

**RADICAL (EVANGELICAL) DEMOCRACY:
THE DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
AND ANTONIO NEGRI**

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ABSTRACT

This essay critically examines the theories of radical democracy offered by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of the beloved community and Antonio Negri's vision of the multitude. The radical democratic visions of King and Negri continue to critically inform progressive reflections on democratic theory and propel new dreams of democracy. Despite their similarities, the differences between Negri and King are substantial. I argue that Negri's dream of the multitude and King's dream of beloved community have been shaped by *different* conceptions of radical democracy. While Negri works out of a tradition of Italian Marxism, King works within a *critical* tradition of prophetic evangelicalism. Thus, the political task, according to King, is to translate Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom of God into a beloved community on earth. King's creative negotiation of transcendence and history provides the requisite theological *and* political resources to develop a truly transcendent *and* immanent vision of a radical democratic society that is attentive to the demands and dignity of "all God's children."

Keywords: Antonio Negri, Christianity, democracy, evangelical, love, Martin Luther King Jr, non-violence.

Dionysus versus the "Crucified": there you have the antithesis. It is *not* a difference in regard to their martyrdom—it is a difference in the meaning of it... The god on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from life; Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction.

Friedrich Nietzsche

A man's moral conscience is the curse he had to accept from the gods in order to gain from them the right to dream.

William Faulkner

Democracy remains modernity's final dream. The dream of democracy has taken on multiple forms during modernity's tortured and traumatic history. Sometimes religious, sometimes political, and sometimes both, the unrealized dream of democracy is a specter that haunts the modern political imagination. In the second half of the twentieth century, two visions of radical democracy were birthed that confronted modernity's dream quest. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of the beloved community and Antonio Negri's vision of the multitude continue to critically inform progressive reflections on democratic theory and propel new dreams of democracy.

It was during their seasons of exile and imprisonment—a “liminal” space between waking and sleeping—when they began to imagine new conceptions of radical democracy.¹ The democratic dreams of Negri and King emerge from a “liminal” place in their psyches and lives. C. G. Jung writes, “The dream is specifically the utterance of the unconscious. Just as the psyche has a diurnal side which we call consciousness, so also it has a nocturnal side: the unconscious psychic activity which we apprehend as dreamlike fantasy.”² While born in the “nocturnal” sides of their consciousness, Negri and King were able to effectively translate and communicate their dreams to the “diurnal” world. Their democratic dreams struck a chord with people's movements and connected so deeply with social and political movements in their struggle for true equality and freedom.

King's and Negri's dreams were the products of two very different social and theoretical contexts. While King's vision was produced in the context of the U.S. black freedom struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, Negri's vision was produced in the context of the Italian worker's struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. From the bus boycott in Montgomery to the protests of sanitation workers in Memphis, King and the black freedom movement not only fought for racial justice in the United States, but also animated global struggles against racial oppression, economic exploitation, militarism, and imperialism. Both King and Negri share a deep commitment to more robust forms of democracy. And it is this commitment, critically informed

1. For an explanation of the “liminal” see Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–111.

2. C. G. Jung, “The Practical Use of Dream Analysis” (1934) in *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 16: *Practice of Psychotherapy*, ed. and trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1966), 317.

by an axiomatic emphasis on love that forms a crucial point of contact between their distinct social imaginaries.³

Despite their similarities, the differences between Negri and King are substantial. While both King and Negri advocate a politics of love with a focused critique of imperialism and a rapacious capitalism, their democratic dreams clash. Negri advocates an atheist politics of immanence while King advances what I term an evangelical politics of transcendence. In this essay, I will argue that Negri's dream of multitude and King's dream of beloved community have been shaped by *different* conceptions of radical democracy. While Negri works out of a tradition of Italian Marxism, King works in a *critical* tradition of prophetic evangelicalism. With roots in the Black protestant church and radical social movements, prophetic evangelicalism espouses a Christocentric vision of social and cultural flourishing based on a critical reading of the Bible informed by an ethic of the Kingdom of God. It is this tradition of prophetic evangelicalism that provides King, and by extension religiously informed political radicals in contemporary society, with the critical resources necessary to develop a robust emancipatory politics and political vision of a truly radical democracy.

