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UWS 5b: From the 13th Amendment to Mass Incarceration

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“The Most Dangerous Negro”: Martin Luther King Jr. and the FBI

“Today the FBI honors the Rev. Martin L. King Jr. and his incredible career fighting for civil rights #MLKDAY” (FBI Twitter). While made with good intentions, this January 16, 2017 tweet from the Twitter account of the FBI is nothing but ironic. During the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. rose to prominence in the Civil Rights Movement. At the same time, he became the subject of a mass surveillance operation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. These projects became collectively known as COINTELPRO, derived from COunterINTElligence PROgrams. The FBI employed various resources against King including, but not limited to the use of undercover operatives, wiretapping, covert listening devices or “bugs,” forgery, and blackmail. COINTELPRO was a systematic effort to infiltrate and sabotage the endeavors of political organizations deemed threatening to national security. Today, COINTELPRO is a cautionary tale of the abuses of government surveillance powers. Nevertheless, there is another story to be told regarding the FBI’s conduct towards African Americans with a specific focus on King (Churchill & Vander Wall, *COINTELPRO* 1). Under the leadership of Director J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI sought to fabricate a negative public image of African American leaders such as King. Throughout the 1960s, the investigative strategies of the FBI became more radicalized as it utilized and perpetuated false stereotypes of African Americans in order to spy on and vilify the Civil Rights Movement and its leaders. COINTELPRO was not just an attempt to destabilize the Civil Rights Movement, it was also a larger effort to criminalize King by portraying him as the stereotypes he fought to disprove.

FBI surveillance of subversive political movements dates back to the early 1920s; however, COINTELPRO’s surveillance formally began in 1956 with an emphasis on disrupting the actions of

the Communist Party of the United States of America (Communist Party USA) (Ward & Wall 38). COINTELPRO's inquiry into the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its president, King, explored potential communist infiltration within the organization. In *The COINTELPRO Papers*, authors and activists Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall trace the origins of the investigation of King to a January 8, 1962 letter from Director Hoover to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. One of the supposed communist infiltrators of the SCLC was Stanley Levison, a close friend and advisor of King. Levison previously handled finances for the Communist Party USA (Ward & Wall 1). On the basis of Hoover's claims regarding the alleged communist's relationship with King, A.G. Kennedy green-lighted the wiretaps necessary to gather nearly seventeen thousand pages of evidence on King (Greenberg 156). The communist theory proved to be the first crucial link in the FBI's crusade to demonize King.

The synonymy between communism and criminality became intertwined within the criminal stereotype of African Americans and King. Much of what is known about COINTELPRO stems from a 1975 Senate committee chaired by Senator Frank Church. The Church Committee, as it became to be known, uncovered a myriad of domestic surveillance operations against U.S. citizens. The committee's final report contains scores of memorandums detailing the inner workings of COINTELPRO. On August 30, 1963, two days following King's iconic "I Have A Dream" speech, FBI Deputy Director William Sullivan penned a memorandum to FBI Assistant Director Alan Belmont. Sullivan issued a call to arms against King:

Personally, I believe in the light of King's powerful demagogic speech yesterday he stands head and shoulders over all other Negroid leaders put together when it comes to influencing great masses of Negroes. We must mark him now, if we have not done so before, as the most dangerous Negro of the future in this Nation from the standpoint of communism, the Negro, and national security. (US Congress 107-08)

Sullivan makes a conscious decision to identify King as “the most dangerous Negro.” The interjection of race was not necessary as Sullivan could have classified King as a most dangerous man, person, or leader. Sullivan inserts “Negro” to connect King's racial background to “dangerous,” an adjective that is regularly used to define criminals. Sullivan’s connection between communism and King's speech is ill-defined and is scrutinized by the Church Committee. The Senators quoted King’s famous “dream” and question how it pertains to demagoguery let alone communism (US Congress 107-08). Communism continues to make appearances throughout the investigation as part of the broadening endeavor to impeach King.

The FBI implied more than a mere association between King and the Communist Party USA; the FBI proposed that King and the Communist Party USA were conspiring to commit violent, treasonous acts. On February 8, 1968, the FBI observed an exchange between Levison and SCLC executive director William Rutherford. During their discussion, Levison and Rutherford decided to encourage King to assume a more liberal attitude regarding violence occurring at SCLC events (FBI 104-10125-10133). The file references a later meeting between King and Levison on March 29, 1968, during which, “Levison indicated to King that it was time for him to accept the position favorable towards the use of violence in the streets,” and furthermore, “King agreed there was great merit to what Levison had suggested” (FBI 100-438794). This evidence postulates that King contemplated a shift to militant protest and that he would influence other African Americans to carry out violent acts on his behalf. The imagery of “violence in the streets” alludes to the Summer 1967 rioting in cities such as Watts and Newark, during which African American protesters faced off against police officers (Rios-Bustamante). The FBI manufactured the seditious collusion between King and the Communist Party USA; ultimately, such a danger would necessitate their ever increasing response.

