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Review of Freedom Church of the Poor: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign

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***Freedom Church of the Poor: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign.* Colleen Wessell McCoy. Lexington Books, 2021, 222 pp., hardback, 978-1-9787-1023-8**

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This review was written on the weekend of the U.S. national holiday marking the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King. By the time it is published, we'll have marked the 55th anniversary of King's April 4 martyrdom. As Colleen Wessel-McCoy points out in her introduction to *Freedom Church of the Poor*, the January national holiday has served to enshrine King as "the patron saint of community service and color-blind meritocracy." Rarely, she notes, do we hear from the King who said, "Capitalism was built on the exploitation and suffering of black slaves....and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor, both black and white, both here and abroad."

But that was the kind of talk that dominated the last two years of King's ministry, and in his last months he was immersed in planning and organizing for a Poor People's Campaign that would bring thousands of grassroots poor people—Black, white, Latino and Indigenous—to Washington, DC to demand that the federal government guarantee jobs or income as human rights of every American. The demand was for "jobs or income" King said, because "God loves all of us and wants us to have the basic necessities of life." He frankly acknowledged that meeting this demand would require a "radical restructuring of the architecture of American society." He envisioned that "a nonviolent army," a "freedom church of the poor," would disrupt the workings of government until its demands were addressed.

In the early chapters of *Freedom Church of the Poor*, Wessell-McCoy takes us inside some of the rooms where, in long, tense and often frustrating sessions throughout the early months of 1968, the alliances were forged that, it was hoped, would allow a coalition of unprecedented diversity to act as one. King's leadership was, of course, central to this process. He strove to keep the disparate groups focused on the vision that a multiracial "nonviolent army" of the poor could tip the balance of power in America, resulting in "a revolution of values" that would guarantee the basic necessities of life to all.

In reflecting on King's last days, Wessell-McCoy makes a great contribution by homing in on King's phrase to describe the envisioned movement: "a freedom church of the poor." She argues that, looking at the U.S. through the lens of biblical Christianity, King saw the poor as a sort of chosen people, set apart to lead the transformation of society away from his "giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism." But to accomplish this redemptive task, the "freedom church" of the vanguard activist poor would have to become a multiracial, multiethnic beloved community centered on a shared mission and a shared set of class interests. One could conclude that King was forging a "theology of liberation" centered on the agency of the poor at the same time that Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez was writing an earth-shaking book with that title that would be published in Spanish in 1971.

Wessel-McCoy moves on to detail what actually happened to the Poor People's Campaign after King's assassination. In May construction began on the makeshift dwellings that would become

Resurrection City, an encampment of several thousand poor people in the space between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. Ultimately, there were 6,312 registered participants in the Campaign. Of these two-thirds were Black, another 1200 were poor whites (mostly Appalachian), and the rest were Chicano, Puerto Rican or Native. The campaign ran for six weeks, with demonstrations at various government offices to put forward demands in such areas as welfare, housing and land rights.

In passages that will bring nods of recognition from any veteran of movement politics in the U.S., Wessel-McCoy recounts how the diversity of the coalition led to a multiplying of demands and a loss of the campaign's singular focus. In addition, once they were in Washington, insiders began to dilute the demands until they constituted a mildly reformist agenda that even *The Washington Post* could support. Nonviolent direct action to disrupt the working of government never materialized. Participants began to go home, and finally the camp was dismantled by federal police and the last occupants arrested.

Wessel-McCoy's recounting of the events of 1968 leads her to a closing section on the present-day Poor People's Campaign, led by Rev. William Barber and Rev. Liz Theoharis. This Campaign grew out of Barber's Moral Monday sit-ins at the North Carolina capitol and Theoharis' experience with Philadelphia's Kensington Welfare Rights Union. The current Poor People's Campaign has brought King's vision of a multiracial alliance of the poor back into the mainstream of U.S. social movements and has mobilized thousands of people across the country for an agenda of basic human rights, especially on the 50th anniversary of Resurrection City in 2018.

However, the world of the 2020s is not the world of 1968. King was a moral visionary, but he was also a hard-headed strategist, and he believed that a direct-action campaign focused on "jobs or income" could succeed. He saw a pathway to social democracy in the U.S. because the preceding decades had brought us part of the way there. In 1968 America was still near the crest of the relatively shared prosperity that emerged from the post-World War II consensus between capital and labor. About 30 percent of U.S. workers were unionized and only one-third of all income was going to the top 10 percent of the population. The minimum wage was more than \$13 per hour (in 2022 dollars). However, starting in the mid-1970s, capital broke the post-war truce and a free market, anti-union, anti-government crusade began. Wessel-McCoy writes in a time when U.S. union membership has fallen to 10 percent of all workers, the top 10 percent of the population takes home almost half the national income and the federal minimum wage is still \$7.25 per hour. King could realistically imagine tipping the balance of power and forcing structural change in America because that balance was not so one-sided as it is today.

Nonetheless, *Freedom Church of the Poor* does today's activists, especially those rooted in the Judeo-Christian traditions, a great service by calling us back to the radical, universalist vision of our greatest leader and raising essential questions about how that vision can be implemented today.

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