The Radical Democratic Dream of the Multitude

Antonio Negri's dreams of democracy were informed by his political experiences and his prison sentence in Padua, Italy. On April 7, 1979, Negri was arrested for his political agitation in the Red Brigades. Formed in the early seventies, the Red Brigades engaged in a violent struggle with the Italian state. Negri was imprisoned without trial for four years. In 1983 Negri was elected to the Italian legislature and through a parliamentary privilege was able to leave prison. A few months later when this privilege was revoked, Negri fled to France to teach at Université de Paris VIII and the Collège International de Philosophie. In 1984, he received a 30-year jail sentence. After teaching in France for 14 years, Negri returned to Italy in 1997 to complete his prison term in the privacy of his home with a night curfew. As a result of his own political experiences and exile, Negri began to dream of a way to help others develop an alternative vision of political community outside of the norms and dictates of empire.

Antonio Negri's dream of radical democracy draws deep from the wells of Italian Marxism as reflected in his early works *Marx Beyond Marx*

3. I use the term "social imaginary" like Charles Taylor to describe a collective social vision that both makes sense of and enables the just practices of society. See Charles Taylor, "What is a 'Social Imaginary'?", in Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2004), 23–30; Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

and *The Savage Anomaly*.⁴ When the Italian Left was crumbling, Negri delivered a set of lectures at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris that was later published as *Marx Beyond Marx*. In these lectures, Negri reinterprets Marx's theory of historical materialism in order to make sense of the Italian worker's protest, including the subversive activities of the Red Brigades. Influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault, Negri comes to understand Marx's greatest contribution to be his analysis of power with reference to struggles between the proletariat and the capitalist class.

In Negri's analysis, power was concentrated in an extensive global capitalist network that was protected and enforced by nation-states. While these networks benefited the capitalists, the workers were exploited. Revolutionary groups like the Red Brigades had a political responsibility, in Negri's judgment, to reverse the flows of power so they moved in the direction of global social justice. Negri's radically democratic political vision sought to move power from its concentrated centers in the state and capitalist economy toward a more radically democratic and diffuse power matrix dispersed among a loose coalition of people's resistance movements.

While Marx helped Negri understand the problem of capitalist political economy, Baruch Spinoza helped him understand the political potential of labor mobilized for social justice. *The Savage Anomaly* is an ode to Spinoza whose dialectical social ontology drives Negri's dream of radical democracy.⁵ Michael Hardt, the English translator of this work, became his collaborator on two subsequent volumes that explored these themes in more detail. *Empire* and *Multitude* seek to distill both Hardt and Negri's thinking around the archetypes of a renewed socialist vision

4. Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*, trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan and Maurizio Viano; ed. Jim Fleming (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1984); *idem*, *The Savage Anomaly* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). Cf. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds, *Radical Thought in Italy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Hardt and Negri work out of a radical stream of modern continental philosophy that "goes from Machiavelli and Spinoza to Marx, and in the contemporary period from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Foucault and Deleuze...an alternative terrain of critique and constitutive thought...on which subjectivities are formed that are adequate to radical democracy and, through labor, capable of communism." Michael Hart and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of State-Form* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1994), 16.

5. See Antonio Negri, "'Reliqua Desiderantur': A Conjecture for a Definition of the Concept of Democracy in the Final Spinoza," trans. T. Stolze, in W. Montag and T. Stolze, eds, *The New Spinoza* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 219–47; Baruch Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Vol. 1 of *Chief Works*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951).

for the early twenty-first century.⁶ Hardt and Negri are Marxian inspired political revolutionaries guided by Spinoza's concept of absolute democracy without limits—"a North Star that continues to guide [their] political desires and practices."⁷

The class struggle between the proletariat and the capitalist in Marx is simultaneously deepened and universalized in Hardt and Negri's democratic dream of the multitude resisting the empire. It is deepened in that empire and multitude are transformed into competing subjectivities. It is universalized in that there is no ontological excess, including transcendence, beyond these two competing economic life-force collectives. Hardt and Negri universalize the actors of Marx's class struggle—so the capitalists are not simply capitalist robber-barrens who benefit from the factors of production, but all social and economic elite and the multiple institutions they inhabit. The proletariat is no longer laborers, but all people, symbolized most accurately by the global poor, who form a motley multitude who have the capacity to collectively resist the Empire's imperial systems.

