

## Syllabus

### The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Instructor:** Peter Levine, Tufts University, Lincoln Filene Professor and Associate Dean; appointments in Tisch College, Political Science, Philosophy and Civic Studies

#### Summary

In this seminar, we will study Martin Luther King Jr. as a political thinker. The whole class will read major works by King and excerpts from biographies and historical documents. Additional readings will be distributed among students, who will contribute insights from their assigned texts to the seminar discussions. The additional readings will include works that influenced King, writings by some of his contemporaries, and interpretations from a recent volume, *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry. We will investigate King's understanding of the Civil Rights Movement—why it was necessary and what it aimed to achieve. Specifically, we will study his ideas about the political and economic organization of white supremacy, the impact of racial ideologies, and the importance of racial integration and the right to vote. We will investigate King's philosophy of civil disobedience and nonviolence as well as a set of values he relates to that philosophy: dignity, sacrifice, self-reflection, self-improvement, love, faith, and freedom. We will relate these values to King's understanding of justice. Criticisms of King will also be considered. Studying King and his critics will provide a window into post-WWII American political thought. (This course is the Capstone for the Civic Studies Major and open to other majors.)

Grading rubric:

- Regular participation in Canvas discussion threads about the readings: 40%. I will post a prompt one week before each class session, and you will reply to my prompt *before* class. Reading and responding to other students' comments will be appreciated but not graded.
- 5-page paper, due at the end of the semester: 30%
- class participation: 30%

Criteria for assessing class participation:

1. Attendance.
2. Engaging in a discussion that is informed by the assigned texts.
3. Focusing on the topic and the texts, which does not preclude drawing connections beyond them.
4. Being responsive to other students. Responsiveness needn't always be immediate, verbal, or occur within the class discussion itself.

5. Building on others' contributions, and sometimes making links among different people's contributions or between what they have said and the text.
6. Demonstrating genuine respect for the others, where respect does not require agreement. In fact, sometimes respect requires explicit *disagreement* because you take the other person's ideas seriously.
7. Taking risks, trying out ideas that you don't necessarily endorse, and asking questions that might be perceived as naive or uninformed.
8. Seeking truth or clarity or insight (instead of other objectives).
9. Exercising freedom of speech along with a degree of tact and concern for the other people.
10. Demonstrating responsibility for the other students' learning in what you say (and occasionally by a decision not to speak).

**Technology policy:** Laptops and phones have been shown to be distracting in seminars. They distract not only the person who uses them but also other students who can see them open. However, some students may reasonably choose to read the assignments in digital form rather than print them and may wish to consult the assigned texts during class. Therefore, electronic devices are not banned, but students are expected to keep them closed *except* when specifically looking for sections of the readings that are relevant to the conversation. Notes should be taken by hand on paper. One of the easiest ways for me to assess overall class participation is by deducting points for students who appear to be misusing technology in class.



## Syllabus


Wednesday, January 15: Introductions and overview

### 1. Predecessors and Early Influences

Wednesday, January 22: Major African American political thinkers, 1885-1940

Students choose *one* of these authors and be prepared to discuss the author as well as the readings.

1. Booker T. Washington, "Letter to the Editor" (1885); "Atlanta Exposition Address" (1895); "Speech to the National Afro-American Council" (1895); "Letter to President Roosevelt" (1904); "Speech to the National Negro Business League" (1915); "My View of Segregation Laws" (1915); All readings in [this file](#). 
2. W.E.B. DuBois, "The Evolution of Negro Leadership" (1901); "Declaration of Principles" (1905); "The Crisis" and "Agitation" (1909); "Race Relations in the United States" (1928); "Marxism and the Negro Problem" (1933); "Pan -African and New Racial Philosophy" (1933); "The [NAACP] Board of Directors on Segregation" (1934); "A Negro Within the Nation" (1935). All in this [file](#).  Plus "[The Talented Tenth \(Links to an external site.\)](#)" (1903).
3. A. Phillip Randolph: "Lynching: Capitalism Its Cause; Socialism its Cure"; editorials on "Racial Equality" and "The Failure of the Negro Church," "The Negro Radicals,"





"Segregation in the Public Schools: A Promise or a Menace," "Negroes and the Labor Movement," "The Negro and Economic Radicalism," and "The New Pullman Porter." All in [this file](#) .

4. Another modern Black thinker of your choice likely to be influential in King's early milieu. E.g., Ida B. Wells, Marcus Garvey ...

(Unless otherwise noted in the PDFs, these readings are scanned from Gary D. Wintz, ed., *African American Political Thought 1890-1930* (M.E. Sharpe, 1996).)

Monday, January 27: Theological Influences

Students choose *one* of these authors and be prepared to discuss the author as well as the readings

1. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, [pp. 7-35](#). 
2. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, [pp. 257-77](#) 
3. Walter Rauschenbush, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, [pp. 57-78 and 95-109](#) 
4. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, pp. [53-69, 96-110, and 160-68](#) .

