with the Declaration of Independence, the useable philosophical history in their work calls for very careful extraction.

Not surprisingly, those who would ‘Make America Great Again’ are apt to have a very weak grasp of the actual, complex political history that they claim they would have us re-enact. ‘Restorative nostalgia,’ as Michael Robertson is at pains to point out in his engaging work, *The Last Utopians: Four Late 19th Century Visionaries and Their Legacy*, is the attempt to ‘impose on the present an idealized conception of the past,’ and it can be a very dangerous thing indeed, whether in the brutal atrocities of the Nazis, or in the more recent and less brutal but still troubling ‘projects of national restoration’ such as the ‘efforts to “Make America Great Again” and, in the U.K., to “take back control” from the European Union.’³

Trump’s followers ought obviously to be reviving the 19th century critique of plutocracy; instead, too many of them are supporting an ethically rudderless plutocrat in reviving one of the worst sides of U.S. history—namely, anti-immigrant bigotry and racism. This is clearly not the better side of historical Nationalism, and it is rather worse than many of the fanciful inventions of history famously depicted by Eric Hobsbawm in *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*.⁴ Richard Rorty’s dream, inspired by James Baldwin, of ‘achieving our country’ seems to have taken a nightmarish turn.⁵ The Trump regime does that — it turns everything into perversity, so that the expression ‘the movement’ comes to apply to the very things the civil rights movement opposed. ‘Fake news’ gets applied in reverse Chomskyian fashion to the all too rare actual news, and so on. It is ‘restorative nostalgia’ with all the twistedness and compulsive attention-grabbing of ‘Reality’ television, all belligerence, bellicosity, and bigotry.

What can academic philosophers say or do about this world of ‘spiritual blackout,’ as Cornel West labels it? Rorty was at least correct in his acidic sarcasm about how leftist academics need to get their hands dirty, engage with non-academics, and get over the self-serving conviction that ‘they gave at the office.’ Moreover, as the

³ Robertson, *The Last Utopians* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 270.

⁴ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition 2012).

⁵ See Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, new edition 1999).

United States veers toward chaos rather than community, with an emboldened racism spreading like climate change enabled wildfires, simple calls for civility and reasonableness in public debate — calls that can too easily be co-opted to mask the frightening political realities — sound hollow. After all, Martin Luther King Jr. was civil and reasonable, but he took the fight for social justice into a ‘war without violence’, calling for confrontation and sacrifice to expose the bigotry that needed to be overcome on the road to the ‘beloved community’ where justice is indeed the public face of love. Testifying through active, courageous nonviolent protest—and civil disobedience—to the evils of racism, poverty, materialism, and militarism was not uncivil or unreasonable, but it was a deeper spiritual commitment than the public reason of the public sphere of liberalism. As Brandon Terry put it, “When leveraged against oppression and resentment, leavened with a spirit of love and forgiveness, and articulated through a willingness to take on more suffering than one’s opponent, nonviolent coercion may be justified”.⁶ This is not just another call for community service.

That line from Terry comes from an excellent and illustrative recent book, *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Terry, and his co-editor Tommie Shelby, bring together an impressive cast of academics in an effort to both insert MLK into the philosophical canon and provoke today’s academic philosophers to do more to follow his example:

Unfortunately, the purification of contemporary philosophy in the twentieth century has contributed to a circling of the wagons around research institutions. Ensnared within departments of research universities, philosophy is now the domain of professionally trained specialists who employ a guild-specific language. Such a self-reverential approach to the philosopher’s task has led to what some now regard as a disciplinary pathology. As a result, organic public intellectuals like Martin Luther King, Jr., are ignored at best, and viewed with supercilious disdain at worst. Political theorists measure activist intellectuals against their more ‘rigorous’ and ‘original’ academic counterparts. The former become less deserving of scholarly engagement. These sorts of professional developments say more about the academic discipline of philosophy and field of political theory than they do about Martin Luther King, Jr.’s philosophical and political import.⁷

That academic philosophy in the U.S. and elsewhere desperately needs such tough love is glaringly evident, if only from the American Philosophical Association’s belated efforts to gather the relevant data and promote a

⁶ Tommie Shelby and Brandon Terry, eds., *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press at Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 305.