Empire, in Hardt and Negri's thought, describes the contemporary economic predicament that we, as early twenty-first-century moderns, find ourselves. Our new global reality is best understood as an economic environment in which a small economic power elite control flows of capital which are decentered and deterritorialized from traditional institutional centers of modern nation-state. Neo-liberal global capitalism has grown so powerful that the vast majority of people live lives of voluntary servitude to the capitalist system. Since Hardt and Negri reject the existence of "God the Father," empire itself becomes a new God with a dominative sovereignty that is absolutely immanent.⁸

Given the endless tentacles of the imperial leviathan, the world's only hope is the creation of a new democratic community, composed of converging global resistance movements. While Hardt and Negri reject transcendence, they have to draw deep in the wells of the Christian imagination in order to imagine a political alternative to a capitalist modernity. Inspired by Augustine's *City of God*, Hardt and Negri write:

Globalization must be met with a counter-globalization, Empire with a counter-Empire. In this regard we might take inspiration from Saint Augustine's vision of a project to contest the decadent Roman Empire. No limited

6. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

7. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 241. Cf. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, chapter XI, paragraph 1.

8. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 396.

community could succeed and provide an alternative to imperial rule; only a universal, catholic community bringing together all populations and all languages in a common journey could accomplish this. The divine city is a universal city of aliens, coming together, cooperating, communicating. Our pilgrimage on earth, however, in contrast to Augustine's, has no transcendent telos beyond; it is and remains absolutely immanent. Its continuous movement, gathering aliens in community, making this world its home, is both means and end, or rather a means without end.⁹

Hardt and Negri rightly see that the only way the Roman Empire of old or the empire of today can be superseded is through a "universal, catholic community," a divine and universal city of aliens from every culture. While Hardt and Negri desire the universal community that Augustine's catholic theological imagination provides, they vehemently reject its "transcendent telos beyond." Therefore, the movement of the multitude is "a means without end," a form of radical democratic practice with no foundation and no destination.

The multitude is an ongoing movement from a moment of renunciation to a moment of creation. The multitude seeks to overthrow empire, but replace it with a counter-empire. Hardt and Negri write, "What we need is to create a new social body, which is a project that goes well beyond refusal. Our lines of flight, our exodus must be constituent and create a real alternative. Beyond the simple refusal, or as part of that refusal, we need also to construct a new mode of life and above all a new community."¹⁰ Framing the flight from empire as an "exodus," coupled with Gospel writers' constant reference to Jesus preaching to the "multitudes," unveils underlying Christian theo-logics in Hardt and Negri's a-theistic vision.

The biblical tropes of exodus and new creation inspire Hardt and Negri to dream big. Their democratic dream is the creation of a new humanity. Their dream is to create a new global political subjectivity that is focused and powerful enough to overthrow the forces of empire. While they refer to it in many different ways, e.g., "a new social body," "a new mode of life," and "a new community," it can be summed up in one word—*multitude*.

Hardt and Negri's multitude is "a set of *singularities*—and by singularity we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different."¹¹ While the multitude is composed of a set of singularities, these singularities share a common situation, empire, and a common aspiration, radical democracy. In Hardt and Negri's narrative vision, the forces of empire are actively working to suppress and repress the democratic desires of the multitude. The unregulated flows

9. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 207.

10. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 204.

11. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 99.

of global capital form new sites of sovereignty, weakening the power of nation-states and shaping new subjugated subjectivities of the working class. In our post-industrial, post-Cold War world, Hardt and Negri are confident that the conditions are ripe for the singularities that make up the multitude to unite in the common task of radical democracy.

Hardt and Negri's social ontology is based on a dialectic of domination and liberation. Empire dominates, the Multitude liberates. With Michel Foucault, they see authority as necessarily a dominating force. Foucault traces the origins of modern domination to the rise of "disciplinary societies" in the sixteenth century.¹² The state is the chief disciplinary society and implements its hegemonic reign through public institutions such as factories, schools, prisons, hospitals and asylums. These state-run institutions produce and regulate biopower that disciplines the biological bodies of the masses. With the rise of capitalist economies, biopower reconstitutes itself into the ebbs and flows of emerging market channels and clearing houses. The sheer economic force of capitalism coupled with the rise of modern technology has transformed "disciplinary societies" into "societies of control" in the twentieth century.¹³

The task of the multitude is to overthrow these all-encompassing societies of control in order to usher in a liberative economic democracy. Our common situation of empire demands a common response. Since all singularities of the multitude inhabit empire, they all have the power to resist it, reconstructing the world. In Negri's dreams, democracy is achieved when the multitude truly loves.

