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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Rethinking Rights

Presenter: Jamie Longazel

Title: A ‘Revolution of Values’ in Immigrant Rights Advocacy

Abstract: “We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights,” Martin Luther King Jr. told Southern Christian Leadership Conference members in 1967 as they prepared to launch the *Poor People’s Campaign*, “an era where we are called upon to raise certain questions about the whole society.” King called for a “revolution of values” and a recognition of the interconnectedness “of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism.” The goal of the campaign was economic security for all so that poor people can maintain dignity and “control their own destiny.”

This paper lays out advocacy strategies applicable to the struggle for immigrant rights in the United States. Consistent with King’s vision and arrived at through previous ethnographic research on the politics of anti-immigrant backlash, such strategies – which include participatory action research (PAR) and grassroots political education – extend beyond the traditional focus on eliminating brutalization and encouraging “integration,” moving toward what King called “a radical redistribution of economic and political power.”

I argue several recent developments justify this shift: massive wealth inequalities, the continued exploitation of immigrant labor, the ‘de-democratizing’ nature of neoliberalism, and the political tendency to racialize and scapegoat immigrants in a way that ‘divides and conquers’ working people. I discuss how PAR produces and disseminates knowledge with relevance to people’s lives and has the capacity to create political subjects immune to elite manipulation. Grassroots political education – particularly when it focuses on issues of race and political economy – similarly prevents the misattribution of social problems and makes ordinary people aware of how race has historically kept poor people divided and thus politically weak and easily exploitable. In combination, these strategies have the potential to unite immigrants with other poor and working people, generating the political power required to make the economic demands needed to restore human dignity.

Keywords: immigration, participatory action research, racism, exploitation, Martin Luther King

Biography: Jamie Longazel is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work at the University of Dayton. His research focuses generally on race, law, and political economy; more specifically, he studies the substantive areas of immigration politics and the criminal justice system. He is the author of a forthcoming book on Hazleton, Pennsylvania’s Illegal Immigration Relief Act (IIRA) titled *Undocumented Fears: Immigration and the Politics of Divide and Conquer in Hazleton, Pennsylvania*. He is also the co-author (with Benjamin Fleury-Steiner) of *The Pains of Mass Imprisonment*. His scholarship has appeared in outlets such as *Law & Social Inquiry*, *Punishment & Society*, *Theoretical Criminology*, *Chicana/o-Latina/o Law Review*, and *Studies in Law, Politics, and Society*.