⁷ Shelby and Terry, *Id.*, pp. 340-41.

more diverse and inclusive educational program.⁸ It is not merely King's organic public intellectual status that has kept him largely out of academic philosophy; the entrenched Eurocentrism of English-language academic philosophy has largely excluded all peoples of color, especially women. The philosophers being read and discussed are predominantly white and male, and they are being read and discussed by living philosophers who are predominantly white and male. As Elizabeth Anderson put it, in her compelling Dewey Lecture 'Journeys of a Feminist Pragmatist': "In North America, philosophy is the most insular, and least demographically diverse, of all the humanities."⁹ It is of course laudable of the APA to start taking action on this matter. But one cannot help but wonder whether the profession could really be the repository of much wisdom when on this front it has lagged behind every other discipline in the humanities and most other academic disciplines as well, including medicine and economics. Over thirty years of teaching at the University of Chicago has only reinforced my conviction that academic philosophers do not give up their Eurocentric and masculinist addictions easily, or even feel obligated to call out the deep racism of such figures as Kant.¹⁰ Simple candor seems uncollegial.¹¹

Philosophy's house is still not in order, and the continuing need for a more critical and reflexive perspective on philosophy as a discipline, despite the risk to the ever-present marketing drive to bring in more majors, is clear even from the work just cited. *To Shape a New World*, excellent as it is, still leans too heavily toward the hagiographic. More attention to many of the figures in King's circle and those carrying on his legacy would have deepened the account of him. Big name philosophers from Rousseau to Rawls and Nietzsche to Niebuhr get some recognition, as of course does Gandhi. But all those other influential organic intellectuals who were members of King's inner circle get skirted or scanted—Timuel D. Black, Stanley David Levison, Vincent Harding, James Bevel, Bernard LaFayette, Fred Shuttlesworth, James Lawson, Jesse Jackson, Dorothy Cotton, Diane Nash, even Coretta Scott King, receive little mention, despite their profound influence on King. The editors allow that they invited the contributors to focus on some key works by King, but that form of textualism can be more limiting than they seem to recognize. The book can leave one feeling that this is King largely without the community that mattered to him the most, the lives that infused his works. After all,

⁸ See <https://www.apaonline.org/page/demographics>

⁹ Anderson, 'Journeys of a Feminist Pragmatist,' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, p. 84.

¹⁰ See, as a still much needed corrective, Julia K. Ward and Tommie Lott, eds., *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

¹¹ For more on this, see my 'Not Eye to Eye: A Comment on the Commentaries,' available at https://www.academia.edu/37104307/NOT_EYE_TO_EYE_A_COMMENT_ON_THE_COMMENTARIES Also, my blog post 'On Not Seeing in Philosophy,' available at https://www.academia.edu/28696890/On_Not_Seeing_in_Philosophy

Coretta Scott King was the one who really pushed her husband in the Gandhian direction, and it is telling that both she and their son Dexter became vegetarians, thinking that King himself had not consistently followed out his debt to Gandhi.

This is not simply a worry about the need to recapture ‘ideas in context,’ as one familiar and influential approach to the history of philosophy would have it, as an antidote to textualism and a fixation on ‘great men.’ The concern is to capture the lives, the works, and the places of real people building actual political community. Disembodied ideas can be used to dodge the tough issues just as handily as hagiography. To again cite Anderson on academic philosophy: “It is best able to expose the intuitions of the socially powerful as ignorant, parochial, and biased by welcoming the widest range of diverse others into its practices, and incorporating them as genuine equals. This is not just a matter of error-correction. Welcoming a wider range of people into the practice of philosophy also entails welcoming a wider range of questions and concerns. It entails expanding the canon, and reading beyond it. In my current research in the history of egalitarianism, I have found authors not in the philosophical canon at least as exciting to study as the canonized. How can we seriously philosophize about freedom without reading Harriet Jacobs, Ottobah Cugoano, and Oloudah Equiano?”¹²