In order to realize their vision of multitude, Hardt and Negri draw once again on a Christian motif—*agape* love:

People today seem unable to understand love as a political concept, but a concept of love is just what we need to grasp the constituent power of the multitude... We need to recuperate the public and political conception of love common to premodern traditions. Christianity and Judaism, for example, both conceive love as a political act that constructs the multitude. Love means precisely that our expansive encounters and continuous collaborations bring us joy. There is really nothing necessarily metaphysical about the Christian and Judaic love of God: both God's love of humanity and humanity's love of God are expressed and incarnated in the common material political project of the multitude. We need to recover today this material and political sense of love, a love as strong as death.¹⁴

12. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 3 vols, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980–1986).

13. See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 177–82.

14. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 351.

A political realization of *love* is vital for the full constitution of the multitude. Seeking to illuminate the mystery of love, they turn to the fragments of a Western Christian past.

St. Augustine also posits the possibility of love as “a political act.” From his wandering heart in the *Confessions* to his nomadic journey from the earthly city to the divine city in *City of God*, Augustine understands love or charity (*caritas*) as a restless desire in every human heart that finds its ultimate rest in the gracious presence of the Living God. Augustine’s dream of *caritas* finds a new form in Negri’s political imagination. Identifying Augustine’s *caritas* with Marx’s proletariat, Negri argues that love is labor seeking to end poverty: “Love (i.e., living labour), in the relationship that links it to the power of poverty and in the exposure of the one and the other on the edge of time so as to create new being, is thus the machine and motor of the subjective dispositions of the biopolitical.”¹⁵ After Marx, Negri seeks to grant immaterial labor a collective subjectivity, naming this living labor “multitude,” which he understands as the material and political manifestation of love.

Arguing that there is “nothing necessarily metaphysical” about Jewish and Christian conceptions of love, Hardt and Negri turn instead to Greek myth for inspiration. In the preface to *Labor of Dionysus* they write: “Our work is dedicated to the creative, Dionysian powers of the netherworld.”¹⁶ In classical Greek mythology, Dionysus was the Greek God of wine, who was associated with festivity, including singing, dancing, and sexual ecstasy. Friedrich Nietzsche—whose thought haunts Hardt and Negri’s projects—also invokes the Dionysian in the context of the nineteenth-century revival of tragedy through music, embodied in Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. While Nietzsche associated the creative spirit with Dionysus, Negri goes further to think about this creative spirit as love politically embodied in a people’s resistance movement. “Dionysus is the god of living labor, creation on its own time,” write Hardt and Negri.¹⁷ Pulling back the Apollonian veil of consciousness that blinds people from the insidious rule of capitalism, Negri hopes to awaken the Dionysian—the erotic energies of the multitude—to resist capitalism’s rapacious reign. In the spirit of Dionysus, Negri engages in “transvaluation” of the Christian concept of agape, collapsing the distinction between *agape* and *eros*, viewing love as the libidinal energies of the poor: “the new vital force of the masses, or as we prefer, of the desire of the multitude.”¹⁸

15. Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 236.

16. Hardt and Negri, *Labor of Dionysus*, xiv.

17. Hardt and Negri, *Labor of Dionysus*, xiii.

18. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 377.

