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The Unknown Story of a Counter War on Poverty

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign

Sylvie Laurent, Sciences Po
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In a brief period from 1964 to 1965, Lyndon Johnson declared a "war on poverty" and signed the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. Fifty years later, it is fitting to explore the entanglement of these revolutionary policies on poverty and race, two dimensions of social policy that have been intertwined throughout the history of the United States.

The first American war on poverty was waged in the 1930's when the New Deal enacted an unprecedented set of measures aimed at eradicating the cruel misery that had swept across the nation. The Great Depression had given a face to poverty and New Deal photographers, social commentators, and moral educators captured the courage, resilience and tenacity of the dispossessed. But Roosevelt's "war on poverty" was badly crippled by its inability to address racism and segregation. Not only did it not challenge segregation but some scholars have argued that the policies enacted on behalf of the underprivileged actually contributed to the deep-rooted segregation system (Katzelzon 2005). In order to assuage the South, the massive social engine of the federal government remained deliberately oblivious to African Americans' concerns.

When Johnson launched his war on poverty, he was adamant about confronting FDR's compromise. Beyond a massive expansion of welfare programs, the cornerstone of Johnson's war was its Community Action Programs, which sought to give blacks real equal opportunity. Johnson cleverly bypassed southern states' obstruction to racial equality by circumventing local welfare authorities (Quadagno, 1994). But while noble and ambitious in intent, and initially greeted as such by Martin Luther King Jr., Johnson's war on poverty proved unable to reverse the growing trend of racial economic disparities. The urban riots that erupted from 1964 to 1968 in impoverished ghettos tragically illustrated such shortcomings. King would ultimately issue a sobering evaluation of Johnson's promising initiative: "… it did not take long to discover that the government was only willing to appropriate such a limited budget that it could not launch a good skirmish against poverty, much less a full scale war" (1967, 86)

Although Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King Jr. had been "virtually co-conspirators" on the civil rights legislation (Kotz, 2005), they parted ways on the war on poverty because King saw the Vietnam War as destructive of anti-poverty programs.

In April 1967, at the Riverside Church Meeting, he explained how Johnson's war was actually a war to the poor:

> "There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor -- both black and white -- through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated, as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction

> tube. So, I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such."

One voice among many dissenters, King publicly lambasted Johnson's faint-hearted program and orchestrated a radical counteraction in the months preceding his own assassination. He sought to truly empower the poor and to succeed through revolutionary reforms where Johnson had failed. For him, substantive racial equality entailed an ambitious federal program to tackle the structural causes of joblessness and economic injustice. In 1967, King and grassroots civil rights activists lauched a "poor people's campaign" whose goals were an Economic Bill of Rights and a true national recognition of the alienation of the poor in affluent times. As this paper will argue, the poor people's campaign had a vexed relationship with Johnson's war on poverty, for it was meant to be its cohesive alternative while building upon the bottom-up mobilization the Community Action Programs had spawned. But whereas Johnson designed his policies to redress past racial wrongs, King used the language of class.

King's assassination struck a blow at what could have been the promising "second phase" of the civil rights movement: a race-neutral set of demands for structural reforms and universal social policies. This paper will first demonstrate that Johnson's anti-poverty agenda was inextricably related to the black liberation movement, which initially wholeheartedly supported a war on poverty it had helped to set in motion. As the scope and intensity of Johnson's policies decreased and their key features revealed their shortcomings, civil rights leaders, and King in particular, voiced their discontent and kept pushing for job creation and massive redistribution. In a third part, I will examine how the poor people's campaign, obscured by mainstream narratives, offered a social-democratic counter-discourse to anti-welfare rhetoric and mainstream anti-poverty theories.

1- Johnson's War on Poverty: The Civil Rights Revolution by Other Means

a- Freedom to vote, freedom from want: toward equal economic opportunity

When assessing the public policies implemented to fight black poverty during the Johnson administration, the major civil rights legislation of 1964-1965 should be regarded as noteworthy parts of Johnson's comprehensive anti-poverty package. The Civil Rights Act was indeed an almost radical piece of social legislation, compelling, for instance, the federal government to make real the citizenship rights of black workers and employees (Lichtenchtein in Milkis and Mileur, 2005). As Bailey & Danziger (2013) also argue, the "Johnson administration used the federal purse to desegregate schools, hospitals community boards, and neighborhood programs. As new grants flowed, threats to withhold funding made compliance with the Civil Rights Act a pocket-book issue". Federal money and power was used to dismantle segregation and emancipate blacks from economic exploitation. Recent and compelling scholarship has indeed vindicated the far-reaching economic gains of the civil rights bills. The right to work in industries previously segregated (including public services) opened major opportunities for black workers. As Gavin Wright (2013) shows, the economic impact of such measures on the upward mobility of black Americans was significant in the South. He demonstrates, for instance, how the opening to black workers of the textile industry, "the most extreme case of segregation", was "a true accomplishment of the Civil Rights Act" (105).

Examples abound of the ripple effects of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts on the economic life of black America. The freedom to vote and the ability to elect officials of their choice increased state distributions to localities with higher proportions of black residents. Courting the black vote, southern legislators transferred more funds to black localities, allocating most of the money to education in black counties. Such shifts in the distribution of state funds proved crucial in improving blacks' socio-economic status (Cascio and Washington, 2012). It has also been documented that black elected officials in mostly black areas, particularly black mayors, had a positive impact on black unemployment of their constituents (Nye, Rainer & Stratmann; 2010).

More broadly, if black poverty sharply decreased between the 50's and the 70's, much of the credit, according to Wright, goes to Johnson's Great Society initiatives. In a private conversation with King, Johnson emphasized that his 8 billion of public spending for health care, education and poverty would directly benefit those "who earn less than $2,000 a year. With a wink he added: "You know who earns less than $2,000 a year, don't you?" (in Kotz, 253). The president was clearly intent on specifically addressing black poverty. The overall outcome of his deed is positive: the black poverty rate of 55.1 percent was just over three times the white rate in 1959, but it dropped to 32.2 percent in 1972 (Fletcher, 2013). Over 1961–69, unemployment for nonwhites fell from 12% to 6% and from 1959 to 1974, black poverty plummeted from 55% to 30%.

The intertwining of the civil rights bills with the war on poverty was eloquently articulated by Lyndon Johnson a year after their adoptions. Johnson's Commencement Address at Howard University, "To Fulfill These Rights" on June 4, 1965 was, in this regard, revolutionary. Indeed, the problems of African-Americans were addressed through the specific question of economic opportunity and justice: "We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and equality as a result" (Johnson, 1965). The speech pointed to the inherent limitations of formal justice absent the economic empowerment of black Americans:

> Thirty-five years ago the rate of unemployment for Negroes and Whites was about the same. Tonight, the Negro rate is twice as high (…) From 1952 to 1963, the median income of Negro families compared to whites actually dropped from 57% to 53% (…) Of course Negro Americans as well as white Americans have shared in our rising national abundance. But the harsh fact of the matter is that in the battle for true equality too many-far too many-are losing ground every day. (1965)

Quite forcefully, Johnson was envisioning acts of "corrective justice" for African-Americans, by virtue of the legacy of their suffering (Katznelson, 2005). Undeniably, Johnson understood that economic justice could not be peripheral to the emancipation of blacks. He pushed through an unprecedented amount of antipoverty legislation which, at its inception, accurately grappled with problems affecting low-skilled workers, most of them African-American. In this regard, the "Manpower Development and Training Act" (which included the Job Corps), launched in 1962 and expanded during the war on poverty reflected such genuine concern for economic equality rather than for efficiency (Holzer, 2012).

