“If our direct action programs alienate so-called friends….they never were really our friends.”: Martin Luther King Jr.’s Challenge to Northern Racism
By Jeanne Theoharis

“In my travels in the North, I have become increasingly disillusioned with the power structures there… [who] welcomed me to their cities and showered praise on the heroism of Southern Negroes. Yet when the issues were joined concerning local conditions, only the language was polite; the rejection was firm and unequivocal.

--Martin Luther King, Jr., Saturday Review, November 13, 1965

It started with a fellowship and the opportunity to move to Los Angeles for a year—partly to research the city’s civil rights movement. As I delved into the archives to tell the story of Black organizing in Los Angeles in the 1950s and 1960s, I was surprised to find Dr. King. The civil rights leader had traveled to LA on multiple occasions in the early 1960s joining with local activists challenging school and housing segregation and police brutality. I realized that I’d bought into the idea that it had taken the Watts uprising to jolt King to turn his attention on Northern struggles. But it simply wasn’t the case.

And then everywhere I looked I found him—Boston, New York, Detroit, Cleveland, Seattle, Philadelphia. King had crisscrossed the country from the late 1950s onward, linking up with local movements from LA to Detroit to NYC as he built support for the SCLC and their work in the South. As he joined with Northern struggles challenging school segregation, police brutality, housing discrimination and job discrimination, he was ignored, lambasted, and red-baited for this work—just as Northern civil rights activists organizing these movements were. In many ways, he was hidden plain sight—his critique of Northern racism and the limits of Northern liberalism evident and yet simultaneously obscured or discounted.

King made his familiarity with Northern racism clear. Three months after the Watts uprising, he took to the pages of the Saturday Review to criticize Northern shock around the uprising and to highlight the depth of white resistance to change outside the South. King zeroed in on the dangers of “polite” racism, of Northern officials who “showered praise on the heroism of Southern Negroes” but were “firm and unequivocal” in opposing efforts to address racial injustice at home. King had witnessed the pride many Northern white liberals had in supporting the Southern movement—only to see their sharp refusal to confront segregation and inequality locally. Having seen the ways Northern movements were dismissed, he underlined how this intransigence, this steadfast lack of change, tilled the ground for these uprisings to happen.

Yet King’s longstanding critique of Northern liberalism and his analysis of the systematic nature of Northern racism—long before Watts, as well as after—has largely been sidelined in most treatments of the civil rights leader. While the radical, expansive nature of King’s politics (and his critiques of US capitalism and warmaking) has animated much of the scholarship on him over the past fifteen years, King’s challenge to Northern white allies has largely escaped examination. Yet, King insisted on the power—and necessity—of disruption, criticized liberal allies who decried it, and repeatedly faced criticism for it. Underscoring the crucial role the police played in maintaining oppressive systems, he stood with movements highlighting patterns of police brutality and called for civilian complaint review boards to provide essential oversight. He took liberal allies to task who preferred to focus on black behavior as a central cause for existing inequities—insisting they attend to the policies and structures that created Northern urban inequalities.