The cult of Dionysus releases the multitude to fulfill its desires even through violent means. During his years of imprisonment, Negri reflected on the subversive character of radical Marxism, dreaming of a global revolt: “violence is legitimated by the duty of peace.”¹⁹ Peace is established through a violent insurrection. Hardt and Negri conclude *Multitude* with a call for “a strong event, a radical insurrectional demand.”²⁰ The militant rhetoric of “strong event” and “insurrectional demand” unveil a *violent* logic that undergirds Negri’s democratic dream. Negri writes, “Proletarian violence, in so far as it is a positive allusion to communism, is an essential element of the dynamic of communism... Violence is a first, immediate, and vigorous affirmation of the necessity of communism. It does not provide the solution, but is fundamental.”²¹ For Negri, violence is a fundamental element in creating radical democracy. While Negri’s vision demands violent insurrection it does not provide clear criteria to help the multitude discern when to use violence. Following a genealogy from Duns Scotus to Baruch Spinoza, the radical democratic vision of Hardt and Negri is grounded in “an anarchic basis of philosophy: *Ni dieu, ni maître, ni l’homme*.”²² At the bottom Hardt and Negri’s vision is a refusal of transcendence, a rejection of God. Without God, violence and anarchy become “legitimate” means toward realizing the equality of all people. Yet these violent political tactics themselves contradict the egalitarian ideal that is supposed to guide the desires of the multitude.

While their socialist economic vision provides an alternative to the current global neo-liberal capitalist order, it is not without limitations and dangers. Because of Negri’s refusal of transcendence, his democratic dream has no peaceable path or final destination. The absolutely immanent movement of the multitude is “a means without end.”²³ When we consider a political vision that rejects any transcendent foundation, deploys violent tactics, and is not critically informed by an ethical norm, this vision can necessarily lead to a destructive form of anarchy. In contrast, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s democratic dream of beloved community is theologically grounded, committed to non-violence, and is guided by moral norms and an eschatological vision. King provides a more promising political theology for the establishment of democratic communities.

19. Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 115.

20. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 358.

21. Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*, 173.

22. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 91–2.

23. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 207.

The Radical Democratic Dream of Beloved Community

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream of democracy continues to capture the imagination of people around the world. Inspired by Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom of God, King rendered democracy through the metaphor of "beloved community."²⁴ God's love for creation disclosed in the event of Jesus Christ becomes for King the foundation for the human effort to realize a deep democracy. The political task, according to King, was to translate Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom of God into a beloved community on earth. Thus, King's contribution to America's *political* future was first and foremost *theological*.

While Negri grounds his democratic dream in a broadly Marxian imaginary, King's democratic dream was based in his theological imaginary animated by a radical political interpretation of the meaning of the life and teachings of Jesus. What I term King's "prophetic evangelicalism" had its roots in the visions of radical egalitarianism that animated such social movements as the black freedom struggle in the Americas. King's prophetic evangelicalism focuses on biblical vision, experiential conversion, and Christ-centered social transformation.²⁵ It is the egalitarian vision of black evangelical revivalism that provides King, and by extension contemporary American society, with the critical resources necessary to develop a robust emancipatory political vision of a truly pluralist democracy.

Jesus' teaching of a peaceable kingdom provides the *telos* of democracy and inspires the political struggles for its realization. For King, democratic

24. There is a substantial literature on King's notion of the beloved community. See, for example, Lewis V. Baldwin, *Toward the Beloved Community: Martin Luther King, Jr. and South Africa* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1995); Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989); Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); and Greg Moses, *Revolution of Conscience: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Philosophy of Nonviolence* (New York: Guilford Press, 1967).

25. Cornel West writes, "Afro-American thought must take seriously the most influential and enduring intellectual tradition in its experience: evangelical and pietistic Christianity." Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), 15. See Peter Goodwin Heltzel, "Prophetic Evangelicals: Toward a Politics of Hope," in *The Sleeping Giant Has Awoken: The New Politics of Religion in the United States*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins and Neal Magee (New York: Continuum, 2008), 25–40. For a historical theological analysis of the rise of prophetic evangelicalism in the United States focused on Martin Luther King's, Jr.'s political theology, see Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race and American Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

community should be marked by three characteristics whose ultimate source is found in the life and teachings of Jesus: inclusivity, interculturality, and non-violent love. With Negri, King seeks an expansive notion of democracy that includes all people, especially the marginalized. But the crucial difference between King and Negri is that King grounds his political vision of society on a conception of love encased within a classical Christian theism. Instead of refusing transcendence like Negri, King appeals to God as a viable basis to ground his capacious conception of love.²⁶ For King, God created all people in the divine image (*imago Dei*) and the universe is founded on God's justice.²⁷ Thus, every person is sacred, unique, dignified, and loved by God and thus must be fully and meaningfully incorporated into the human community. Thus, King's vision of beloved community finds its fullest expression in the transcendent and immanent love of God.