Although some historians contend that the "War on Poverty" was not intended to primarily address black poverty or to cater to black voters (Brauer, 1982), with more than half the black population living in poverty by January 8, 1964, it is hard to decouple Johnson's poverty programs from his racial concerns. In a special message to Congress on 16 March 1964, Johnson called for "'an America in which every citizen shares all the opportunities of this society, in which every man has a chance to advance his welfare to the limit of his capacities" (in Podell, 726). If he strategically stressed justice was to be for *all* Americans (not just blacks) in order to pass his Economic Opportunity Act through Congress and get public support, the motive of racial equality was hard to conceal.

Black leaders like unionist A. Philip Randolph or, later, Martin Luther King Jr. had been aware since the early civil rights movement that economic progress was the *sine qua non* for substantial civil rights advances. No real enfranchisement could be reached without economic gain. But no economic gain was within reach in the Jim Crow framework. The Howard University speech sounded like the more fitting answer to civil rights leaders' concerns about the substance of the formal equality bestowed on blacks by way of Constitutional legislation. Drafted by political scientist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the

speech was naturally widely praised by black activists. Martin Luther King Jr. called the president to commend the intervention, hopeful that it would be followed by an announcement of large-scale public policies on behalf of the disadvantaged. Indeed, counter to the mainstream narrative of the period, economic issues were always a prime concern for civil rights organizations, especially the northern ones (specifically for the Urban League, CORE and the NAACP), while in the South, SNCC activists were very early on engaged on behalf of the poor (Paden). The "Dual Agenda" (Hamilton & Hamilton) of most black groups, fairly documented, is at odds with Assistant Secretary of Labor and "War on Poverty" engineer Daniel Patrick Moynihan's contention that:

> At this time the American poor, black and white, were surprisingly inert. The Negro civil rights movement in the South was still just that: a movement in the South for civil rights. There was almost no economic content to the protest.... The war on poverty was not declared at the behest of the poor: it was declared in their interest by persons confident of their own judgment on such matters (Moynihan, 1970: 24-25).

Social scientists certainly played a critical role, and both the Kennedy and Johnson administration were heavily influenced by converging publications advocating a massive attack on domestic poverty. As early as 1958, John Kenneth Galbraith's *Affluent Society* pointed to this pressing issue. He was followed in 1962 by Gabriel Kolko who published his *Wealth and Power in America*, James Morgan (*Income and Welfare in the United States*), and by the riveting *Other America* of Michael Harrington and its widely read review by Dwight McDonald in *The New Yorker (*Hamilton, 1971). But if historians have mostly focused on the role of social scientists, experts, economic advisors and other consultants to identify the initiators of the "War on Poverty", grassroots organizing and bottom-up incentives should and must be reevaluated.

One year before the Economic Opportunity Act, United Auto Worker president Walter Reuther launched a "Citizen's Crusade Against Poverty" (CCPA). A broad interracial coalition supported this call for massive public spending and significant measures to "bring the Disadvantaged back to the mainstream of American life". A "who's who of the labor union-liberal lobby" (Chappell, 22) the CCPA also reached out to religious groups and grassroots organizing. Notably, almost all black leaders endorsed Reuther's "crusade": A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King among others had indeed been long-time advocates of anti-poverty programs. Social-Democrats like Randolph or Rustin had bound civil rights issues to the labor struggle, conscious that unions and their Democratic allies in Congress were at the same time the "vanguard of federal efforts to expand policies for the poor and a key obstacle to implementing effective policies" (Meir, 4).

As Johnson put his policies in motion, social democrat activist and King advisor Bayard Rustin audaciously stated in *Commentary*: "It seems reasonably clear that the Civil rights movement, directly and through the resurgence of the social conscience it kindled, did more to initiate the War on Poverty than any other single force" (1965, 27).

He was vindicated by Johnson's aide Richard Goodwin who pointed out that "the Civil Rights revolution demonstrated not only the power and possibility of organized protests, but the unsuspected fragility of resistance to liberating changes." (in Milkis & Mileur, 4). Admittedly, the influence of the civil rights movements on the "War on poverty" should not be discounted. Very early on, grassroots organizations for black emancipation as well as prominent leaders had understood the devastating and disenfranchising impact of unemployment on black communities.

b- No liberty in misery: An unheard call for jobs

Early on, Martin Luther King saw the effects of post-war economic restructuring on the American working class. He pointedly connected poverty to hardcore joblessness:

> Hard core unemployment is now an ugly and unavoidable fact of life. Like malignant cancer, it has grown year by year and continues its spread. But automation can be used to generate an abundance of wealth for people or an abundance of poverty for millions as its human-like machines turn out human scrap along with machine scrap as a byproduct of production" (1961)

In 1963, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom captured the tightly bound objectives of economic emancipation and full formal citizenship. Despite the sanitized image of a march aimed at dismantling Jim Crow and at reaching national reconciliation, the main goal of a labor and socialist-inspired organized demonstration was to shed a harsh light on "the economic subordination of the Negro" (in 1963, black workers earned 55 cents for every dollar earned by whites) and to advance a universal "broad and fundamental program for economic justice." (Jones, 2013). Full employment was to be reached through structural reforms: a $2.00 minimum wage (which entailed a raise of 85 cents), the broadening of the Fair Labor Standards Act and a Federal Fair Employment Practices Act were demanded by marchers who sought to be a "living petition" (Euchner, 2011).

The lingering economic origins of black disadvantage in a post-Jim Crow society were issues civil rights activists relentlessly brought forward. For King, the end of *de jure* segregation was the first step in a grander emancipation design:

> Despite new laws, little has changed in his [the Negro's] life in the ghettos. The Negro is still the poorest American –walled in by color and poverty. The law pronounces him equal, abstractly, but his conditions of life are still far from equal to those of other Americans (King 1964).

In 1964, at the Atlantic City convention, King urged the Democratic Party to adopt an "Economic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged" which would tackle unemployment, poor housing, and a substandard education system. To him, the key measure to address poverty was less job training than job creation and job guarantee. In accordance with A.

Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin's analysis, King dismissed the idea of race-based social policies such as the "Marshall Plan for the Negro" put forward by National Urban League president Whitney Young. King favored universal economic programs which would benefit poor whites as well.

The "war on poverty" as initially envisioned by the Kennedy administration was therefore synchronized with lobbying efforts from Civil Rights activists, who "meshed" the two interrelated agendas of voting rights and economics (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1997). From 1964 to 1966, anti-poverty activism increased within black circles, from the National Urban League (which received federal anti-poverty funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity), NAACP and CORE to the Southern Christian coalition or SNCC. They witnessed the disenfranchising effect of poverty, with political participation being predicated upon the satisfaction of primary needs. For civil rights leaders, advocating for the poor was an integral part of their actions from 1964 to 1966. Some, such as the NUL, "considered the implementation of the War on Poverty Programs to be its responsibility" (Paden, 102). Many organizations had an almost symbiotic relationship to Johnson's community actions programs.

