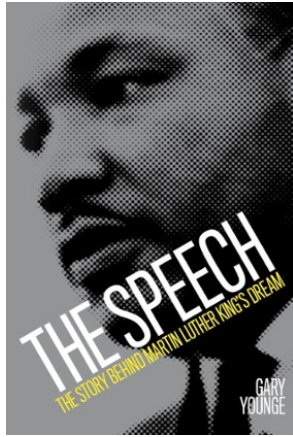


# Review: Gary Younge, *The Speech, the story behind Martin Luther King's Dream*

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Gary Younge, *The Speech, the story behind Martin Luther King's Dream* Guardian Books, £6.99

On the 29th of August 1963 at the height of the American Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King delivered his iconic 'I Have a Dream' speech that was the final act in the mass March on Washington. Over a quarter of a million people from all over the US, marched on a stiflingly hot American summer's day to demand Civil Rights. Up to that point, it was the largest mass demonstration in American history. The marchers were predominantly African American though a significant minority of whites did take part. The march and the speech took place in a deeply racist America where a de facto apartheid state prevailed. In the Jim Crow South the majority of African Americans couldn't vote nor have equal access to health and education and were forced to ride on segregated buses and eat in segregated restaurants. The Ku Klux Klan could murder Civil Rights activists with impunity while the police brutally beat up protesters.

Gary Younge deconstructs the manner in which the speech has been manipulated and subverted across the political establishment such that even an openly racist right-winger like Glenn Beck can shamelessly appropriate it for his own ends. Younge places the

speech's true relevance in the current context of an America with its first African American president but also an America where a racist killer like George Zimmerman can walk free and Black unemployment is almost twice that of whites.

The speech is rightly regarded as one of the greatest speeches of all time but as Younge points out, the speech only assumed its historical legacy after King's death. The response of white mainstream America varied from the racist *Clarion Ledger* newspaper which omitted to mention the speech and headlined its coverage of the March with 'Washington is clean again with Negro trash removed to no mention in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* headline 'I have a dream'. (All quoted in Younge p.5) The more radical sections of the Civil Rights movement considered it wishful thinking on King's part to dream of racial harmony when they were experiencing the brutal reality of every-day racism in America. Anne Moody, an activist from rural Mississippi who attended the March, recalled: 'Martin Luther King went on and on talking about his dream. I sat there thinking that in Canton we never had time to sleep, much less dream'. (Quoted in Younge, p. 5). Malcolm X told Bayard Rustin, one of the main organizers and a legendary Civil Rights activist and socialist, 'You know this dream of Kings is going to be a nightmare before it's over'. (Quoted in Younge, p.5)

Today the speech resonates with people fighting for justice and freedom all over the globe. 'I Have a Dream' was emblazoned on placards carried by protestors in Tiananmen Square. Graffiti on the West Bank wall states: 'I have a dream. This is not part of that dream' (quoted in Younge, p.6). 68% of Americans still think the speech is relevant including 76% of blacks and 68% of whites. (Younge, p.6)

As Younge argues, the speech was both

relevant for its time and also timeless. The aspiration for racial equality that the speech so eloquently articulated was in the same year when the racist Democratic Governor of Alabama, George Wallace, stood in a college doorway to block Black students going to college. Only 2 weeks after the March, four black girls were killed by a bomb in Birmingham, Alabama.

However, while it's the 'I Have a Dream' refrain and the call for racial harmony that is mostly remembered today, the speech contained radical phrases that are not widely quoted. King was demanding immediate change instead of gradual progress; that Blacks could not wait anymore. As he put it: 'We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism'. (Quoted in Younge, p.111) Arguably, in this respect, King was insisting on a revolutionary process unlike a reformist strategy that expects us to wait until the ruling class is ready to grant us our rights and freedoms. Until the end, King was opposed to violence not just as a tactic but as a matter of principle and condemned violent methods elsewhere in the speech. Nevertheless, the speech was a rallying call for people to mobilise and take to the streets. Likewise, another refrain 'We cannot be satisfied' is also conveniently forgotten though King was clearly insisting on nothing less than full equality and wouldn't compromise on that principle.

