

Episode 256: MLK's Contested Legacy

Lisa: Hi, I'm Lisa Hernandez

Lizzy: And I'm Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich

Lisa: And we are your hosts for Scholar Strategy Networks. No jargon. Each month we will discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon. And in honor of Black History Month, for this episode, we are looking at the civil rights movement and the modern narratives around it.

Lizzy: And if you have a child in public elementary school in the U.S., you are definitely aware that it is Black History Month, that it was just Martin Luther King Jr's holiday weekend, and that there's a lot of sanitized narratives around both of those things.

Lisa: Absolutely. Whether it's corporations using MLK's face and likeness to sell items, or public schools giving just one single paragraph that mentions non-violence over and over again or, whatever political narrative is going on around MLK, we're definitely all aware that there are different takes on his impact, the history around it, and of course just the civil rights movement in general.

Lizzy: Yeah, I think especially in today's climate with education, whether we're talking, you know, primary school, or higher education too, the ways we talk about race and history are becoming extra contentious and it hardly seems like there was a time when they weren't. But I'll tell you what, regardless, I'm here for the conversation.

I'm here to learn what researchers have to say. I'm also here to say that Rosa Parks was not just a tired grandma who didn't want to get up. She was an activist. And if your child brings home homework that doesn't mention that you should say something. So, Lisa, who'd we talk to this week?

Lisa: Well, for this week's episode, I spoke to Hajar Yazdiha, Assistant Professor of Sociology and a faculty affiliate at the Equity Research Institute at the University of Southern California. Professor Yazdiha's research works to understand how systems of inequality become entrenched and how groups develop strategies to resist contest and manifest alternative futures.

She is the author of the book, "The Struggle for the People's King: How Politics Transforms the Memory of the Civil Rights Movement."

Here is our conversation...

Lisa: Hi, Professor Yazdiha. Welcome to No Jargon.

Hajar: Thanks so much. It's great to be here.

Lisa: Absolutely. Great to have you. So we want to talk about your book and it opens up with this 2010 Tea Party rally on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. 2010 does feel like ages ago, but of course this is part of a larger decades-long pattern on the civil rights movement.

Could you tell me a little bit about that story, and why you chose to open your book right up with that?

Hajar: Oh yeah. Okay. So for the listeners, the book opens and we're on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. It is the place where Dr. King gave his famous, "I Have a Dream" speech, and we zoom in. and you would expect to see somebody who looks like Dr. King carrying on his legacy, and instead it's Glen Beck, who is the right wing, kind of shock jock, who had a show on Fox News for a long time.

And he is up there representing the Tea Party, which is this reactionary group that emerges during the Obama presidency, and he's up there claiming the mantle of the Civil Rights movement to a crowd of thousands at what he calls the rally to restore honor. And he has not coincidentally planned this for the day of the March on Washington.

And in fact, that is exactly what he's trying to summon is the memory of the civil rights movement. He is now claiming he is the new Dr. King and that the Tea Party is carrying on King's legacy of individualism of a free market. And Glen Beck is also the guy who's saying that Dr. King would be opposed to Obama because Obama is racist against white people.

So I felt like this was the perfect way to drop readers into just this egregious phenomenon that's taken over political culture, which is using Dr. King's words against the very causes that he would've fought for. And this includes everything from voting rights to affirmative action. Just rolling back all of the things that the civil rights activist fought for, and using his name and his words to do it.

Lisa: So the recurring pattern that you've seen of using Dr. King's words is what led you to write this book, and was that the specific moment that really was like a turning point for you to realize I think there's patterns to this and I wanna investigate it further? Or were there other moments that you have noticed in which that has happened?

Hajar: Yeah, so it really was this era. So I was in graduate school during the Obama era and I was watching, you know, it wasn't just the Glen Beck moment, so for me it was actually the Abigail Fisher case that drew me specifically into the phenomenon. And this is the case where there was a young white woman who was rejected from the University of Texas at Austin and

she decided to take affirmative action to the Supreme Court because she claimed that she didn't get in because she was white. And that affirmative action was a policy that was racist against white Americans. And in the court case and all the discourse around it, Dr. King's words kept getting invoked to claim that he would have been opposed to affirmative action.

I'm watching this play out as a graduate student in sociology who is, you know, writing a dissertation on race and social movements. And for me it was this question of, you know, how do you get to a point in the political main stage, the highest court of the land, where you can use history in such a revisionist way for your own political purposes?