Locally, the War on Poverty therefore had a catalytic effect on the organizing of black communities. The "maximum feasible participation" principle of the Economic Opportunity Act, which resonated so strongly with the spirit of empowerment embodied in the massive mobilization of the period, was immediately embraced. More than a thousand Communities Action Agencies (CAAs) ensured that African-Americans would not be prevented from participating. The more educated and more informed of their rights they grew, the more politicized African-Americans became. At the grassroots level, the war on poverty triggered an upsurge of democratic activism not only among poor blacks but also among poor Latinos and poor Appalachian whites as well (Orleck & Azirjan, 2011). The National Welfare Rights Organization, created in 1966 by former CORE member George Wiley illustrated this phenomenon. It also galvanized middle-class whites, particularly women, who – as the main recruits of community services programs - built grassroots interracial coalitions to voice their predicaments (Naples, 1997; Reese, 2005). Such a community of purpose is worth noticing, although in many instances whites were reluctant to be associated with what they perceived as programs designed for blacks. In many places in the South, the federal effort to implement anti-poverty policies became a part of the ongoing struggle against segregation and white supremacy. To give a few examples, Head Start programs in the Louisiana Delta (Germany in Orleck, 2011) or Concentrated Employment Programs in Texas (Clayson, 2011) fostered formidable local resistance and racial backlash. The war on poverty morphed into a war for the African-Americans right to achieve substantive equality.

2- A lukewarm policy in radical times

a – A shotgun approach to reform

But from the onset, civil rights activists expressed their concern about an anti-poverty program which was too frail to be able to reach out to disinherited blacks, particularly in urban areas. In an article for *The Nation* in January 1964, King expressed moderate enthusiasm for Johnson's policies, arguing "Though the tempo was slow and the goal far distant, the direction was right". He was specifically referring to the Fair Employment practices contained on Title VII of the Civil Right Act, signed on July 2, 1964. Non discriminatory practices in the workplace were to be enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). But while actively dealing with individuals' racial discrimination, it did not tackle the structural inequality of opportunities between whites and blacks. What is more, the EEOC lacked any real enforcement authority and, in many workplaces around the country and especially in unionized industries, African-Americans were still discriminated against. Organized labor was highly involved in the Office of Equal Opportunities and their influence in the Department of Labor allowed them to circumvent a law it resented for its federal job training programs. The AFL-CIO indeed considered job-training a crucial union prerogative containing the labor pool and thus the wages of skilled workers (Quadagno, 1994)

But the weak degree of leverage of the EEOC was just a part of the greater critique articulated by civil rights leaders, who, in unison with major economists and policy makers such as John Kenneth Galbraith and Moynihan or prominent activists like Michael Harrington were disappointed by the inability of the policies to grapple with the magnitude of poverty and unemployment. In an emphasis on equality of opportunity, Johnson favored job-training over job creation, focusing on individuals' employability. Far from New Deal policies, the war on poverty down-played income transfer and did not seek to create public jobs or to engage in structural reforms. The demise of industrial democracy (workers' ability to gain economic freedom through strong unions) and the rise of behavioral explanations for poverty reinforced the post-war assumption that, inasmuch as opportunities are fairly spread, a sustained economic expansion would "lift all boats".

Johnson's fiscal conservatism and concern about a balanced budget undermined the war on poverty efforts. Indeed, as early as February, 1964, President Johnson had vetoed a $1.25-billion unemployment plan for the urban poor, and with expanding military expenditures, and the total anti-poverty budget would not go significantly above $2-billion a year after 1966. Although the national unemployment rate decreased significantly with the Vietnam War, it was still about twice as high for blacks (8.0% vs 3.7% for all Americans). In 1964, more than 20% of young black men under 25 were unemployed nationwide (Freeman and Holzer 1986). More significantly, however the

unemployment rate remained steady for all black males between 1965 and 1970, around 8%. The shift of the industrial labor market from low-skilled jobs and its relocation to the suburbs almost annihilated blacks educational gains after 1964. Wage inequality increased and black unemployment remained twice as high as whites (Fairlie, 1997).

In an attempt to respond to this situation, government insiders such as Moynihan, and Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz unsuccessfully pushed for a more muscular approach to providing jobs for the downtrodden. Martin Luther King reiterated that "the ultimate answer to the Negroes' economic dilemma will be found in a massive federal program for all the poor, a kind of Marshall Plan for the disadvantaged" (1968/1994, 39). He criticized Johnson's War on Poverty for being underfunded, superficial, and too piece-meal. While housing programs, job training and family counseling were not themselves unsound, King (1967) contended that "all have a fatal disadvantage. The programs have never proceeded on a coordinated basis.... At no time has a total, coordinated and fully adequate program been conceived." Further, he argued, people in circumstances of want were in need of jobs and on-the-job training, not just job-training. Rather than continuing with "fragmentary and spasmodic reforms," King advocated that the government provide full employment. "We need to be concerned that the potential of the individual is not wasted," King wrote. "New forms of work that enhance the social good will have to be devised for those for whom traditional jobs are not available."

b- The ambivalence of poor people's empowerment

But income transfer or job guarantee initiatives were downplayed by "poverty warriors" to avoid what the driving force of the War, Sargent Shriver, and Johnson himself identified as an expanded "dependency on welfare" (Bauer, 119). Rather, a service-strategy approach would rehabilitate the poor while community-action and "maximum feasible participation" would provide them with a sense of empowerment. Influenced by "human capital theories", the War on poverty policies "took for granted that the Keynesian macroeconomic management strategies heralded by the 1964 tax cut would create sufficient opportunities for the newly empowered poor, and that they would do so in or near the communities where the poor actually lived" (McKee. 2010) Empowering the poor so that he is taught how to work would suffice to tackle underlying economic mechanisms. The "maximum feasible participation", praised by Shriver, was the answer to Roosevelt's failure to bring democracy to all poor:

> At the heart of the poverty program lies a new form of dialogue between the poor and the rest of society.... [It] is a legislative, an ethical, and (for those of us involved in the program) a personal commitment to insure that the poor themselves actively participate in the planning, implementation, and administration of these programs. (Shriver in Burke, 1966, 1).

Moynihan was one of the most eloquent critics of a "war on poverty" he perceived as purposefully designed on the cheap. In 1965, he expressed his insightful concern that inexpensive Community Action Programs were poor surrogates for structural reforms (Brown, 1999). Actually, even the "maximum feasible participation" principle, never wholeheartedly endorsed by Johnson, was quickly on the wane. Doubtful about its relevance, he privately stormed, "To hell with community action" when the program grew controversial (Gillette, 148). The urban poor were in fact expressing their sense of alienation through Community actions as the local agencies became their privileged sites of protest. In contradiction with Johnson's ambition to decrease "welfare dependency", resentful ghetto dwellers used the CAA's as means to obtain benefits, to make assertive claims of their rights and to castigate local corruption. Their radicalized voice alarmed blame-prone conservatives. After the Watts uprising of the summer of 1965, the vocal participation of the poor, from Conservatives' standpoint, became subversive, aggravating the distorted perception of that Johnson was running a "pro-black" agenda (Jackson, 2007).

The CAP and its key words (community action, "self-help", "maximum feasible participation") can be read, as Goldstein suggest, as a strategy to imbue "the poor" with post-war liberal democracy values, to neutralize their grievances and to prevent them from seeking self-determination (which entails a real redistribution of power (2012). The tension between the two notions proved problematic. Johnson himself came to embrace the view of local officials that community control was actually destabilizing local governments. Besides, by targeting young blacks from urban ghettos[1], the job-training programs put the war on poverty on a collision course with Dixiecrats, the main trade-unions, and part of the Northern working class (Sugrue, 2008). Southern Democrats denounced the misuse of tax-payers' money to fund anti-poverty initiatives "for blacks" (Orleck, 2011). The anti-welfare backlash crippled the policy but was not particularly at odds with Johnson's personal view-point. Among the justifications provided to sustain his "War on Poverty", he had argued that it would help young Americans to "escape from squalor and misery and unemployment rolls where other citizens help to carry them." (in Brauer, 117).

