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“Previously on ‘1968’: Operation Breadbasket and Iconographic Memory in Class/Race Politics”

In the United States, “1968” provides a mnemonic touchstone for the Civil Rights Movement, protest against the Vietnam War, race riots, community organizing, the targeting of activists by the government’s COINTELPRO program, and a flourishing counterculture. The events of that period, that year, are often less narrated than rendered into iconography through images and events that for all their power have sedimented into historical memory: the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at a Memphis hotel; police brutality at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago; the Chicano student walkout in Los Angeles; maxi-coats; the Tet Offensive; street demonstrations; cities in flames; “Soul Man,” “Hey Jude,” and “Respect” on the radio; Black Panthers carrying rifles for self-defense. Photographs of the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz Island by Native American activists, the impending murder of Fred Hampton by Chicago police, and the free breakfast program about to be initiated by the Panthers helped create a near future for that rendered, remembered past.

My comments for “Since 1968” will focus on a sometimes remembered but less iconic feature of that historical landscape: Operation Breadbasket, the Chicago-based organization dedicated to improving economic conditions in African-American communities. My earliest knowledge of Operation Breadbasket came through growing up in Chicago, a city that would itself come to occupy an iconic position in histories of the “social unrest” of the time. Drawing upon historical material, memoir, and findings from my latest book, *Traveling Light: On the Road with America’s Poor*, I will use the example of Operation Breadbasket to re-examine the received wisdom that Dr. King’s move to link racial justice to class politics (together with his opposition to the Vietnam War) in the period leading up to his death was implicated in his assassination and in stepped-up attacks on the leadership of social movements. What are the implications of the forgetting or at least minimizing of initiatives such as Operation Breadbasket for understanding the articulation of class and race politics not only back in the day, but also today, at a time when wealth, health, and income disparities linked to race/class differences are widening?