So that was really the entryway for me where I started digging into this deeper, and I expected this to be something that emerged out of the Obama presidency. I thought it was directly in reaction to having the first Black president. But what I came to find out is that this phenomenon lasts, I mean, it goes all the way back to the eighties, and so I did not expect that this was actually going to be part of this long political strategy from the right wing, and it would've been so successful that it moved these revisionist histories to the mainstream of American culture.

Lisa: And just so that the listeners know, we are recording this on January 19th and earlier this week, a lot of Americans had the day off work in order to honor MLK day. And I wanna zoom in about this story of how MLK day came about since, as you write about it in the book, it is a prime example of how that memory of MLK and the civil rights movements can differ between different groups of people.

Can you tell me about the story? Are there maybe sanitized versions of Dr. King's life that are prominent in today's world?

Hajar: Oh yeah. I mean there are so many and I think, you know, I'm glad you bringing up the example of the King holiday because in the book I talk about how this is really one of the foundational moments where King's name gets remade, where his memory gets distorted, and then it becomes institutionalized in collective memory for the United States.

And so what I mean by that is, you know, we think about collective memory, like we think about memory itself as something that just lives in people's minds. But collective memory is this process of storytelling. It's how we connect the present to the past. So it's not just about history, it's really about how we interpret and remember history.

And that ends up being a political and cultural process. And so when we think about the collective memory of Dr. King, it really goes back to some of these initial debates over whether there would be a King holiday. And that's something that often surprises people because you know, now King is like this beloved figure, and we celebrate him every year, and we think of him as this hero, but he wasn't a hero at the time. In fact, you know, the year that he was killed, 75% of Americans really hated him, and he was unpopular amongst the Johnson Presidential

administration because he had spoken out against the Vietnam War. He was speaking out against economic justice. And in so many ways, he was quite radical.

And so he was taking on these triple critiques. He was talking about how we had to eradicate not just racism, but also capitalism and imperialism. And so the fact that he was so radical made him such a divisive character that when he was assassinated and his wife, who was a civil rights activist herself, Coretta Scott King, she and Congressman John Conyers, they really want to establish this King holiday to remember him and carry on his legacy, but so many politicians are opposed. And so it's this 15 year battle and it ends up having a lot of the debates that go into some of the questions we have now about King. Questions about what he actually would have believed about some of the questions that face us today about polarization and the divisions between us.

So it's really during these debates that, you know, we get some of the, the critiques that get buried and what happens is Reagan, who himself, you know, is opposed to civil rights, who never liked Dr. King, he in fact says that, you know, he was assassinated because he was such a violent character himself. He, you know, has this political pressure where at a certain point he realizes he has to sign the King holiday into law, but if he has to do it, he's going to make sure to remember a very specific version of Dr. King.

And so, you know, he says, behind closed doors, we are gonna remember a very selective image of Dr. King. We're gonna wipe out all of that radicalism. We're not gonna remember that. We're gonna remember him as a symbol of the American dream, of American exceptionalism, as an individual who talked about pulling yourself up from your bootstraps. And so we're gonna forget that King actually was making all of these sorts of critiques of American exceptionalism and of American capitalism.

And so it's in this way that you get the roots. I describe it like a tree with gnarled branches is the memory of Dr. King. And so you get these fractures right there in the trunk of the tree where you have the true memory of King opposed by the one that ends up becoming mainstream and celebrated every year.

And that's the one where we remember a safe. Dr. King, the one who didn't threaten our ideas about American democracy and about America being this exceptional place where everybody can make it. And so for me, that's really important to remember because I think we take for granted sometimes that the way the past gets talked about is more than just history. It's more than just something that lives in the textbooks. I say all the time that our collective memory is actually a political project, and so it really matters that we think about why we know what we know, and then also why we've strategically forgotten certain things.

Lisa: Right. And the things that we tend to draw upon, the things that we do repeat, why do these things get chosen? So why do political and social movements routinely draw on history

and why does the civil rights movement, or maybe the sanitized version of it, why is this such a powerful symbol?

Hajar: Yeah, those are really good questions. So to answer the second one first, because I think this is helpful for understanding why other movements draw on it, the reason the civil rights movement is such a powerful collective memory is because it was a really powerful moment of reckoning with the history of the United States as a nation that was founded on the enslavement of Black Americans.

And so it's this great kind of cataclysm. It is the great kind of point and the peak where we have to think about, okay, what does it really mean that we have had this history of enslavement, that it resulted in a civil war, and then that we've now come into this period of Jim Crow where we have essentially institutionalized and legalized apartheid. And so that question becomes a moment where the civil rights movement and the gains that it has with the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act, these are moments where we think of them as a story of American redemption. It's a moment where the country actually kind of opens its eyes and comes together.