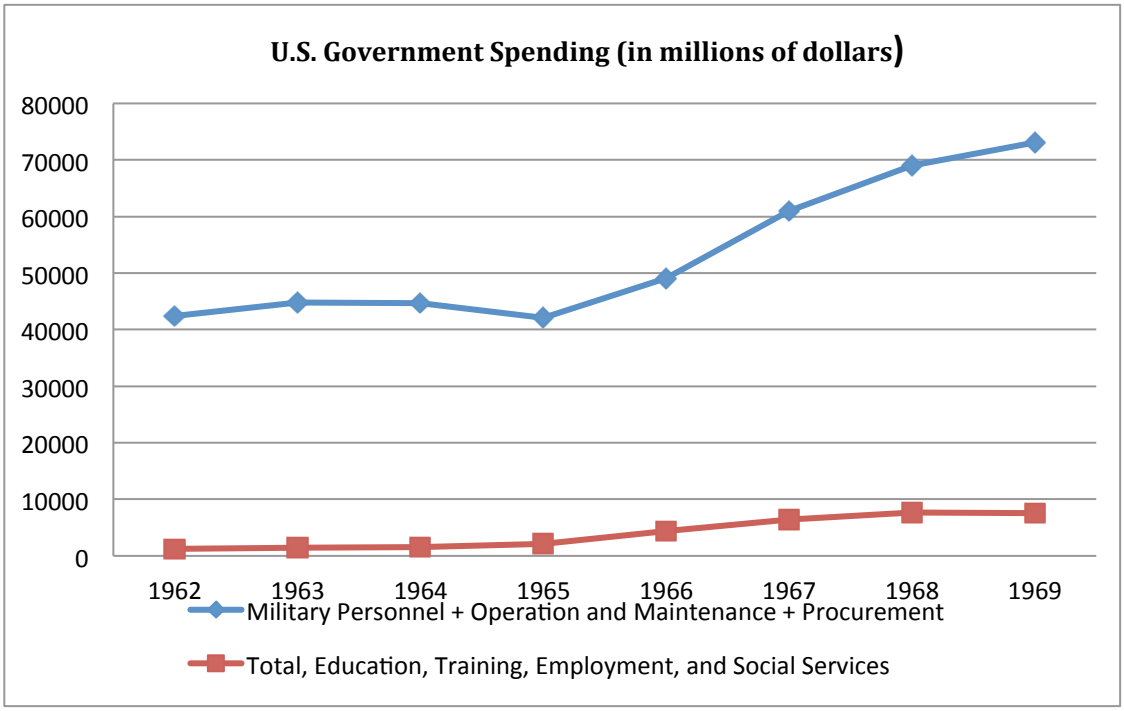
Chief among the post-Watts riots arguments was the white establishment contention that the rioters were "culturally" drawn to violence and poverty, and therefore immune to economic redistribution. Michael Harrington's 1962's *The Other America*, had ignited anti-poverty programs but a misreading of his essay also contributed to the distorted visions of "islands of poverty" sustained by a specific "culture". With Moynihan's 1965 essay "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action", the "culture of poverty" was identified as the main hindrance to black progress, and it took the face of the African-American woman as the source of a "tangle of pathology". Concurrent with urban riots, Moynihan's analysis was co-opted by assertive opponents of the War on poverty, who

[1] According to Margaret Weir, in 1968, 47% of the Neighborood Youth Corps, 81% of the Concentrated Employment programs and 59% of the job corps recruits were Africans-Americans. In Quadangno, 69.

saw it as the scientific evidence of the unsalvageable nature of the black urban poor undergirded, they thought, by a pathological family structure (Chappell, 2011). It also sustained the assumption that working men should be the prime recipients of anti-poverty policies disregarding the role of women who were by and large the primary breadwinners of low-income households (Reese, 2005). However misinterpreted and distorted, the book contributed to a simmering welfare backlash which crippled anti-poverty policies.

The retrenchment of Johnson's anti-poverty policy was all too apparent when the Senate adopted a dwarfed appropriation request in 1966. That year, the military expenditures skyrocketed but the Office of Economic Opportunity was chronically underfunded. Katz (1986) contends that it received less than 10% of the necessary budget to be effective. If the bitter claim made by King, according to which the war in Vietnam was financed with budgets primarily allocated to the war on poverty, is not reflected in governmental expenditures[2] there is undeniably a double standard between the two wars with regard to public spending (Figure 1).

Figure 1. "A Tale of Two Wars"



Source: http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/historicals

Despite regular meetings at the White House with black leaders, Johnson quickly backed away from the civil rights leaders' diagnosis of the socio-economic cause of the urban uprisings. The Kerner Commission, which he formed in 1967 to explain the tide of riots, vindicated black activists as it recommended massive job creation to curtail the

[2] The expenditures allocated to Social programs did not decrease but their growth was undeniably crippled by military spending.

ghettos' "frustrated hopes" (1968). Yet, Johnson stuck to his fiscal conservatism. Central to Johnson's economic theory was the belief that poverty could not and should not be addressed through centralized administration and federal spending. In the footsteps of Kennedy's administration, he opted out of income redistribution and toward a less interventionist form of Keynesianism that emphasized overall economic growth through tax cuts. The assault on adult unemployment demanded by King was consequently inconceivable from the White House standpoint. Some have argued that such disdain for black organizations plea to tackle joblessness amounted to nothing less than "institutional racism." (Russel, 2005). Certainly, "had Johnson listened more carefully to blacks, he might have created jobs for those who desperately needed them" (Jackson, 193). Had he listened to King, he would perhaps have understood that effecting universalistic structural reforms would have benefited poor whites as well as blacks, thus lessening the growing white backlash.

c- Roosevelt versus Johnson: for a new New Deal

Civil rights leaders and King in particular maintained throughout Johnson's presidency that jobs programs for adults could cure poverty and that black joblessness could thus be reduced. Randolph, Rustin and King were adamant that unemployment was the cause of poverty and that only a new Economic Bill of Rights would prompt a social revolution and foster substantive equality. In October 1966, Randolph publicly presented a "Freedom budget" whose proclaimed goal was to eradicate unemployment and poverty within 10 years, with a set of federal policies worth $180 billion over the decade. Pointing out that 34 million Americans were living in poverty in a time of "unparalleled prosperity", the budget provided 7 objectives:

1. To provide *full employment* for all who are willing and able to work, including those who need education or training to make them willing and able.
2. To assure *decent and adequate wages* to all who work.
3. To assure a *decent living standard* to those who cannot or should not work.
4. To *wipe out slum ghettos* and provide decent homes for all Americans.
5. To provide *decent medical care and adequate educational opportunities* to all Americans, at a cost they can afford.
6. To *purify our air and water* and develop our transportation and natural resources on a scale suitable to our growing needs.
7. To unite sustained full employment with sustained *full production and high economic growth*. (A. Philip Randolph Institute 1966).

King was among the strongest supporters of the Freedom Budget's intent and content, specifically its redistributive aspect. He repeatedly advocated the specific demand of job guarantees through a government-provided "employer of last resort" program (Forstater, 2011), which had already been in his 1964 address in Atlantic City.