King's dream of beloved community was born and born again in the darkness of the 16 prison cells that King inhabited during his courageous public ministry. During King's sojourns in prison, he would grieve the loss of his life during those seasons of lonely isolation, connecting his grief with the grief of many African people who had lost their lives during the Middle Passage, slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation. King's dream was born in suffering: his own suffering and the suffering of all God's children. It was in these darkest of moments of King's life that he was at a threshold of a horizon of hope. The night his home in Montgomery was bombed, an angry, frightened, and confused King prayed for God's help at his kitchen table. In the stillness of that moment King resolved to continue the quest for justice and the instantiation of the beloved community. We can read King's kitchen table experience as a "liminal" moment in that the boundaries between sleeping and waking were dissolved and King broached a new space whereby he would be able to transcend the limits of what he was and was to become. By forging ahead through his dark night of the soul, King became inspired by multicolored dreams of democracy. A dream he was dedicated to making a reality.

King rearticulates Josiah Royce's term—beloved community—that expressed the Harvard philosopher's liberal hope for the common good

26. Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Experiment in Love" (1958), in Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 16–20 (hereafter *Testament of Hope*). Cf. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 220, 221.

27. For a helpful elaboration of these two theological claims in King in conversation with personalist philosophy and Christian ethics, see Rufus Burrow, Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

within his prophetic black Christian theological imagination. In so doing, he intimately links it with the life and teachings of Jesus with acute reference to the idea of the Kingdom of God.²⁸ The Kingdom of God has both an “already” and “not yet” character. King uses beloved community to refer to the “already,” earthly manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Beloved community is the “creation of a society where all men can live together as brothers, where every man will respect the dignity and the worth of human personality.”²⁹ For King the *telos* of the civil rights movement was not only the political liberation of individual African Americans, but also the creation of a new social order for all people: “The end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of beloved community.”³⁰ The most authentic material manifestation of beloved community is radical democracy; it is the space and place where all God’s children, regardless of race, creed, and color, are free to fulfill all of their God-given rights.

King’s legendary 1963 speech, “I Have a Dream” is one of the most memorable expressions of his theo-political vision of beloved community.³¹ King’s dream is a synthesis of Jesus’ ideal of the Kingdom of God and the American dream: “It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” While King’s dream emerges out of the prophetic black Christian tradition, it is inclusive of all people, “black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants.” King draws liberally on the deep river of the Black Church tradition in this speech, but his call is to every citizen of the United States. King’s vision is that one day all people, regardless of race, creed, or color, can sit down together, learn together, play together, and serve together. King provides us with not only an image of a multi-racial, pluralist democratic society—the beloved community—but also provides a concrete embodiment of it—Jesus Christ—and collective political practice—nonviolent love.

28. See Ralph Luker, “The Kingdom of God and the Beloved Community in the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” in *Ideas and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Ted Ownby (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 39–54; Cf. Peter Goodwin Heltzel, “Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Theology of the Cross,” in Heltzel, *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race and American Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 87–93.

29. Martin Luther King Jr., “The American Dream,” in Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 215 (hereafter *Testament of Hope*).

30. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 3, ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 136.

31. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream,” in *Testament of Hope*, 217–20.

In his famous sermon titled “A Time to Break Silence” delivered on April 4, 1967 at New York’s Riverside Church, King spoke of America’s need to forsake the idols of racism, materialism, and militarism in order to truly embody the beloved community. In front of a packed Riverside Church, King argued that the American empire was “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.”³² Racism, poverty, and war were identified as the three great sins of the American empire. King’s strategy to dismantle these “powers and principalities” was through building a large-scale, non-violent coalition for justice. What King saw is that racism, materialism and militarism were all based on a logic of violence that can only be permanently dismantled through non-violent love. King’s vision of democracy was more than just a form of government in which all people have the right to vote; it entailed the instantiation of being and becoming the beloved community.