Younge also argues that another important aspect of the speech that is conveniently forgotten was King's use of the metaphor of the bad cheque. As King put it: 'In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check a promissory note for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' and 'We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us, upon demand, the riches of freedom and the security of justice'. (Quoted in Younge, p.10) In this sense, King was com-

ing to realize that legal reforms were insufficient if African Americans didn't simultaneously experience a material improvement in their lives. To acknowledge this aspect of the speech would, as Younge puts it: 'demand an engagement with both the material reality of racism and the material remedy of antiracism - a challenge the country has barely begun to address.' (Younge, p.12)

John F Kennedy has been mythologized as a great liberal crusading President who was assassinated before he could withdraw America from Vietnam and initiate more substantial Civil Rights reforms. The fact that he was a militant Cold Warrior and brought the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation is more often overlooked. Kennedy could speak in West Berlin about democracy while the notorious police chief, Bull O'Connor, was setting dogs loose on non-violent civil rights protestors in Birmingham. Only the fact that the images were broadcast around the world and the Civil Rights movement was becoming more militant forced JFK to address the issue. His brother Robert displayed the contempt that his administration held for the Civil Rights movement and Black people in general when he said: 'Negroes are now just antagonistic and mad and they're going to be mad at everything. You can't talk to them... My friends all say even the Negro maids and servants are getting antagonistic' (Younge, p.21). In addition, Kennedy, who relied on Black votes to get elected, was equally dependent on another key constituency, white racist Southern Democrats such as George Wallace and his own Vice President, Lyndon Johnson. Younge shows that it was only with great reluctance that Kennedy and the Democrats conceded Civil Rights.

King would eventually break with the Democratic Party in 1967 when he openly opposed the Vietnam War. The Democrats, of course, turned on him and accused him of betrayal. At the time of his death, King's popularity was quite low. An opinion poll in 1966 showed that twice as many Americans held an unfavourable opinion of him as those who held a favourable one. Life Maga-

zine accused King of 'demagogic slander' after his anti-war speech at the Riverside Church (Younge, p.147).

In the decades since his death, King's popularity has soared. In a 1999 poll, King rivalled JFK and Albert Einstein; only Mother Teresa was more popular (Younge p.148). Even so, Younge argues a struggle had to be won before King's legacy was officially recognized or at least that part of it that America was comfortable with. Even in 1983, the notorious racist Republican senator, Jesse Helms, could baldly state 'The conclusion must be that Martin Luther King Jr. was either an irresponsible individual or that he knowingly cooperated and sympathised with subversive and totalitarian elements of a hostile foreign power.' (quoted in Younge, p. 149).

The dreams and aspirations contained within the speech are all the more powerful and poignant for the very fact that America still remains a deeply racist society. As Younge states:

But to the extent that the speech was about ending racism, one can say with equal confidence that its realization is not even close. Black unemployment is almost double that of whites. Black male life expectancy in Washington DC is lower than in the Gaza Strip. One in three Black boys born in 2001 stands a lifetime risk of going to prison; more Black men were disenfranchised in 2004 because they were felons than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment ostensibly guaranteed the Black male franchise. (Younge p. 154).

While the legal barriers to racial equality have been largely removed, institutional racism is still a fact of life as the above figures demonstrate.

Indeed, African Americans have suffered disproportionately more than whites during the current recession which has largely coincided with Obama's presidency. While Obama has acknowledged that his election

was made possible by the gains of the Civil Rights movement, it is unlikely that King would recognize the realization of his Dream if he were alive today. Also, while King opposed American foreign military intervention, Obama authorizes drone attacks on innocent Pakistanis and Yemenis. Under successive Democratic and Republican presidencies the majority of working class Americans have seen their real income decline while the richest 1% has amassed more wealth than ever.

According to a recent Oxford University Press study: 'Around four out of every five people in the U.S. will endure unemployment, receive food stamps and other forms of government aid, and/or have an income below 150 percent of the official poverty line for at least one year of their lives before age 60'. And while poverty is highest in percentage terms among African Americans, contrary to racist myths, the majority of Americans on welfare are white. However, while America has experienced its deepest recession since the Great Depression, the rich have continued to get richer. The 400 richest Americans have a combined total wealth of \$1.7 trillion. While racist attitudes still prevail among white Americans, it's this tiny elite who has been the main beneficiary of racial inequality.

Younge concludes his book by making a passionate defense of King's Dream. As he argues, if we only allow cynical 'realists' to determine the parameters of our political horizons we will never change anything.

I strongly urge everyone to read this book. Gary Younge provides a useful analysis of the speech and its wider historical context. In addition people should take the time and listen to the speech on the internet and be inspired.

I would like to acknowledge the help of my partner Lucien Senna in writing this review. Lucien grew up in 1970s Boston and experienced racism first hand when she was 'bused' to a mixed school and the bus was regularly stoned by racists in Irish-American South Boston. Her father, Carl, spent part of his childhood in a Catholic orphanage in New Orleans where the nuns frequently had to hide the children when the Klan attacked the orphanage.