Wednesday, January 29: Biblical echoes

Students will choose one of these, read it, and also read a bit online about the context:

1. Book of Exodus, Chapters 1-3, in the [King James Version \(Links to an external site.\)](#) (click "next page" to read all three chapters)
2. Book of Amos, Chapter 2, in the [King James Version \(Links to an external site.\)](#)
3. Book of Micah, in the [King James Version \(Links to an external site.\)](#) (click "next page" to read the whole book)
4. Book of Matthew, Chapter 26, in the [King James Version \(Links to an external site.\)](#)



Monday, February 3 - no class (instructor is away)


Wednesday, February 5: Precursors--Gandhi




Everyone will read:

- Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi: The Years that Changed the World* (2018), [chapter 16 \("The March to the Sea"\)](#)

Choose one of these:

1. Bikhu Parekh, *Gandhi*, Chapter 4 ("Satyagraha"), [pp. 51-62](#) 
2. Gandhi, [Satyagraha](#)  (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing Co., 1951), excerpts; and Gandhi, Notes, May 22, 1924 - August 15, 1924, in *The Collected Works of*





*Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic Book), New Delhi, Publications Division Government of India, 1999, 98 volumes, vol. 28, [pp. 307-310](#) 

3. Karuna Mantena, "[Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics](#) , " in Shelby and Terry, pp. 78-101
4. Martha Nussbaum. "[From Anger to Love: Self-Purification and Political Resistance](#) , " in Shelby and Terry, pp. 105-126
5. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, [pp. 231-256](#) .

Monday, February 10: Precursors--African American campaigners against segregation

- Everyone watches Episode 1 of Eyes on the Prize, "[Awakenings, 1954-1956 \(Links to an external site.\)](#)"

Choose among:

1. Charles Payne, "[Ella Baker and Models of Social Change](#) "; and Ella Baker, "[Developing Community Leadership](#) 
2. Danielle McGuire, *At The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* ([excerpts](#) )
3. James L. Farmer Jr., *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* ([excerpts](#) )

In lieu of class, please attend "Civil Rights Movement Initiative: Strengthening Students through History"

Maiyah Gamble-Rivers, the Manager of Programs, Community Engagement, and Curator at the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice at Brown University will discuss how one of the Center's programs, the Civil Rights Movement Initiative, has created space for local high school students in the city of Providence to learn about the Movement, shift their perception of self, and provide an opportunity for them to give voice to the lack of visibility that is often part of what is learned in schools. February 10, 2020 Crane Room (rm. 113), Paige Hall. Come late if you need to, since this starts at 4.

## **2. Montgomery**



Wednesday, February 12: MLK's background

No new reading for today. We will spend time in class discussing all the influences and background conditions for the young Martin Luther King, Jr., including Gandhi and his immediate predecessors in the US Civil Rights Movement.

**Monday, Feb 17: no class, Presidents' Day**

## Wednesday, February 19: What Happened?



Choose between:

1. David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986), [pp. 11-82](#). 
2. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, pp. [105-205](#). 

Thursday, Feb 20 (makeup day): How Does King Present What Happened?

- Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, [chapters 3, 4, and 5](#). 

Monday, Feb 24: Why did it turn out as it did?




- Charles Tilly, "[Social Movements, 1768-2004](#)" 
- Marshall Ganz, "[Why David Sometimes Wins: Strategic Capacity in Social Movements](#),"  in Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) pp.177-98.

## 3. Albany and Birmingham

Wednesday, February 26: What Happened?

Please watch: Episode 4 of *Eyes on the Prize*, "[No Easy Walk: 1961-1963 \(Links to an external site.\)](#)"

Optional, for background:

1. David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986), [173-286](#). 
2. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, [pp. 524-561](#)  and [673-802](#). 


Monday, March 2: How Does King Present What is Happening?

- Martin Luther King, Jr., [Letter from Birmingham Jail \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

Wednesday, March 4: More Analysis of the Letter

- Martin Luther King, Jr., [Letter from Birmingham Jail \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

Monday, March 9: King's version versus the Supreme Court's

- David Luban, "[Difference Made Legal: The Court and Dr. King](#) " (start at p. 2156)
- [Walker v. City of Birmingham, 388 U.S. 307 \(1967\) \(Links to an external site.\)](#) (click on "case" and read that)

#### 4. March on Washington, Selma

Wednesday, March 11: Protest and Politics

Everyone reads:

- Rustin, [From Protest to Politics: Future of the civil Rights Movement. \(Links to an external site.\)](#) 1965.
- [Proposed Plans for March \(Links to an external site.\)](#) (perhaps by Rustin)
- Everyone reads or listens to [the speech \(Links to an external site.\)](#) and other documents from that day:
  - [Program \(Links to an external site.\)](#)
  - [Instructions for March Ushers \(Links to an external site.\)](#)
  - [Original Speech of John Lewis \(Links to an external site.\)](#)
  - [Speech of John Lewis as Given \(Links to an external site.\)](#)