Perhaps some of the main points here can be made with reference to a recent work that I was honored to edit—Timuel D. Black’s memoir *Sacred Ground: The Chicago Streets of Timuel Black*.¹³ Timuel Black is a legend on Chicago’s South Side—an African American civil rights activist, educator and oral historian who, at age 100, is still carrying on the struggle for social justice. Black worked closely with King and helped organize the Chicago contingent of the famous 1963 March on Washington. He also worked to get Harold Washington elected mayor of Chicago (the City’s first black mayor), and supported Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr. in his presidential campaigns and Carol Mosely Braun in her successful effort to become the first black woman to represent Illinois in the U.S. Senate. He helped guide the young Barack Obama, when Obama was building his political career on the South Side, and in the video announcement¹⁴ of the Chicago site selection for the Obama Presidential Center, the first voice one hears is his. He was one of the first academics to start teaching African

¹² Anderson, ‘Journeys,’ p. 86.

¹³ Black, *Sacred Ground: The Chicago Streets of Timuel Black, as Told to Susan Klonsky*, edited by Bart Schultz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019). See also Black’s two volumes of oral history, *Bridges of Memory, Vols. 1 and 2* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the DuSable Museum, 2005 and 2008). See also the video of “The Life and Times of Timuel D. Black: A Centenary Symposium,” available at https://www.academia.edu/38011194/The_Life_and_Times_of_Timuel_D._Black_A_Centenary_Symposium

¹⁴ For the full video, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2Q3xFpf-KE>

American history in the Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago City Colleges—calling it ‘corrective’ American history, when challenged by white administrators--and his educational work has always been tied to his political activism.

Yet despite these many important achievements, the story he wanted to tell in *Sacred Ground* was a collective, communal one. The title itself refers to Chicago’s Bronzeville Neighborhood where he has lived nearly all of his life — the community that was called the ‘Black Belt’ or ‘Black Metropolis,’ formed by the racial segregation that forced (with such tools as restrictive covenants and outright violence) the blacks coming North from the South in the first and second Great Migrations to live in densely crowded conditions in a limited city space. But Chicago’s Bronzeville eventually rivalled Harlem as the black cultural capital of the U.S., launching such luminaries as John Johnson, the founder of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, the artists Charles White and Margaret Burroughs, writers like Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks, politicians like Harold Washington, and so many others. But for Black, his history is inseparable from the history of Bronzeville, and that history is about much more than celebrity:

When I thought about writing this book, I thought there must be something of wider value in my stories. I worried that this book might seem vain or egotistical. The fact is, I don’t give a damn about Tim Black as some sort of a shining light. Again, I consider my story to be fairly typical of men and women of my generation. I believe my life is fairly representative of the lives of many of the children of migrants from the Deep South. My story’s typical-ness is precisely where its value lies. What might be learned from our stories? Considering where we started, how did we get over--or not get over--coming up the way we did? Sometimes it amazes me, even now.¹⁵

He did not want to dwell on his marriages or children or personal issues that seemed too removed from the story of his community, the story he often recounts in long, winding, somewhat Southern fashion, with lots of backstory. And in this story is a remarkable story of optimistic overcoming.

Although we moved frequently there was always a neighborhood identity and a feeling of neighborliness. Both before and during the Great Depression, one did not feel a sense of shame or embarrassment to borrow a necessity from the neighbors. We all did it. Nor was there a psychological feeling of depression. It was a Depression but we were not depressed. There was poverty, but we

¹⁵ Black, *Sacred Ground*, p. 7.