The threat of the Civil Rights Movement as an extremist, revolutionary operation prompted more expansive aims for FBI surveillance. On August 25, 1967, Director Hoover dispatched the

special-agents-in-charge of twenty-four FBI field offices. Hoover's memorandum signified a drastic transformation in the goals of intelligence activities from safeguarding national security to procuring information for a smear campaign: "The purpose of this new counterintelligence endeavor is to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters, and to counter their propensity for violence and civil disorder" (Hoover). Hoover's language insinuated that these factions of African Americans were inherently criminalistic and violence-prone. Hoover continued to make racist insinuations about African Americans as he laid out the objectives: "Many individuals currently active in black nationalist organizations have backgrounds of *immorality, subversive activity, and criminal records*. Through your investigation [...], you should endeavor to establish their unsavory backgrounds" (2). King's SCLC is not referred to as a civil rights organization but one of the "revolutionary or militant groups," hoping to incite violence. The memorandum is a denigrating view of African Americans and the Civil Rights Movement. While only the SCLC is mentioned in the August 1967 memorandum, a March 1968 communication referenced King by name. Speaking of the need to "prevent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify, and electrify the militant black nationalist movement," Hoover cautions that King is, "a very real contender for this position should he abandon his supposed 'obedience' to 'white, liberal doctrines' (nonviolence) and embrace black nationalism" (2). Director Hoover forebode the danger of militant African Americans and urged for comprehensive means of intelligence gathering.

Following Director Hoover's call, the FBI launched an exhaustive mission to pin anything on King. In another monograph by Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression*, the authors expose the immense diversity of counterintelligence operations against King. After King publicly criticized the FBI for their failure to curb white supremacist activities, the Bureau stepped up their operations against him. The FBI went through trash at the SCLC headquarters, inspected King's financial records, and installed a covert listening device in his office. The FBI investigated others members of

the SCLC in hopes that they could turn one of them against King. Donors to the SCLC received a fake letter from “King” notifying them of an Internal Revenue Service investigation into the organization (Churchill & Vander Wall, *Agents* 55). The FBI would not pledge the resources to such a massive hunt unless they truly supposed it would turn up incriminating evidence on King. To believe that King was a criminal required the assumption he was guilty in the first place. Nevertheless, the FBI's venture was futile as it failed to yield incriminating evidence against King. Consequently, the FBI began to look into more confidential aspects of King's life.

The FBI's initial lack of success into defaming King necessitated increasingly aggressive surveillance tactics, particularly the gathering of knowledge into King's personal matters. In *Racial Matters*, University of Alaska Professor Emeritus of History Kenneth O'Reilly highlights the changing nature of the Bureau's relationship with King: “The ease with which the FBI slid from the communist issue to the morality issue indicates that the director and his aides were looking for something – anything – that might work to discredit King.” Prior to the expansion of COINTELPRO, the crimes against King centered on offenses such as treason, sedition, and inciting insurrection through the meshwork of alleged communist infiltration. COINTELPRO now became an investigation of “moral offenses” (“Moral Offenses”). From colonial times upwards to the late twentieth century, acts such as adultery, sodomy, and alcohol intoxication were punishable by jail time. Nearly all of these actions have been decriminalized throughout the United States; nevertheless, they are still viewed as morally reprehensible. Criminality is commonly affiliated with immorality and sin whereas moral offenses are infractions of religious doctrine. The FBI's newfound curiosity in King's morals conveyed an attempt to disparage him on an almost religious level. Hoover aspired to portray King as a criminal in the eyes of God. This form of intelligence gathering proved to be the most damning information compiled on King during COINTELPRO.

The evidence gathered by the FBI typified King as a felonious figure with a flawed sense of morality. This view was incompatible with his reputation as a family man and a Baptist minister. In

November 2017, the National Archives released hundreds of documents related to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Among them was a twenty-three-page FBI dossier entitled, *Martin Luther King, Jr., A Current Analysis*. The most provocative facets of this report pertain to King's private life. King organized an urban leadership conference for ministers in Miami in February, 1968. The dossier describes a very different seminar full of, "behind-the-scene drinking, fornication, and homosexuality," in addition to, "an all-night sex orgy [...] held with prostitutes" (FBI, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* 19). The report discusses King's previous sexual experiences:

This activity is not new to King and his associates. As early as January, 1964, King engaged in another, two-day, drunken sex orgy in Washington, D.C. Many of those present engaged in sexual acts, natural as well as unnatural, for the entertainment of onlookers. When one of the females shied away from engaging in an unnatural act, King and other of the males present discussed how she was to be taught and initiated in this respect. (FBI, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* 19)

The dossier presents a disturbing image of King and insinuates his participation in the described acts. In *Racial Matters*, O'Reilly asserts that this aspect of the investigation reflected the idea of African American males as innately hypersexual and animalistic (141). The report intimates an alleged extramarital affair between King and a woman in Los Angeles that resulted in a child born out of wedlock. King is accused of having relations with three other women. The allegations perpetuate the stereotype of African American males as disloyal to their spouses. Additionally, it plays into to the racist belief that African American men abandon their families and depicts King as an "absent Black father." The FBI infuses these individual stereotypes surrounding African Americans to maintain that King has a perverted sense of morality.