And so we have that rosy retelling of the past where we think of this as a closed chapter. Where the civil rights movement did this incredible work. They were symbols of, you know, the promise of Americans when they come together and really join to create social change. And unfortunately, because we tell it in such a rosy way, we write out a lot of the messiness and the complexity that actually helps us take up some of those tools and lessons and to continue their unfinished work.

And so this is also one of the reasons that politicians all the time draw on the memory of King and draw on the memory of the civil rights movement because they're using this kind of strategy where they're using a story of American Promise, right? It's a really rosy story. It's a story that makes people feel good and it's also a symbol of moral authority, right? Because King is thought of as like the one guy who was the moral conscience of America. And so it's very easy to use him in the kind of purpose of all these sorts of things that he actually would've completely opposed.

Lisa: Absolutely. And you mentioned a couple of specific actors that have used and maybe revisionist history as well on Dr. King's legacy. You mentioned politicians, is it all sides of the political spectrum? Is there a certain way that more liberal politicians use Dr. King's memory versus how more conservative politicians use that? Is there a difference at all?

Hajar: Yeah, so this was one of the big surprises of the book. And so I trace these 40 years of the uses and the misuses of Dr. King and civil rights memory from 1980 to 2020, and I study it all across the political spectrum. And so you have all sorts of social movements, everyone from gun rights activists. To the family Values movement, you know, to Muslim rights activists, so everybody from progressive groups that are really trying to vie for minority rights all the way over

to groups that are incredibly conservative and really kind of trying to roll things back to a prior era, and hey all invoke King.

Yet they do it in these very specific ways, which, you know, creates what I call these branches of memory on that tree that I described. And so it's not that the misuses of memory are kind of equal, and I actually critique in the book the idea that there's kind of a both sidesism, of both sides story to this, because even when progressive groups misuse Dr. King's memory—for example, one of the ways they do it frequently is upholding this idea that Dr. King really just stood for equality and the idea that we're all Americans. And again, this kind of rosy telling that it gets rid of his radical critique of the United States. Now this is well intentioned, right? It really comes from a place where they're using King's memory to make claims to inclusion. But one of the things I show is that by doing that, in a lot of ways, they erase the reality that anti-Black racism is still very real. That we still deal with a lot of systemic inequality. And so by making that story of America as this place of promise, they actually make it very hard for social movements to make those radical critiques.

Now on the other hand, from the right wing, one of the things that we see is that the intentional strategy is to revise and completely distort the memory of King and the Civil Rights Movement.

And so this is a strategy that's used for two reasons. So one reason is they use it to wedge progressive groups. And so a lot of times they'll use King's memory to create these wedges between Black communities and other progressive communities that might be fighting for their rights.

For example, we see this in the case of the Immigrant rights movement, where immigrants are out here in the streets saying immigrant rights are civil rights, and they're comparing themselves to the civil rights movement. And the right wing groups come in and they try to reach out to Black communities and say, "Hey, actually these immigrants are taking your jobs, and they're trying to claim that they're like you." And so they create this kind of divide and conquer strategy. We also see that happen with LGBTQ movements. We see it happen with the Muslim rights movement. And so in that way, for right-wing groups, it's a wedge strategy.

But the second strategy they use is actually claiming the memory for themselves. To claim that white Christian conservatives are the new victims under multicultural democracy, and so they'll use King's memory to say, you know, the fact that we have race conscious policies, the fact that there is this discourse around systemic racism is actually an attack on us as white Americans, and it's an existential threat that Dr. King would've been opposed to. And so that twofold strategy becomes really effective because they kind of, they take all the air out of the room. It makes it impossible to actually talk about what King would've actually believed.

Lisa: And one of the ways that we learned this collective memory right, is obviously through our education system. So I do want us to speak a little bit about, what ways has this whitewashing or sanitizing of, um, Dr. King's legacy? How has it played out within our education system? I live

in Florida at the moment, so I'm sure you're familiar with a lot of the education laws that are basically against teaching anything around racism or the history of racism.

So I would love to hear your thoughts on the certain laws that are going into place that are attacking these parts of the education system.

Hajar: Oh my gosh. Yeah. I mean this is something that has kept me up at night and there was this 2021 NPR report and they showed that in this press conference, it was a Republican health press conference about the threat of critical race theory. So you know, this idea that we should not be even teaching about race in schools and also just this kind of fake moral panic around young kids learning about critical race theory, which is not a thing.

So in this press conference, they found that over half of the Republican speakers quoted Dr. King to play up the threat of critical race theory. And as we know, what emerged from this moral panic around critical race theory was all sorts of other trajectories. So we also had repealing teaching about racism, talking about race in schools. We had banned books and then now we're even having limits on teaching sociology. And so as a sociologist, this is just ringing the alarm left and right.