*were not poverty stricken. We took care of each other. There was never a feeling of hunger or of not being able to get help to pay the bills or the rent. We never imagined we were going to starve or become homeless. Thus I do not recall being frightened.*¹⁶

There is some form of nostalgia at work here, but it is certainly not ‘restorative nostalgia.’ Black is far too aware of the historical injustices, complexities and paradoxes, of how his ‘sacred ground’ was created by the racial prejudice of whites. As with Robertson’s approach, Black’s can be better identified with Svetlana Boym’s notion of ‘reflective nostalgia,’ which is ‘a flexible and dynamic mode of thought that looks to the past for practices that can be adapted to bring about a better future.’ Black, like Robertson, is best described as a ‘partial utopian’ who admires those ‘living out possibilities for a transformed future in their communities, their schools, and their everyday lives.’¹⁷ His ‘sacred ground’ is and has always been a source of just such possibilities, of the resistance of those forced to be ‘twice as good to get half as far.’

Indeed, like MLK himself, Black found a larger, place-based identity such that his destiny was simply part of a garment of destiny. As King put it in his book *Strength to Love*, in words that Coretta Scott King celebrated as at the heart of his philosophy, we are ‘caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.’¹⁸ Consider, too, this passage, from King’s *The Trumpet of Conscience*: “*When an individual is no longer a true participant, when he no longer feels a sense of responsibility to his society, the content of democracy is emptied. When culture is degraded and vulgarity enthroned, when the social system does not build security but induces peril, inexorably the individual is impelled to pull away from a soulless society.*”¹⁹

King could have been describing the spiritual blackout of the U.S. at present, when vulgarity is enthroned like never before. And in contending with that condition, Black, without the comforts of King’s religious convictions, and even at age 100, retains his belief that, in Sam Cooke’s words, ‘a change is gonna come’ and that the future will belong to those who fight for it. Perhaps it is time for philosophers to learn from this elder, to teach a ‘corrective’ history of philosophy, and to never let a hothouse, intuition mongering academic community disable one from being able to talk across the divisions of race, class, and gender in an actual

¹⁶ Black, *Id.*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Robertson, *The Last Utopians*, p. 270.

¹⁸ King, *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 69.

¹⁹ King, *The Trumpet of Conscience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), p. 44.

community, mobilizing in the continuing struggle for justice that calls for active sacrifice, rather than the ‘paralysis of analysis,’ as King put it.

Black is certainly disturbed by the vulgarity now enthroned. But with his long experience, he knows how to stay alive and attuned to what is coming. His form of nostalgia does not feel like a nostalgia trip; he is forever open to new causes—environmental justice, gender justice—and hopes to live to see the first woman president of the U.S. The ‘perfect moral storm’ of climate change, a challenge without historical precedent, is not evaded through this form of nostalgia, but recognized in all its daunting complexity. His love for the history of his ‘sacred ground’ has rendered him more alert to the serious problems confronting the world, not less so. He is living history and more—a living embodiment of that form of Deweyan reconstructive and historically aware philosophy and democratic community that could never think of academics as a form of monastic retreat removed from the serious and all too real problems of the world. And he would be the first to say that he is only a product of his ‘sacred ground,’ and that if one wants to learn more about him one should read about the life in community that gets recounted in *Sacred Ground*, with all those stories about people both celebrated and ordinary, who lived and worked together.

Hopefully, the recent midterm elections in the U.S. signal that the change is coming—Black’s favored party, the very Deweyan Democratic Socialists of America, has been steadily gaining ground ever since Bernie Sanders gave socialism a boost. It is a remarkable achievement of the last ten years that the word ‘socialism’ is no longer a red flag for a wide swath of U.S. politics. But the Pledge of Allegiance may need further correction. The original version was better, but the ecopoet Gary Snyder’s version, with its invocation of the First Peoples, is better still, in this changing world:

*I pledge allegiance to the soil of Turtle Island, and to the beings who thereon dwell one ecosystem in diversity under the sun with joyful interpenetration for all.*²⁰

²⁰ From Snyder’s poem ‘For All,’ available at http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/snyder/onlinepoems.htm .