The FBI brought the campaign to condemn King directly to his front door. In 1964, King received an anonymous letter along with a tape recording. King and his advisors presumed that the author of the letter was urging him to commit suicide: "there is only one thing left for you to do. You

know what it is” (Gage). The recordings were purportedly of King engaged in adulterous acts. The author threatened to blackmail King by publishing the contents of the audiotapes. The Church Committee confirmed that the letter and recordings came from an undetermined source at the FBI. The committee’s final report contained a heavily redacted copy of the letter. In the summer of 2014, Yale University professor and historian Beverly Gage located an unredacted version of the “FBI-King Suicide Letter” among Hoover’s confidential files at the National Archives. The existence of the letter and Gage’s analysis were shared in a November 2014 article in the *New York Times*. Gage notes the frequent use of the word “evil,” particularly in reference to King as, “a colossal fraud and an evil, vicious one at that,” and later as an “evil, abnormal beast.” The letter alludes to King’s sex life and speaks of “sexual orgies,” “adulterous acts,” and “immoral conduct” (Gage). King’s wife, Coretta Scott King, first opened the package. It is probable that Coretta King knew about the affairs, as Gage shares that King’s relations were, “already an open secret within the civil rights movement’s leadership.” Nevertheless, the suicide-letter and tapes illustrate an extremely personal attack on King. The FBI corrupted King in the eyes of his wife and threatened to spread this information to the nation. The situation the author intended to provoke is sinful from the viewpoint of the Baptist church. Historically, the Baptist church regarded suicide and divorce as a sin. The FBI wanted King to appear to be a criminal on each and every level, from both his public life to his private life.

COINTELPRO exploited the criminal stereotype of African Americans to disrupt the ambitions of the Civil Rights Movement. In their book, *It Did Happen Here*, historians Bud and Ruth Schultz reason that this was not an isolated incident of systematic racism carried out by the U.S. government. They declare that, “Hoover was not the first or the last in power to try to disrupt and discredit a ‘Black messiah.’ All COINTELPRO did was formalize a policy of repression that’s been in existence since the anti-slavery movements – frame-ups, character assassinations, sometimes out-and-out assassinations, a broadside attack upon our leadership” (281). In other words, the FBI’s

character assassination of King is not an anomaly but part of a larger trend. COINTELPRO intended to suppress African American leaders such as King. To ruin his character, the FBI portrayed him through harmful racial stereotypes. Hoover feared that the ideology of African American leaders such as King, as they threatened the established order. Politics and culture within the United States underwent radical changes during the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement, anti-war protests, and the hippie counterculture challenged the normative beliefs that reigned over the first half of the 20th century. COINTELPRO attempted to criminalize King and the political dissent characteristic of the decade. Nearly fifty years after the assassination of King it is disturbing to find that much has not changed.

The Church Committee's investigations into surveillance abuses throughout the U.S. government were thought to mark the death of COINTELPRO. Nonetheless, recent events demonstrate that COINTELPRO is alive and well. Following the 2014 police shooting of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the FBI monitored the activities of individuals associated with Black Lives Matter (BLM). FBI reports published by *The Intercept* describe the surveillance of the homes and vehicles of those with ties to the group (Hussain and Joseph). An August 2017 FBI report contains eerie resemblances to COINTELPRO. "Black Nationalist-Hate Groups" is now "Black Identity Extremists." The FBI emphasizes the inherently violent nature of such groups: "it very likely Black Identity Extremist (BIE) perceptions of police brutality against African Americans spurred an increase in premeditated, retaliatory lethal violence against law enforcement and will very likely serve as justification for such violence" (Weinberger & Winter). The legacy of COINTELPRO is that it authorized the U.S. government to wield astonishing amounts of surveillance power over its citizens. Furthermore, COINTELPRO is a case study in the hazards of stereotypes. Surveillance and counterintelligence are a crucial tool for law enforcement investigations; however, certain methods of intelligence gathering rely on racial profiling and targeted policing of certain groups. The criminalization of any group is the ultimate denial of civil



rights; therefore, it is imperative that this lesser known part of the Civil Rights Movement be acknowledged as the liberties that Dr. King fought for are still under assault.

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