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## The “Creative Extremism” of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Importance of Tension<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** The author revisits Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” from April of 1963 to better appreciate the “radical” King and his critique of the “moral” principles of white moderates within the context of the recent events of this past year. **KEYWORDS** COVID-19, “creative extremism”, January 6, 2021, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”, Martin Luther King Jr., systemic racism, white moderates

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The year 2020 will certainly be one of the most consequential years in modern world history. And this is surely the understatement of 2021! In the United States alone, between the pandemic, the incidents of racial violence, subsequent protests throughout the summer, and the economic and political repercussions, many of the structural inequities in our society became tangible to some for the first time. These inequities became even more apparent for many others who experience the consequences of decades of deliberate disinvestment in public health, housing, and educational services every day.

According to the *Washington Post*, between 2015 and the end of 2020 Black Americans were killed by police at a disproportionate rate compared with their percentage of the population. While white Americans were killed in police encounters at a rate of 14 per million, Hispanics were killed at a rate of 25 per million, and Blacks at a rate of 34 per million. That’s more than double the rate of white Americans. And these incidents occur all over the country.<sup>2</sup> These numbers, not only higher profile incidents such as the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, begin to illustrate that racial disparities in policing are systemic, rather than mere aberrations or instances of a few officers behaving poorly.

In terms of the pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control reported as of November 30, 2020, that Black Americans were being hospitalized at 3.7 times the rate of white Americans due to COVID-19 and were dying at 2.8 times the rate.<sup>3</sup> By the end of December, the death rate among Black Americans was still 1.7 times higher than that

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1. A version of this Commentary was previously delivered as a speech by the author on January 18, 2021, at St. Paul’s Church—National Historic Site, Mount Vernon, NY.

2. “Fatal Force,” *Washington Post*, January 4, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>, accessed on January 5, 2021.

3. Centers for Disease Control, “COVID-19 Hospitalization and Death by Race/Ethnicity (As of November 30, 2020),” <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>, accessed on January 5, 2021.

of white Americans, and more than 50,000 Black Americans had died of the virus, according to the COVID Racial Data Tracker at *The Atlantic* magazine.<sup>4</sup> The total number of recorded deaths due to COVID-19, as of December 31, 2020, was 341,199,<sup>5</sup> which means that Black Americans comprised just over 14.5% of the death toll from the virus in the US. And it has to be mentioned that the death tolls are almost certainly undercounts. Black people are more disproportionately essential workers, more likely unable to work from home, and often live in intergenerational households. As *Atlantic* columnist Patrice Peck has written, “For centuries, Black people have spoken about the struggles we face, pointing to root causes like poverty, housing segregation, unemployment, and environmental degradation. And for centuries, those concerns have been largely ignored. The same thing has happened with the pandemic. Long before data confirmed our worst fears, Black people knew that the coronavirus would disproportionately devastate our already vulnerable communities.”<sup>6</sup>

Those “struggles” over the course of centuries and the advocacy to eradicate the inequalities that persist in our society intensified once again during the summer of 2020. The number of incidents of police violence against Black Americans, the videos of Black people being assaulted and killed made “viral” through social media, the literal virus killing Black people more frequently than those of other racial groups, and the forced stillness that “stay-at-home” mandates during the spring and early summer of 2020, all combined to make a larger swath of Americans take notice of the disproportionate force being meted out against Black Americans in encounters with the police. Activists who had been organizing in communities for years demanded recognition that “Black Lives Matter” and continued their calls for structural reforms to the way law enforcement is carried out in the United States. They also demanded redress for the unequal economic and health outcomes in the country based on race. While the pandemic did not cause the disparities, the events of the last ten months have laid bare those inequities even more acutely. The activism and increasing consciousness of inequality throughout our society gives me hope and a cautious optimism that we may be living in a moment of national—and global—reckoning around issues of racial, economic, gender, and other kinds of inequality that has not been experienced in this country since the 1960s. I maintain this hope even in the face of the most recent watershed moment—the insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, led in part by white supremacists. I maintain this hope because we have to. Hope and constructive action are the tools we have in order to bring about a just society over time.

4. Patrice Peck, “The Virus is Showing Black People What They Knew All Along,” *The Atlantic*, December 22, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/12/pandemic-black-death-toll-racism/617460/>, accessed on January 5, 2021.

