(The following is the text of a video Ed Dodson made of his lecture on Dr. King’s principles of political economy. He revised his lecture Feb. 15, 2013 and has now made it available on Youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quMnU-wa6yE&feature=youtu.be. Ed Dodson may be emailed at edod08034@gmail.com.)

We know Martin Luther King, Jr. as the leader in the non-violent approach to gaining full civil liberties and equality of opportunity for people of color in the United States. Less appreciated is his broadened concern to end the very existence of poverty.

In King’s 1967 book, Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?, he was looking ahead to the day when racial discrimination was no longer tolerated. He knew this would not bring an end to poverty. More had to be done. Deep changes in the nation’s economic system were called for, he was convinced.

King was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1929, attending the Booker T. Washington High School until 1944.

Although he had not formally graduated from his high school, he was admitted to Morehouse College.

At Morehouse, King was introduced to the writings of Henry David Thoreau, which had a lasting influence on the direction of his activism. He later wrote:

“During my student days I read Henry David Thoreau’s essay “On Civil Disobedience” for the first time. Here, in this courageous New Englander’s refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of jail rather than support a war that would spread slavery’s territory into Mexico, I made my first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance.”

He graduated from Morehouse College in 1948 and entered the Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania.

Now, while a student at the Crozer Theological Seminary, King began to broaden his study of what might be called ‘the great ideas’. He recalled:

“I turned to a serious study of the social and ethical theories of the great philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle down to Rousseau, Hobbes, Bentham, Mill, and Locke. All of these masters stimulated my thinking -- such as it was -- and, while finding things to question in each of them, I nevertheless learned a great deal from their study.”

King then decided to examine the rationale behind the communist ideology.

He read Das Kapital by Karl Marx as well as the Communist Manifesto.

As devout Christian, King rejected the communist interpretation of history. Thus, although King thought Marxist ideology to be without principle, and even evil in its fundamental nature, he acknowledged why others might embrace it as a path to escape from long-standing oppressions. He wrote:

“With all of its false assumptions and evil methods, communism grew as a protest against the hardships of the underprivileged. Communism in theory emphasized a classless society, and a concern for social justice, though the world knows from sad experience that in practice it created new classes and a new lexicon of injustice. …”

“The Christian ought always to be challenged by any protest against unfair treatment of the poor.”

Importantly, he came to the conclusion that capitalism as practiced was inherently unjust and in need to specific reforms.

“My reading of Marx also convinced me that truth is found neither in Marxism nor in traditional capitalism. Each represents a partial truth. Historically capitalism failed to see the truth in collective enterprise and Marxism failed to see the truth in individual enterprise. Nineteenth-century capitalism failed to see that life is social and Marxism failed and still fails to see that life is individual and personal.”

In Philadelphia, he then heard a sermon by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, who spoke of his recent trip to India and the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.

King immersed himself into a study of Gandhi’s life and works. He came to embrace Gandhi’s strategy of non-violent resistance as the answer to the unfair treatment people of color received in the United States. The question then arises: to what extent was King also influenced by Gandhi’s views on reforms and how to end poverty?

Gandhi was a dedicated agrarian and championed the cause of the landless peasants. He supported the outright confiscation of land from India’s large landowners, to be distributed free of charge to the poor. It was his view that only those who actually worked the land should be permitted to own it. He declared:

“Land and all properties is his who will work it.”

Years later, King was able to make the journey to India to visit Gandhi’s place of birth. In a radio address made just before returning to the United States, he said:

“Since being in India, I am more convinced than ever before that the method of nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity. …”

“In a real sense, Mahatma Gandhi embodied in his life certain universal principles that are inherent in the moral structure of the universe, and these principles are as inescapable as the law of gravitation.”

In a November 1956 sermon, King presented an imaginary letter from the apostle Paul to American Christians, which stated:

“Oh America, how often have you taken necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes... God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty.”

Speaking in 1963, King talked about the poverty that crossed the color line:

“To this day the white poor also suffer deprivation and the humiliation of poverty if not of color.…”

“It corrupts their lives, frustrates their opportunities (continued on page 10)
and withers their education. In one sense it is more evil for
them, because it has confused so many by prejudice that they
have supported their own oppressors."

King asked some of the same moral questions asked
by Henry George regarding the treatment of nature as private
property:

"You see, my friends, you begin to ask the ques-
tions, 'Who owns the oil?' You begin to ask the question,
'Who owns the iron ore?' You begin to ask the question, 'Why
is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two-
thirds water?'"