Although most black leaders sought to gain leverage within their traditional coalition with Democrats and Progressive organizations, some lost faith in Johnson's ability to carry his programs through. Leon Keyserling, the economist appointed by the A. Philip Randolph Institute to write the budget, contended: "We must get away from the idea that the Freedom Budget can be enacted under the present conception of consensus." (in Le Blanc & Yates, 115). Martin Luther King, incensed by the War in Vietnam, was henceforth distrustful of the White House. While Randolph and Rustin sought conciliation to foster progress, he believed in social change through confrontation with Johnson and Congress:

> Federal, state and municipal governments toy with meager and inadequate solutions while the alarm and militancy of the Negro rises (…) The ensuing white backlash intimidates government officials who are already too timorous, and when the crisis demands vigorous measures, a paralysis ensues. (King, 1964)

King was deeply aware that racial inequality was embedded in economic structures. His experience in Chicago and his deep reflection on the urban uprisings (which paralleled Bayard Rustin's 1965 definition of the riots as "outbursts of class aggression in a society where class and color definitions are converging disastrously") emboldened him to publicly voice his radical vision. In 1967, he frequently incriminated the capitalist system, which "was built on the exploitation and suffering of black slaves and continue to thrive on the exploitation of the poor, both black and white, both here and abroad" (in Jackson, 323). Yet, he was still hopeful that a renewed coalition of radical liberals could successfully lead the country toward democratic socialism. Actually, his economic agenda was tenaciously advocated by a few. In August 18, 1967, at the SCLC Convention in Atlanta, John Conyers, a Democratic Congressman from Michigan, called for a 30 billion per year omnibus bill "to provide every American adequate employment, housing and education on a truly non-discriminatory basis. Conyers envisioned this "Full Opportunity Act" to be introduced at the House of Representatives the following week.

Echoing King, he contended that "Piecemeal programs and patchwork legislation have proven totally ineffective… it is like applying a band-aid to a cancerous growth. Only a massive Federal Program can eradicate the ghettos and slums that have spread throughout the cities of America over many decades." This bill would guarantee jobs by making the government "the employer of last resort". The minimum wage would be raised to $2.00 an hour and workers would get better legal protection. A massive program of low-cost housing should also be engaged as well as a comprehensive Federal college loan program to provide higher education to all. The bill also included the enforcement of anti-discriminatory laws in all economic areas".

Despite the voices calling for radical institutional changes in policy, Conyers' bill was no more successful for the disadvantaged than King's Economic Bill of Rights. Yet, King kept pressing the White House for job creation and economic justice. As the 1967 Chicago riots prompted Johnson to implement emergency action, King urged him "to do

as his Hero FDR did" (Talburt, 1968) by setting up a WPA-type make-work program for the poor. The *Scripps Howard* journalist who reported the exchange in a January 1968 article underscored King's comments: "I am not convinced the statesmanship exists in Washington to do it … I am convinced that one massive act of concern will do more than the most massive deployment of troops to quell riots and instill hatred". He repeated his call for a "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged" and suggested that a national agency should immediately be set up "to give employment to everyone needing it."

Actually, far from expanding Fair Work initiatives, Congress reformed the AFDC requirements in 1967 and moved toward workfare while freezing social expenditures, which infuriated welfare rights organizations. The National Welfare Rights Organization, closely tied to the civil rights movements, organized nationwide to protest the anti-welfare rhetoric that permeated Johnson's social policies (Kornbluh, 2007). In a telegram to Johnson which he purposefully leaked to the press to publicize his disapproval of Congress's decision to cut the anti-poverty budget, King stressed the need for drastic change in the economic structures of the country:

> Let us do one simple, direct thing- let us end unemployment totally and immediately (…) I propose specifically the creation of a national agency that shall provide a job to every person who needs work, young and old, white and Negro. Not one hundred jobs when 10,000 are needed. Not some cheap way out. Not some frugal device to maintain a balanced budget within an unbalanced society.
>
> I propose a job for everyone, not a promise to see if jobs can be found. There cannot be social peace when a people have awakened to their rights and dignity and to the wretchedness of their lives simultaneously. If our government cannot create jobs, it cannot govern. It cannot have white affluence amid black poverty and have racial harmony. (King, 1968 in Garrow 1988, p. 570)

Despite such attempts, it became clear to a disaffected King, who distanced himself from consensus partisans such as Bayard Rustin, that the War on Poverty would not be broadened. The War in Vietnam, which the SNCC and then King publicly denounced, fractured the civil rights movement, with moderate groups such as the NAACP and The Urban league remaining silent on this controversial topic (Hall, 2003). For King, such an imperialist war, which he saw as draining funds from domestic policies, raised serious doubts about the trustworthiness of the national government. In contrast to Rustin's or other moderates' pragmatism, King broke with Johnson and, to paraphrase Rustin's description, chose uncompromising "protest" over "participatory "politics[3]. Now that a new liberal paradigm, undergirded by grassroots empowerment and protest had been institutionalized through the "maximum feasible participation" principle (McKee in Orleck, 2013), a more radical step was clearly called for. Reconciling the New Deal's liberal emphasis on jobs and group-based rights, King sought to truly empower the poor.

[3] In his February 1965 *Commentary* article "From *Protest to Politics*: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement", Bayard *Rustin*, called for the termination of street mobilization to engage in an alliance with the Democratic Party and their agenda.

3- The poor people's campaign: raising class as a civil right issue

a- For the welfare of the least of these

In 1967, King announced an unprecedented act of dissent which would disrupt the disempowering process of formal democracy:

> We are still not free (…) And you know why we aren't free? Because we are poor. We are poor. (…) What is poverty? (…) Poverty is being underemployed, poverty is working a full-time job, getting only part-time income. Poverty means living in a run-down, dilapidated house (…) now, we are tired of being on the bottom, we are tired of being exploited (…) And as a result of being tired, we are going to Washington D.C (…) in order to say to this nation that "you must provide us with jobs or income (…) And for 60 or 90 days, this nation will not be able to ignore or overlook the poor. And we are going to plague Congress, and we are going to plague the government, until they will do something… (King 1968)

In December 1967, King announced the launch of "the poor people's campaign" whose explicit motto "Jobs and Income" and calls for massive redistribution re-established the SCLC at the forefront of the struggle for economic justice. It was to be the most ambitious campaign ever envisioned by King, who trusted Mississippi lawyer and activist Marian Wright[4]'s idea that bringing the poor to Washington, dramatizing their predicament and forcing the elites to see them would be a game-changer with respect to social policy. King's goal was for them to petition the government for specific reforms aimed at securing jobs and income *for all*. Without renouncing the idea that race was a major factor in the mechanism of inequality and that it had to be dealt with as such, he nonetheless asserted that blacks shared common aims with other dispossessed groups. Carving out a social welfare agenda comparable in scope to the Marshall plan would be the path to a fair redistribution of power. Intentionally vague in its early stage, to avoid any petty bargaining with Congress, the Economic Bill of rights, as laid out, called for:

> A meaningful job at the living wage for every employable citizen;
> A secure and adequate income for all who cannot find jobs or for whom employment is inappropriate;
> Access to land as a means to income and livelihood;
> Access to capital as a means of full participation in the economic life of America;
> Recognition by law of the right of people affected by government programs to play a truly significant role in determining how they are designed and carried out. (Mantler, p. 129)

[4] She became Wright Edelman in July 1968 when marrying Peter Edelman.