5. Reuters, “U. S. CDC Reports Record 3,764 Coronavirus Deaths in a Day,” *US News and World Report*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2020-12-31/us-cdc-reports-record-3-764-coronavirus-deaths-in-a-day>, accessed on January 15, 2021.

6. Patrice Peck, “The Virus is Showing Black People What They Knew All Along,” *The Atlantic*, December 22, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/12/pandemic-black-death-toll-racism/617460/>, accessed on January 5, 2021.

Dr. King, similarly—and certainly much more eloquently than me—expressed both disappointment and hope for this nation about its ability to first acknowledge then eradicate the structural inequalities that existed in the society. Dr. King embraced, much earlier than he is often given credit for, the characterization of his principles and policy ideas as “radical” by those who sought to stymie racial and economic equality. He gave a manual for white Americans to become antiracists that is still useful to look back to today. And so I want us to take a closer look at King’s “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” from April of 1963 in order to better understand the “radical” King, as well as his critique of the “moral” principles of white moderates.

The “Letter” has to be placed within the context of the year 1963, as well as the particular protests in Birmingham. This was the centennial year of the Emancipation Proclamation, the document President Abraham Lincoln signed into law that formally converted the Civil War into a battle over the future of slavery. And the protests in Birmingham helped transform the national conversation around civil rights and segregation. Birmingham had the infamous title of being the most segregated city in the South in 1963, and was also known as “Bombingham,” due to both the frequency and high rate of “unsolved” bombings of Black homes and institutions compared with anywhere else in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Black residents had long been struggling against police brutality; discrimination in employment, as many of the downtown stores would not hire Blacks; and political suppression in the forms of “white primaries,” poll taxes, and literacy tests; not to mention physical and economic intimidation of those who dared to even try to register to vote. However, due to the strategic decision to disrupt the Easter shopping season and the courage of Black Birmingham residents, particularly younger people inspiring their elders; images of dogs being sicced on unarmed protesters, Black people being knocked down by fire hoses, and children as young as 7 years old marching and being loaded into police wagons started to make their way around the world.

Nevertheless, King understood acutely that the outcome of the Birmingham protests, like the ultimate achievement of racial justice in the United States, was far from inevitable. Those accomplishments would be secured only through the collective and diligent work of ordinary people and organizers, of all races, and over a long period of time. King wrote that “it is a strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills.” He said that time was neutral and could either be used for constructive or destructive ends, but that would be a result of the choices that individuals made.<sup>8</sup> In this and in many other ways, historians such as myself write and try to teach our students that this is the most productive way to think about historical processes, as well as their own agency as actors upon the broader historical forces surrounding us all. We all have the ability, through the choices we make, to affect the course of human events.

7. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 11, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf), accessed on January 7, 2021.

8. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 11, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf), accessed on January 7, 2021.

King wanted the clergymen he was addressing from his jail cell in 1963, and those who would read the speech thereafter, to take seriously the burden and responsibility to act morally and to not take time for granted. And in laying out his principles of morality, Dr. King evinced and embraced the ideas that made him a “radical” in the eyes of moderate white Americans—not to mention conservative whites—and tried to make them understand that being a moral person *required* concrete action on behalf of justice and a fundamental dismantling of the status quo.

It might sound a bit crazy to us today—although it really shouldn’t—but what made Dr. King a “radical” in the minds of the white clergyman who criticized him was that King advocated for a truly just democracy, in which democratic rights and opportunities would be available to all. King explained, with searing poignancy, what segregation had done to Black Americans generation over generation. Addressing his white audience, King wrote,

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging fact of segregation to say “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see the tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people . . . then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, Sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.<sup>9</sup>

There are several important themes I want to highlight from this extended quotation.

The first is King’s conception of time. Black Americans and white Americans conceived of time very differently due to their material circumstances and relationship to economic, political, and social power within the society. White Americans could counsel African Americans to wait until a more “convenient,” more “prudent” moment to carry out their protests because white Americans’ material conditions were relatively secure; white Americans enjoyed political and social control within Birmingham and the larger American society. The system was constructed to be more responsive to their needs because of their race. Whiteness provided a social and political capital that Black Americans could not access. While these white clergymen may have also wanted to see Eugene “Bull” Connor out of power in Birmingham, it was not out of a desire to make

9. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 6-7, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf), accessed on January 7, 2021.

