

KRISZTINA MAGYAR

Jason Sokol.
The Heavens Might Crack: The Death and Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.
New York: Basic Books, 2018, 343 p.

Pro&Contra 2

No. 2 (2018) 87–91.

In the U.S., the fiftieth anniversary of King's death naturally occasioned fresh reflections on the meaning of his life, cut short by an assassin's bullet in Memphis on April 4, 1968. In *The Heavens Might Crack: The Death and Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.*, historian Jason Sokol revisits King's assassination and discusses the range of collective responses that it provoked, both in America and worldwide.

Sokol shows that King's murder made it evident more than anything else that America was a highly polarized nation, both along racial and political lines, at the end of the 1960s. In its different communities, news of the event provoked widely differing responses—they ranged from expressions of shock, outrage, grief, and despair to expressions of hatred and animosity. Ultimately, Sokol argues, King's death illuminated magnificently the various fault lines that cut across America's social and political landscape.

Sokol devotes one chapter to an exploration of international responses to King's assassination. He contends that, while he was alive, King was more readily embraced as a hero abroad than in his native country. His assassination, therefore, was front-line news in numerous countries. Exploration of the responses provoked by King's murder allows the author to highlight a central irony of King's political career: his death ultimately helped create both a more racially divided America and a more antagonistic world in general. Sokol argues that if King's efforts during his lifetime were spent on bringing the races more closely together in America, his death revealed "the depths of white racism, quickened the pace of black radicalism, and helped to break the races further apart" (257). King's death had much the same negative effect abroad. For example, Sokol explains how racial hatred bubbled to the surface in Britain after King's assassination, as well as how the event helped deepen the conflict that had existed for some time in West Germany between officials and protesters in the radical student movement (175).

Since his death, King has been largely transformed from difficult political activist to transcendent icon. In public memory today, he is mostly cast as a benevolent, unthreatening dreamer of social harmony who rose above all divisions, racial and otherwise. Nationwide, he is uniformly celebrated as a hero, venerated as a saint. Sokol's book concludes with an account of how this transformation has taken place and what he believes its consequences are. He argues that King's canonization, his ultimate transfiguration from much-hated "rabble-rouser" to venerated saint does not tell a "tale of diminishing racism" (9). Quite simply, his legacy has been "sculpted and scrubbed" (9) so that today, it is possible for Americans of all persuasions to embrace him and enlist what they believe his legacy is. Although the reader is made to understand that this cultural shift facilitated Barack Obama's rise to the presidency, he or she is also made to see not simply that racial tensions persist into the twenty-first century but, for example, the perceived monstrosity of the appropriation of King by opponents of Black Lives Matter. Sokol explains that

the latter like to reference King in denouncing what they see as their disruptive activism and inflammatory rhetoric. However, they are justified to do so, Sokol argues, only if they ignore altogether the more upsetting and contentious aspects of King's own activism. When Black Lives Matter protesters are denounced as disruptive and threatening, Sokol writes, their critics sadly forget that the King that they idolize and reference was himself committed to civil disobedience, causing "massive disruptions" throughout America (261).

Sokol laments the fact that a large number of Americans today have very little understanding of what King actually stood for. He believes that in today's tense political climate, to make clear "the substance of his actual teachings and actions" is indeed necessary, so that people can "reckon... with the actual King" (262).

Authors who wish to write about Martin Luther King, Jr. today face the challenge of having to recycle old material on him, yet offer fresh contributions. The literature that explores King's life and political activism is vast, so the challenge is great indeed. It appears that at best, what these books can achieve is offer novel perspectives on oft-told stories. In this respect, Sokol's work is no exception. While, naturally, it relies and builds in part on previous research on King's life, funeral and the import of his death, it is written from the vantage point of 2018, inviting the reader to consider what the collective amnesia with respect to the radicalism of King's nonviolent direct action strategies means for American race relations today.

Sokol's book also deserves praise for allowing a fresh view of King's radical agenda of human rights and economic equality, and the threat that it constituted. But the question is, threat for whom? Taking an international perspective, the author argues that it was easier for Europeans to applaud King while he was alive because he did not constitute a threat to *their* way of life. When he spoke of the need to reconstruct the social edifice from its foundations, it was the *American* edifice that he had in mind. "Indeed," Sokol argues, "foreign support for King only rarely amounted to support for a global movement for human rights and economic equality" (159). Viewed from this angle, one wonders all the more how the hatred that he invited in America, especially in the final years of his life, has finally become transmuted into the reverence surrounding his memory today.

Apparently, Sokol belongs to that group of critics who find King's inclusion into the pantheon of American heroes highly problematic, critics who simply understand it as

co-optation, as a demonstration of the country's power "to absorb [...] all opposition"¹ and the ability of its representatives to use King to further their own agendas.

Apart from being politically motivated, Sokol's book is derivative of a deeply felt personal interest on the part of its author. As he admits, his initial trip to Memphis in 1998 impressed him to the extent that he decided he would one day carry out a more in-depth study of the events surrounding King's assassination. In part, then, it is this need for personal investment that spurred him, at a later point in his career, to dig into the archival collections whose list is included in the Bibliography section of the book.

¹ Ron Eyerman, *The Cultural Sociology of Political Assassination. From MLK and RFK to Fortuyn and van Gogh* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 56. Eyerman, in the same place, also allows for a more positive interpretation of the shift with respect to King: "On the other hand, however, one could speak not of co-optation and domestication, but of a radical transformation, in a moral and cultural, if not a political sense. From this perspective, the incorporation of MLK into the American pantheon and the transformation of his image represent a clear cultural shift, providing a new moral yardstick for gauging progress and also what being an American means." *Ibid.*, 56.