The SCLC, despite the immediate dismissal of the project by some of its key members, including Bayard Rustin, Roy Wilkins and Jesse Jackson, complied with King's view of a massive demonstration of the American poor, irrespective of their race or ethnicity. The strategic outline was not only a mass-meeting in Washington but a showcase of the poor's odysseys from all around the country to the capital. The dispossessed would travel to the capital by car, train or mule wagon, stopping for local rallies, all the while performing spectacular acts of civil disobedience and civic disruption. Hundreds of well-trained non-violent activists would accompany the multi-racial caravans of the disinherited and help them get settled on the Washington Mall where they would compel Congress to take action against poverty. The initial plan was to disrupt the daily functioning of the capital, for instance, by staging sit-ins at the Department of Agriculture or the Department of the Interior. Non-violent yet resolute, they would settle on the Mall as long as necessary. More than ever, King expressed a sense of urgency, an imminent threat to an oblivious nation. The upheaval of the democratic process was to be unprecedented.

Prior to his fatal trip to Memphis to support the garbage collectors strike, King had traveled thousands of miles in the early months of 1968, meeting and negotiating with prominent Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians and poor white activists. In March 1968, he led a planning symposium called the "Minority Conference Group" in Atlanta in order to bind the cause of blacks to theirs, given the extent to which non-black accomplished freedom fighters intended to remain autonomous. King, very early on, expressed his hope that poor whites would also join him, as their economic oppression was linked to and entwined with blacks' subjection. He was convinced that a real, from the bottom-up "war on poverty" entailed an interracial class-based coalition: "At this level, Negro programs go beyond race and deal with economic inequality, wherever it exists. In the pursuit of these goals, the white poor became involved, and the potential emerges for a powerful new alliance" (1967). Even among the black garbage workers of Memphis, he repeated that "the plight of the Negro and of the underpaid worker is one situation in the United States. They go hand in hand." (in Kotz, 401). The "class struggle" at play could not work under the patronage of the liberal establishment. This new alliance was built upon the radical activism spurred on the ground by the "War on Poverty", particularly by the National Welfare Rights Organization.

The convergence of King's economic demands and the welfare rights' struggle was a core element of the Poor People's Campaign, which the AFL-CIO accurately deprecated as "welfare-oriented" (in Chase 2008). Actually, both King and the NWRO called for guaranteed income, a higher minimum wage, and redistribution of wealth. Mostly a northern movement (with a significant outpost in California), it was an instrumental medium for King who sought to connect the SCLC with the northern urban poor. Indeed, as Frances Fox Piven puts it, the Welfare rights impulse manifested as a 1963 "version of the Civil Rights" which "had come to the Northern slums and ghettos" (in Kornbluh 14). George Wiley, a former member of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and long-time civil rights activist, decided to organize welfare recipients. The retreat of

most welfare provisions and the harsh treatment received by the poor at governmental offices were their main concerns, but their economic demands also touched on the issues of a minimum wage and full employment. A chief concern, besides welfare policies and fighting the stigma of being a recipient of such benefits, was the implementation of a guaranteed annual income. NWRO was up-in-arms when the 1967 Democratic Congress enacted the "WIN" (work incentive) amendments, imposing work and training requirements on AFDC recipients. More and more, welfare policies were being rolled back as part of a backward trend to contain what was perceived by officials as a "negro problem" (Heclo in Blank & Iaskins, 2001; Quadrango, 1996).

Multiracial in their scope, NWRO activists had locally organized numerous inclusive marches and rallies which foreshadowed the poor people's campaign rhetoric, as illustrated in a 1967 issue of its information brochure, "Now !": "Most NWRO groups are located in the ghettos and barrios of major US cities but there are also groups located in rural areas of the South, Appalachia and the Mid-West. NWRO includes substantial numbers of low income whites, Puerto-Ricans, Mexican-Americans, as well as Negroes in its membership" (NWRO 1967).

Despite their common ground, the organization was unsuccessful in its attempt to reach out to the Black Freedom Movement, and the SCLC rejected most of its pleas for support from 1966 to 1968. Some black leaders were outright hostile. According to Piven, when the welfare rights activists reached out to National Urban League president Whitney Young, he lashed out that he would "rather get one black woman a job as an airline stewardess than to get twenty black women on welfare" (Piven, 2012). In 1964, at the Democratic convention, King had pointed out that the black man "does not want to languish on welfare rolls", would "rather have a job," and that poor blacks were bound "to a culture of poverty" (King 1964b). Although his use of "culture of poverty" most certainly stems from Gunnar Myrdal and Michael Harrington (who saw it as the result of economic deprivation, certainly not as an essential feature or intrinsic deficiency of the black poor) and did not carry the negative undertone it would have a couple of years later, King may have vacillated on the definition of work and "idleness". A man of his time, he was bombarded by negative labeling of welfare and stereotypical depictions of unworthy black single welfare-reliant mothers, which became the norm among many whites in the mid-Sixties (Ganz 1995).

Like Johnson, King was influenced by Moynihan and his controversial depiction of the pathological de-structuring of the black family. The careless rhetorical use of a "tangle of pathology" induced by the "matriarchal arrangement" of black life, out of line with the American mainstream, suggested that blacks, unable to act on their own, had to be "fixed" by white America. Overwhelmed by the controversy and by what some scholars termed a "misrepresentation" of a content chiefly dedicated to structural economic reform and full employment (Patterson, 2010, Wilson 2013) Moynihan's analysis of black disadvantage was nevertheless endorsed by King.

But by 1966-1967 King had fundamentally reconciled with a female oriented welfare-rights activism: in *Where Do We Go from Here*, he denounces the "arbitrary power" of abusive welfare bureaucrats who "often humiliate or neglect" the recipients. He became a supporter of Welfare policy, lambasting the middle-class disdain for any measure called "welfare" for the poor but "subsidies" for everyone else. He mocked their proclivity to demonize anything as "socialist" while the American economic system was in fact "socialism for the rich and rugged free enterprise for the poor"(1968, in Jackson, 346). On May 25, as the poor people's campaign was on the move, he sent a telegram to the Pennsylvania State Welfare Rights Organization which read: "Pennsylvania AFDC grants of 71% of a starvation standard are a shame and a disgrace. I strongly support your demonstration (…)" (King 1968e)

b- A radical redistribution of power

The asymmetries of power inherent in capitalism, about which he theorized during his stay in a Chicago slum, were translated to the political scene. More than a Social Democrat, he was willing to give poor people democratic control on economic policies to redress such imbalances in a democratic socialist framework (Resnick 2011). Thus, the purpose of the poor people's campaign was not to participate in a political bargain with Democratic allies any longer, as King had grown disillusioned with Johnson's Great Society. His opposition to the escalating war in Vietnam was King's main grievance. He directly connected Vietnam to social justice at home. It was, as he told the audience in Chicago on November 11, 1967, an unjust and racist war which was eviscerating the domestic anti-poverty programs.

> In the past two months unemployment has increased approximately 15%. At this moment tens of thousands of people and anti-poverty programs are being abruptly thrown out of jobs and training programs to search in a diminishing job market for work and survival. It is disgraceful that a Congress that can vote upward of 35 billion a year for a senseless, immoral war in Vietnam cannot vote a weak 2 billion dollars to carry on our all-too-feeble efforts to bind up the wounds of our nation's 35 billion poor. This is nothing short of a Congress engaging in political guerilla warfare against the defenseless poor of our nation.