King often referred to “all God’s children” in his speeches and sermons. He saw beloved community as a social order that treats all people with dignity and equality, regardless of their race, because they are each made in God’s image. Being created in God’s image becomes the basis of each individual’s God-given political rights: “And there is another thing we see in this dream that ultimately distinguishes democracy and our form of government from all of the totalitarian regimes that emerge in history. It says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state. To discover where they came from it is necessary to move back behind the dim mist of eternity, for they are God-given.”³³ It is God who creates beloved community through the collective mobilization of empowered citizens trying to contribute to the common good. In other words, God’s work in each person leads to the liberation of the whole of humanity holding open the possibility of the manifestation of beloved community on earth. King understood that the liberation of African Americans in the civil rights movement entailed the liberation of all people, including whites. King’s intercultural approach to democracy demands that cultural others who have been excluded from the public square—African Americans, Latinos/as, Asians, and Native Americans—be brought from the margins to the center of democratic conversation, deliberation, and practice.

King’s *theo-political* theory of democracy based on non-violent love is a radical departure from the dream of democracy that animates Negri’s theoretical conception of radical democracy. While Negri accepts a certain

32. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 24.

33. Martin Luther King, Jr., “The American Dream,” in *Testament of Hope*, 208.

level of violence as a necessary part of revolution, King views violence as the death of the very possibility of democracy. To physically harm or kill someone is to disregard the God-given sacredness of the individual person. Theologically, to kill someone made in God's image and reflecting the image of Jesus Christ is an assault on the living God. In King's theo-politics, the beloved community can only be achieved through non-violent love.

While King's dream of democracy was born in the aftermath of violence, it could only be fulfilled through non-violent protest. On the evening of January 30, 1956 when King's home was bombed in Montgomery, Alabama, he had to decide whether or not he would retaliate. King chose the path of nonviolence, embodying Christ's teaching to love one's enemies. From that point on Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence shaped both King's Christology and methodology:

Then I came upon the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. As I read his works I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. The whole Gandhian concept of *satyagraha* (*satya* is truth which equals love, and *graha* is force; *satyagraha* thus means truth-force or love-force) was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.³⁴

With the principle of non-violent protest we see that King develops a political strategy to inspire people to collectively embody love through a coalition dedicated to realizing social justice, including the full participation of all people in democratic life. While violence led to destruction, non-violent love was the way to redemption. King wrote, "The way of acquiescence leads to moral and spiritual suicide. The way of violence leads to bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. But the way of nonviolence leads to redemption and the creation of the beloved community."³⁵ The path of non-violence marked King's democratic *theologizing*—it was only through the theory *and* practice of non-violent love that beloved community could be realized.

On Dreams and Radical Democratic Futures

It is precisely the year of King's death—1968—that Negri marks as the beginning of the revolutionary constitution of the multitude:

34. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," in *Testament of Hope*, 38.

35. Martin Luther King, Jr., "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," in *Testament of Hope*, 25.

When, through a biopolitics of exodus, the singularities decide to turn the multitude into a revolutionary subject, teleological production, without pre-figuring the common, exposes it to the *to-come*. The *vita activa* of the multitude is thus an open and total dystopia, and the decision to revolutionize the eternal is irreversible. With the events of 1968, the City of Man, in an irreversible decision, loosed the arrow of the revolutionary temporality of the common. In the face of this *kairòs* of poverty and of love, the City of God is now only a bad stench.³⁶

While Negri views 1968 as the end of the City of God and the end of Christianity, the year of King's death brings us back to the horizon of the radical ideal of the beloved community.

It is in confronting the political vision of Negri and the theological imagination of King that we can glimpse the beginning of a new social order, not predicated on death but on life eternal. For King, "It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny."³⁷ Our common humanity, knitted together by the living God, is the reason that humanity will prevail. As King continued to struggle for radical democracy, he was assassinated in Memphis, leaving us heirs to a new season of struggle to achieve a truly radical democratic vision—the beloved community. After King, political theology must acknowledge its wounds if humanity is to heal and become a democratic whole.³⁸ Our radical democratic future lies in new global movements of the people of the world, wounded healers, who are united by the egalitarian ideals of love and justice.

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36. Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 241.

37. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Peace on Earth," in King, *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 69.

38. See Peter Goodwin Heltzel and Corey D. B. Walker, "The Wound of Political Theology: A Prolegomenon to a Research Agenda," *Political Theology* 9, no. 2 (2008): 252–5.

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