Despite the history of how people of color were
subjected to centuries of unjust law, King looked to govern-
ment to secure economic rights. He described capitalism as a
system:

"permitting necessities to be taken from the
many to give luxuries to the few."

The reforms he sought were directed toward
achieving what political economists described as a just distri-
bution of wealth. Government needed to be pressured to secure
and protect economic as well as political rights. As King put
it in a 1965 Speech to the Negro American Labor Council:

"The good and just society is neither the thesis of
capitalism nor the antithesis of communism, but a socially con-
scious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism
and collectivism. ...

"Call it democracy, or call it democratic socialism,
but there must be a better distribution of wealth within this
country for all God's children."

King observed that in the world of 1963, people
of color were the last hired and the first to be let go, all the more
so because of improvements in the efficiency of industrial
machinery:

"The nation will also have to find the answer to full
employment, including a more imaginative approach than has
yet been conceived for neutralizing the perils of automation.
Today, as the skilled and semiskilled Negro attempts to mount
the ladder of economic security, he finds himself in competi-
tion with the white working man at the very time when auto-
mation is scrapping forty thousand jobs a week. ...

"Though this is perhaps the inevitable product of
social and economic upheaval, it is an intolerable situation, and
Negroes will not long permit themselves to be pitted against
white workers for an ever-decreasing supply of jobs."

King’s vision of a world in which all persons felt
part of society rested on a realization of full employment. To
that end, he sent a telegram to President Lyndon Johnson:

"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. ...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 understood that without the opportunity to earn
a decent living, the social conflicts would only escalate into
political turmoil and violence, threatening the very life of the

Democratic that was, potentially, the promise of the United
States as a society. Because the private sector had failed to
deliver a full employment economy, King called upon the
federal government to fill the void:

“We must develop a federal program of public
works, retraining, and jobs for all -- so that none, white or
black, will have cause to feel threatened. At the present time,
thousands of jobs a week are disappearing in the wake of
automation and other production efficiency techniques.”

In an article he wrote appearing in the April 3rd
issue of Saturday Review during 1965, King acknowledged
that racial and economic problems in the Northern states were
far more serious than he had thought. King biographer David
L. Lewis writes:

“The illusion of freedom in the North had masked
its hideous economic conditions – matriarchal families whose
morality was vitiated by perpetual dependence upon welfare
programs, levels of unemployment that had actually risen in
the decade since Montgomery, and agglutinations of the im-
poveryed in substandard housing that had few equivalents
even in the South.”

Late in 1965, King arrived in Chicago to add
strength to a coalition formed to take on Mayor Richard Da-
ley and Chicago’s very real racial and economic segregation.
High on King’s list of priorities was the terrible condition of
rental housing units available to Chicago’s people of color
and poor whites.

King could feel gratified, to some degree, when in
August of 1966, Chicago’s officials announced that $500
million would be invested in twenty-two depressed areas of
the city over the next two years. Moreover, after prolonged
negotiations with Mayor Daley, an agreement was reached
that promised an end to housing discrimination.

The lessons learned from the Chicago campaign
were significant, King wrote:

“For years I labored with the idea of reforming the
existing institutions of the society, a little change here, a little
change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you’ve got
to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of
values.”

Under circumstances of widespread discrimination
in the labor markets that faced people of color, they had little
hope of better pay and working conditions. According to
King, unionization was one of the few responses available to
them:

“Where Negroes are confined to the lowest paying
jobs, they must get together to organize a union in order to
have the kind of power that could enter into collective barg-
gaining with their employers.”

King’s final book is also his statement of positions
on raising the living standards of the poor among his fellow
people:

“We must create full employment or we must cre-
ate incomes. People must be made consumers by one method
or the other. ...We realize that dislocations in the market op-
eration of our economy and the prevalence of

(continued on p. 11)
To summarize what I believe I learned in this examination of King's positions on how to deal with poverty, he believed that government is there to ensure that all citizens have access to what Mortimer Adler calls the goods of a decent human existence. In his experience, the system almost everyone chooses to call capitalism fails to deliver the goods. Therefore, government must intervene.

King embraced democracy, but a social democracy distinct from the Social Darwinism defended by some who stand right of center.

As I compare his sense of justice with my own, I reluctantly conclude that King -- like most of his contemporaries who cared deeply about poverty -- apparently did not fully grasp the extent to which privilege dictates economic outcomes in our country. Or, perhaps more accurately, he had not yet recognized some of the most powerful forms of entrenched privilege that plague our society.

To be sure, his struggles helped to lessen privilege based on race or the color of one's skin. Every day we observe how other forms of privilege continue to threaten our very democracy and stand in the way of a society built on equality of opportunity.