On the civil rights side, he lamented that "laws passed for the Negro's benefit are so widely unenforced that is a mockery to call them law," and as regards the promising War on Poverty, he deplored the fact that "while millions of its citizens smothered in poverty in the midst of opulence (…) the government was only willing to appropriate such a limited budget that it could not launch a good skirmish against poverty, much less a full scale war" (King 1967).

The new wave of riots in Newark and Detroit, the deadliest urban disturbance of the decade, compelled the nation to yet again face urban poverty. The rise of revolutionary black nationalism which attracted more and more young impoverished blacks complicated the countercultural movements of the era, bringing forward an

assertive racial claim. Washington, alongside moderate civil rights leaders sought to contain the new insurgency. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders Johnson appointed in the wake of the riots ended up with drastic recommendations. Chaired by Otto Kerner, governor of Illinois, the commission had auditioned many insiders (among whom King, who called for a vast federal effort to guarantee jobs to the poor) before issuing its report. The latter was an indictment of white racism and a structural economic black disadvantage which had never been seriously addressed. Echoing King and his friend (and poor people's campaign blueprint writer) Michael Harrington, the report concluded that the nation was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal" (1968). The decay of the "other America" could only be prevented by massive public spending and job creation. The Economic Bill of Rights for the disadvantaged King was pushing for could not find a more notable vindication. King suggested that he would call off the poor people's campaign, were Congress willing to adopt the recommendations. Not surprisingly, at local rallies for the poor people's campaign, he included the Kerner report in the set of policy recommendations he strongly supported, along with Randolph's Freedom Budget. He stressed the need for an annual guaranteed income, which many liberals demanded, from Francis Fox Piven, Patrick Moynihan to economists James Tobin's and Paul Samuelson [5].

But the movement was about to lose its most charismatic, inspiring, and persuasive leader. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination on April 4 was the most devastating and crushing blow against the poor people's campaign. Nevertheless, his plans for the campaign went ahead and Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, Bernard Lafayette, Hosea Williams, and Bob Moses brought King's last crusade into being. Thousands of marchers were recruited across the country along with well-trained non- violent social activists, reviving a grassroots movements' unity toward a common purpose. The poor people's campaign was to be the most-fitting tribute to Martin Luther King Jr.

c- Occupy Washington: Resurrection City

On May 2, 1968, the first caravan departed from the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. Seven others would follow, all of them heading toward Washington. But most of the media's attention was focused on the "Mule train", a picturesque procession made of 20 mule-drawn wagons which left the small Delta town of Marks, Mississippi. On May 14, 1968, 3000 participants (some of them having joined the caravans while others dropped out) set up a shantytown in Washington which they christened "Resurrection City". Thousands of demonstrators lived on the site. They staged nonviolent protests as King had planned: according to his vision, they remained on premises and demanded an

[5] In 1968, James Tobin, Paul Samuelson, John Kenneth Galbraith and 1,200 economists petitioned Congress to get a system of income guarantees and supplements introduced.

Economic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged. They asserted that they would not depart as long as the White House, Congress and the federal institutions ignored their plight. Once the encampment was settled and despite the relocation of the Hispanic delegation —who felt Resurrection City was already too crowded—to the nearby Hawthorne High School, the protesters displayed their unity of purpose. The opening act of their militancy was the Mothers' Day Parade on May 12, born out of the intense negotiations between SCLC and the National Organization for Welfare Rights.

King's death on April 4, 1968 unleashed a wave of uprisings that shocked the nation and dramatized black youths' anger, but it also produced a revived interest in his peaceful last campaign. Thousands of people were willing to join and support it, so much so that Resurrection City, which was initially designed to accommodate 500 persons, was overwhelmed by newcomers. At its peak, the utopian Noah's Ark gathered approximately 3000 protesting poor. Ralph Abernathy, King's successor, struggled to find sponsors willing to fund a disruptive, anti-war, multiracial social movement. According to many participants, the ill-equipped and chaotic city was doomed when a heavy rain began to pour, transforming it into a muddy slum. Tensions arose and violent clashes between the radical youngsters appointed as Resurrection City's Marshalls and a heavy rain muddied the "City of Hope".

Yet, during its six-weeks of existence, the shantytown provided its inhabitants with an unprecedented cross-racial understanding. Latinos, for instance, who settled in the nearby Hawthorne High School with most of the Appalachian caravan, came to terms with white poverty (Mantler, 2013). A sense of solidarity beyond racial affiliations emerged, symbolized by a shared space, Resurrection City. The latter was provided with a zip code, streets names, schools, a medical center, a newspaper, a "poor people's university" and a "Many Races Soul Center". Paradoxically, Jesse Jackson, an ardent supporter of black-self entrepreneurship and the free-market who only endorsed the campaign after King's death, was chosen as its mayor.

The multiracial workshops and seminars (which many nationalist Chicanos and Puerto-Ricans attended along with Black Power activists) offered an in- depth reflection on the entangling of poverty and "identity", complicating the forthcoming opposition among the Left between cultural and economic oppression, redistribution or minority recognition (Fraser, 1996). Participants were provided with a wide array of social services, from child care to shelter (Wright, 365). Modeled on the poverty and social service support provided by NWRO (counseling to get emergency food stamps and housing relief, job training, help with health care, social security, and welfare checks from the administration) Resurrection City social services also got their inspiration from social democratic countries such as Sweden, which had impressed King during his 1964 trip to receive his Nobel prize.

As part of the War on Poverty and the 1964 EOA, the Community Action Agencies (CAA) were also purveyors of such relief for the poor, but as the government decreased

its funding for anti-poverty programs in 1966, it also increasingly assigned new requirements for welfare recipients. The social services, therefore, provided in Resurrection City were designed as an act of resistance on the part of the poor and also as an experiment aimed at being implemented nationally. King (1967) specifically defended the development of "*human services jobs* -medical attention, social services, neighborhood amenities of various kinds" which, in areas of concentrated poverty, would constitute "the missing industry that would change the employment scene in America". Massive public jobs such as community-based ones and those oriented towards well-being would change the face of ghetto life and overhaul federal social policies to counteract the nefarious effects of unregulated capitalism.

On June 19, almost 50, 000 people gathered to endorse the campaign's economic objectives. "Solidarity Day" was initially to be organized by Bayard Rustin. Formerly opposed to the March, he accepted Abernathy's call and took it upon himself to reframe the campaign demands and to reshuffle the Economic Bill of rights..Rustin requested the Recommitment to the Full Employment Act of 1946, a legislation for an immediate creation of at least one million public jobs; the adoption of the pending Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968; the repealing of the 90th Congress's punitive welfare restrictions in the 1967 Social Security Act; the extension to all farm workers of the right to organize agricultural labor unions; the restoration of significant budgets for bilingual education, Head Start, summer jobs, Economic Opportunity Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Acts. Rustin's initiative and his silence on the War in Vietnam (its condemnation was shared by all the participants) infuriated the organizers and he was let go. "Solidarity Day" was nevertheless the culmination of the campaign. Coretta Scott King led the event, which attracted prominent Democratic figures such as Eugene McCarthy, the anti-war Democratic candidate against Lyndon Johnson.

