

Who was the “Radical” King?

When people use the term “Radical King,” what do they mean?

[\[Audio Link\]](#)

Dr. Clayborne Carson: I think sometimes that description of him is based on a misunderstanding. Like I've heard people talk about King became more radical as he became older. And I think that's just wrong. That's just from people who have not really studied him very much. From his first writings as a teenager, from the first time he describes his mission as a minister, he's talking about bringing about change in slums and unemployment, economic security.

You know, he's talking about the social gospel. The same social gospel that Walter Rauschenbusch was talking about, you know, many years, many decades before the one that led to many people to join the socialist party at the turn of the century. This kind of notion that Christianity demands justice in all areas. And that that was his motivating force.

So, if you go back and look at those papers, you know, that he writes as a seminary student in 1948 when he talks about slums, unemployment, economic insecurity, what is he doing 20 years later in Chicago and Memphis at the poor people's campaign. That was always his concern. I think that Rosa Parks turned him into a civil rights leader. If she hadn't been there in 1955 and he hadn't been in Montgomery in 1955, he probably would have always stayed a social gospel minister, becoming involved in, you know, helping poor people like some ministers do today, but he would not have become a civil rights leader. We probably wouldn't be talking about him today.

So, Rosa Parks made him into a civil rights leader, and I think for ten years he did that pretty well. I think anyone would say, you know, for someone who didn't ask for the job, someone who was somewhat reluctant to take on that role, he spent the next ten years and succeeded admirably. But once he had succeeded as a civil rights leader by 1965, with the passage of the Voting Rights Act, he went back to his radical roots. He moves to Chicago, sets up shop in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago, and begins to deal with the same issues that he was concerned about as a teenage seminary student.

So, I think that King's basic orientation was one of transforming the society as a whole into something more just. And that meant not just civil rights reform, but a radical transformation of all the institutions in this society – the political, the economic. He was a critic of capitalism. Which didn't make him a communist, it just made him part of a long-standing tradition in America in which many people have been critical of the capitalist system and are searching for some alternative to a kind of capitalism that is very hurtful for those at the bottom of the social order.

So, I think that those kinds of things make him a radical in the sense of going to the root of the problem. Of trying to not deal with, you know, not just making life better for individual poor people, but changing the structure that produces poor people. And that was his goal.

[\[Understanding the Legacy of MLK\]](#)