And I think what's so scary is that Dr. King, his own name is being used to ban teaching about Dr. King himself. And so it's this story about, you know, why is it that the past holds so much power that politicians are making sure that we don't learn about it? And that's the question that I always want folks to ask themselves is, is this really about limiting quote unquote woke culture? Making sure that we don't quote unquote, indoctrinate our children, or is this a larger political strategy to make sure that we don't understand why systemic inequality continues to exist, because if we were to look at the past and understand its roots, then we would actually have to do something about it. And so it's a much larger project. And in the book I describe it as the making of a culture of ignorance. So it's really insidious and I think it really has such deep roots that we have to look at it in every realm of society.

Lisa: And in order to fight back against this culture of ignorance, I would love to get your advice on how people can be better stewards of history and make sure that it is remembered accurately.

Hajar: Yeah, it's a beautiful question. I think about this so much just because I think, you know, people are busy and the way that our economy is set up, it's like we truly are in a hustle culture where you have to work around the clock, you know, who has time to sit around and read history books?

So for me, the way that I've thought about this model of what we actually do is in the acronym "A.R.C". And so this is for the quote that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." And so the A stands for advocate. And for me, this is not just about advocating against the legislation that limits our education and history and race, but it's also about

advocating for policies that really expand our critical education. And so this is not just, you know, for our schools and for young people, this is really culture wide. We should be thinking critically and asking the deeper questions about, how do we know what we know? You know, what is the political project behind this knowledge that's being spread every day? So that's the A for advocate.

And then there's an R. And the R is for relate and for me, relate means relate both to the past more broadly in terms of your national history, but also to the past within your communities. And so think about the places where you live. You know, what is the story of why neighborhoods look the way that they do, why the schools might look the way that they do? And this is a way to really embed us in the world around us, and also the spaces that we might actually be able to control a little bit more if we were to get involved. And so I think that relate piece is really critical because it is something concrete that we can do in the very places where we live and interact with our neighbors.

And then the C is one that I think is really not talked about enough because we are so overextended in our day-to-day lives, and it's the C for create. And by create, I really am pushing us to expand our political imaginations, to create spaces where we can come together and dream bigger. And I say all the time that I really think learning about the past is one of the most powerful ways to expand your imagination of what's possible in the future. And you know, it's not just me, neuroscientists have actually shown this. That learning about the past actually creates those neural pathways to thinking about things differently and thinking. Maybe there is actually a world that we have not yet had, but that could be.

So for me, that arc model is a way to think about a combination of ways that even just as individuals, we can kind of take on this work of challenging revisionist history and then also [00:20:00] taking on the politics that motivates it.

Lisa: Absolutely, and we obviously, a lot of our listeners are scholars themselves, and I'm sure there are also professors teaching classes and young people who have. Have come from different states and have totally different versions of history within their knowledge. And, um, I'm wondering if you have any advice specifically to those that are, educating folks.

Have you seen anything that has worked as far as, um, maybe refreshing or finding a common ground when it comes to civil rights history or maybe just Dr. King's legacy?

Hajar: Yeah, I mean, you know, I think this is a hard one too because there are so many competing interpretations, and like I said, it is really rooted in these competing political projects. So one of the things I think about frequently is that Dr. King himself was a sociology major, and building a sociological imagination has always been much more about that project of critical thinking.

It's about connecting your individual experiences to these larger social structures, to these larger histories, and to thinking about how you are not just an individual alone in the world, but that your life has been made by these larger social forces, and you're always interconnected with other people.

And so when we think about Dr. King and him talking about that inescapable network of mutuality, that is always fundamental to my work as an educator—is helping my students not just, you know, learn about the past or even have the tools to reference, but it's really about being able to make those connections between their own lives and then these larger histories and the larger patterns that connect us, not just across boundaries of race and class, but also across borders, across time.

So I think this is a way that educators can really think about reaching out to their students, is building their sociological imagination. So clearly this is also a little bit of a plug for sociology, but I do think those tools could truly go into every sort of domain that you might be teaching.

Lisa: Well, I'm sure that a lot of our sociologists listeners would appreciate that solid advice. And thank you so much for everything you have shared today and may we all find the connections that we need to make in order to keep Dr. King's, legacy alive. So thank you so much for talking with us today, Hajar.

Hajar: Thank you, Lisa.

Lisa: Thanks for listening. For more on Professor Yazdiha's work, check out our show notes at scholars.org/nojargon. No jargon is the podcast of the Scholar Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policy makers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy.

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