But absent the charismatic figure of King, the encampment failed to garner much positive media interest. Despite its success in terms of attendance (50,000 people demonstrated), Solidarity Day was depicted as a dismal demonstration, no match for the March on Washington. In a vitriolic article named "Solidarity and Disarray", *Time* portrayed Resurrection City as "an ill-housed, ill-fed, self-segregated, absentee-run slum afflicted with low morale, deepening restiveness and free-floating violence" (in Lentz, 332). As time passed, and under the influence of the FBI, which spread misleading rumors of violence and subversion within Resurrection City (McKnight, 1998), critics insisted upon highlighting internal tensions between the leaders and the obvious disorganization of the shantytown. Not all of the qualifications were off-base; Resurrection City was indeed ill-prepared and chaotic. The lack of support from the AFL-CIO and public opinion and the participants' fatigue after no effective anti-poverty measures were obtained proved fatal. Out of legal permits, the poor people's campaign closed on June 19, 1968. In a bitterly sad ending, the tents were leveled to the ground and the remaining occupants arrested.

A couple of weeks later, Ralph Abernathy and the "51st state of hunger" attended the Republican Convention to once again demand jobs, healthcare, minimum wage, and welfare rights but his plea was hardly audible in the midst of the much-greeted nomination of Richard Nixon (Mantler, 215). But, as Jesse Jackson (2013) recalls: "Tired of war, cynical about lies, weary of upheaval, Americans were said to suffer compassion fatigue." Despite a short-lived expansion of welfare programs and the adoption of a "negative tax credit" (which amounted to a guaranteed income) through his 1969 Federal Assistance Program, Richard Nixon's policy plans were infused with a divisive racial strategy: implicitly denouncing the culture of dependency of African-Americans relying on the social programs expanded during the war on poverty while simultaneously reaching out to southern poor whites who would benefit from his revamping of redistributive policies (Spitzer, 2012). His rhetoric proved effective: since 1968, both political parties and federal government had concurrently withdrawn their support from anti-poverty policies. Even advocating a guaranteed annual income was seen as a pernicious shift from "opportunity liberalism" to "entitlement liberalism (Davies, 1996). Calling for a universal social welfare system which would not be divided between social insurance and stigmatizing welfare programs, became a hard sell in civil rights groups (Paden, 2008). The language of class became taboo.

Conclusion

King's poor people's campaign should be read as an integral part not only of the countercultural movement of the Sixties but of the long history of American economic dissent. As he pointed out, poverty cannot be comprehended without insisting on the limitations of the rhetoric of equal opportunity and coming to terms with the need for structural reforms; "Poverty is not an unfortunate accident, a residue, an indication that the great American mobility machine missed a minority of people" nor the result of a "culture of poverty" drenched in racial stereotypes but rather "the necessary result of America's distinctive political economy" (Katz, 237). With the theatrics of the Poor Peoples Campaign, King urged the nation to question not Johnson's reformism or lack thereof but their whole economic system, a system in which poverty in the midst of plenty is a conscious choice:

> We must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. …one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, "Who owns the oil?" (*Yes*) You begin to ask the question, "Who owns the iron ore?" (*Yes*) You begin to ask the question, "Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?" (*All right*) These are words that must be said. (1967)

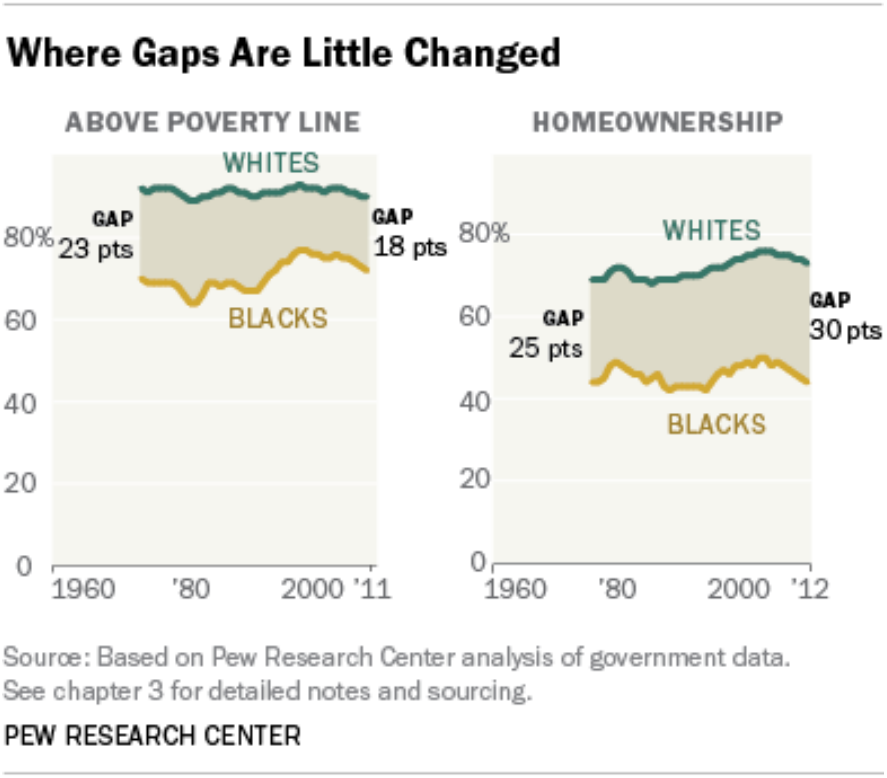
Nonetheless, King's radical critique should not be allowed to discredit the war on poverty efforts. If New Deal policies alleviated white poverty but failed to address blacks' predicament, the Great Society liberalization of public assistance helped black as well as white families raise their incomes (Katz, 2001). Johnson's gesture toward "corrective justice" was relevant: the expansion of social welfare programs significantly benefited to the poor and both desegregation and affirmative action policies boosted the black middle-class. Yet the Great Society and its core feature, the war on poverty, have had pernicious effects. Initially supported by public opinion, Johnson's anti-poverty programs became unpopular when they became associated with racial issues (Quadrango, 1995). Politically, this equation proved fateful: from 1966 on, Southern Democrats in Congress refused to vote the expansion of anti-poverty budgets which they identify as civil rights measures by stealth.

For Katznelson (1989), whereas the New Deal "understood poverty as anchored in class relations", Johnson's policies were predicated upon the idea that poverty was "a matter of race," not a redistributive issue. He contends that Johnson's domestic war thereby crippled for good the chances of social democracy in the US, for poverty policies were seen as race-based policies. Indeed, if the racial break-down of poverty had remained steady (Figure 2), the media coverage of the poor during the war on poverty misrepresented it as a black issue: "As news stories about the poor became less sympathetic, the images of poor blacks in the news swelled" (Gilens in Schram, Soss and Fording, 101).

Since the rise of Richard Nixon and George Wallace in 1968, social welfare policies have consequently been derided by the public[6] (Gilens, 1999; Bobo and Kluegel, 1993). King interracial poor people's campaign offered an alternative: an attempt to anchor poverty in the realm of universalism. His case for universal welfare state in the US is still being made today (Wilson, 1991). Indeed, had the class-based pan-racial poor people's campaign been considered in a different light by the nation, the welfare backlash and the fragmentation of progressive coalitions along racial and gender lines would perhaps have been deflected.

[6] The disrepute and "racialization" of welfare policies initiated then seems to have had far reaching effects. In *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, Martin Gilens demonstrates that negative feelings still harbored today by most Americans about welfare are related to the perception of welfare as a program for African Americans and the misrepresentation in the media of most welfare recipients as black and the undeserving poor.

Figure 2. Racial Economic Gap since the War on Poverty



Source: **"King's Dream Remains an Elusive Goal"; Pew Research Center.**

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