Monday, March 23: **No class. The university has extended Spring Break.**

Wednesday, March 25: Selma

Everyone listens and/or reads the text of:

- ["Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March" \(Links to an external site.\)](#) (March 25, 1965)

Please also choose between:

- Episode 6 of Eyes on the Prize, "[\(Links to an external site.\)Bridge to Freedom: 1965 \(Links to an external site.\)](#)"
- David Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (1986), [pp. 357-430](#) 

#### 5. Issues During the "Heroic Moment" of the Civil Rights Movement



**Monday, March 30: What Should be the Goal?**

Please read *both*:

1. Martin Luther King, "[The Ethical Demands for Integration \(Links to an external site.\)](#)" (1962) AND
2. Stokely Carmichael, "[Toward Black Liberation \(Links to an external site.\)](#)," The Massachusetts Review, Autumn 1966

Optional readings (valuable interpretations of King's view): Danielle Allen, "Integration, Freedom, and the Affirmation of Life," in Shelby and Terry, pp. [155-169. \(Links to an external site.\)](#) and Derrick Darby, "A Vindication of Voting Rights," in Shelby and Terry, [pp. 170-83. \(Links to an external site.\)](#) [Because of the pandemic, I cannot get access to this book to scan it. The Google book version of these chapters skips some pages; just read what you can.]

### Wednesday, April 1 Change from Below or from Above?


- Patrick Healy and Jeff Zeleny, "[Clinton and Obama Spar Over Remark About Dr. King - The New York Times.pdf](#)"  Jan 13, 2008
- Garth E. Pauley, "[Presidential rhetoric and interest group politics: Lyndon B. Johnson and the civil rights act of 1964,](#)"  Southern Communication Journal, vol. 63, no 1 (1997), pp. 1-19
- [Original text \(Links to an external site.\)](#) of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

Monday, April 6: Martin Luther King and Malcolm X

Everyone reads these primary texts:

- King's [remarks \(Links to an external site.\)](#) on Malcolm X in 1965 (from a Playboy Magazine interview)
- Malcolm X., "[Message to the Grass Roots \(Links to an external site.\)](#)" (Nov 9-10, 1963)
- Malcolm X, "[The Ballot or the Bullet \(Links to an external site.\)](#)," 1964 (audio and/or text)

Choose among:

1. Episode 7 of Eyes on the Prize, "[The Time Has Come: 1964-66 \(Links to an external site.\)](#)"
2. August H. Nimtz, "[Violence and/or Nonviolence in the Success of the Civil Rights Movement: The Malcolm X–Martin Luther King, Jr. Nexus \(Links to an external site.\)](#)." New Political Science 38.1 (2016): 1-22. >> ([Downloadable PDF](#) )
3. Clayborn Carson, "[The Unfinished Dialogue of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X \(Links to an external site.\)](#)" (1998)

### 6. Later Writings and Issues

Wednesday, April 8: The North and Poverty

Everyone watches:

Episode 8 of Eyes on the Prize, "[Two Societies: 1965-68 \(Links to an external site.\)](#)"

Choose from:

1. Tommy Shelby, "Prisons of the Forgotten: Ghettos and Economic Injustice," in pp. 196-213

Monday, April 13: War

Listen to audio and/or read the text:

- "[Beyond Vietnam -- A Time to Break Silence \(Links to an external site.\)](#)" (1967)

Wednesday, April 15: The end

Everyone watches/listens to:

- Episode 10 of Eyes on the Prize, "[The Promised Land: 1967-68 \(Links to an external site.\)](#)"
- Martin Luther King, "[I've Been to the Mountaintop](#)" ([Links to an external site.](#)) (April 3, 1968)

## **21st-Century Appraisals**

Wednesday, April 15

Peniel E. Joseph, "[Waiting till the midnight hour: Reconceptualizing the heroic period of the civil rights movement, 1954–1965 \(Links to an external site.\)](#)"

[April 20: Patriot's Day, no class.]

Monday, April 27: The right and the left of King after his death

Choose among:

1. Glenn C. Loury, "[Achieving the 'Dream'; A Challenge to Liberals and to Conservatives in the Spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr \(Links to an external site.\)](#)"
2. Ronald R. Sundstrom, "The Prophetic Tension Between Race Consciousness and the Ideal of Color-Blindness," pp. 136-154
3. Cornel West, "Hope and Despair: Past and Present," in Shelby and Terry, pp. 334-346
4. Shatema Threadcraft and Brandon M. Terry, "Gender Trouble: Manhood, Inclusion, and Justice, in 214-244
5. Brandon M. Terry, "Requiem for a Dream: The Problem-Space of Black Power," in Shelby and Terry, pp. 299-333