Birmingham a more just and desegregated city, but rather because Connor was not a polite segregationist. Connor was more than willing to bare the teeth of the Jim Crow system to the world in order to maintain it. That brought bad publicity and pierced the outward image of an “orderly” city. Connor had become bad for business. Dr. King wrote, “We will be sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Mr. [Albert] Boutwell will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is much more articulate and gentle than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to the task of maintaining the status quo.”<sup>10</sup> The status quo upheld white supremacy, Jim Crow, and the white Birminghamian conception of time toward racial equality—never!

Second, Dr. King described the precarious nature of Black life in America at the time—a description that is unfortunately still all-too-apt today. Black Americans had to know the written and unwritten rules of interacting with white Americans in the Jim Crow South because to transgress those “rules,” even by accident and even one time, might lead to your death or to the deaths of those you love. Jim Crow segregation warped the minds of Black adults and children, who were constantly being told that they were inferior to whites, that their lives did not matter, that white comfort and convenience was more important than their rights and liberation. Jim Crow segregation created distorted realities for both Blacks and whites, and the awful indoctrination began in childhood. King could hardly bear to explain to his son, why white people treated “colored people so mean.” The answer was simultaneously too simple and too complex. Because they were Black and white people considered them to be inferior and undeserving of respect. Because white people feared what a truly equitable society might look like. Because white Americans conceived of their own self-worth as inextricably tied to their status as being superior to Black Americans. Because white Americans would have to give up some political control, some material wealth, some access to job and educational opportunity, and issue an apology for centuries of mistreatment, in order to help create a truly just society.

Third, Dr. King explained that African Americans would no longer meekly accept their “place” as second-class citizens in the United States. The patience of a race had been used up and extending more patience at this time would be no virtue. King not only explained that the current protests in Birmingham had been postponed multiple times before April of 1963 in an effort to both give the city of Birmingham the opportunity to follow through on promises made to the African American community going back to the fall of 1962, but also so as not to inadvertently help “Bull” Connor get reelected as Safety Commissioner for the city. While Black leaders had acted in good faith while negotiating with the city, that good faith had not been returned. City officials had been promising to remove the humiliating “colored” and “whites” signs from stores and other establishments, along with other reforms, but nothing had actually changed after months of assurances. And while Black leaders urged waiting until those more “prudent” moments to demonstrate so as to not tip the scales of the nearly all-white election, that discretion

10. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 5, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf), accessed on January 7, 2021.

had not resulted in any further relief or support from white business owners, city officials, and residents.<sup>11</sup>

And so, these realizations on the part of Dr. King and other Black leaders in Birmingham caused them to delay their demonstrations no longer. In doing so, Dr. King recognized at least two things: that he would have to embrace being called an “extremist” and that he would have to call out white moderates for their lack of moral fortitude. In the process, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and his public life provide us with useful frameworks for understanding what it takes to work toward a just society.

Seven white clergymen in Birmingham wrote an open letter to the major newspaper in the city criticizing King and Black Birmingham residents for their direct-action protests, calling them “unwise” and “untimely.” The clergymen asserted that King was an “outsider” who was stirring up trouble and using extreme methods that were doing more harm to race relations in the city than good.<sup>12</sup> King responded in print and in public, refuting their points, but also quickly moving beyond them in order to articulate the deep systems of injustice that repressed Black residents and distorted the realities of white residents.

The Black residents of Birmingham employed the tactics of nonviolent direct action in an effort to dramatize the discrimination they endured on a daily basis. They used their bodies and buying power to cause physical and economic disruption within the city in order to be seen, heard, and ultimately respected as human beings and full members of the community. Dr. King explained that the purpose of nonviolent direct action was to “create such a crisis and establish such a creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.” Dr. King was not afraid of tension. He considered it “already alive” within the community. Rather, the protests brought that tension to the surface and he argued that the exposed tension was necessary for growth.<sup>13</sup>

And in embracing the need for “creative tension,” Dr. King also became more comfortable with being called a “radical” or an “extremist.” He understood that seeking racial justice within a racist system required a “radical” vision. Although, I am sure he was disappointed that the desire for a just society would have to be considered radical. King wrote,

At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as these of the extremist. . . . But as I continue to think about this matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was Jesus not an extremist in love . . . Was not Amos an extremist for justice . . . Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ . . . Was not John Bunyan an extremist . . . Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist . . . Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist . . .

11. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 3-4, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf), accessed on January 7, 2021.

12. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 1, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf), accessed on January 7, 2021.

13. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 4, 10, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf), accessed on January 7, 2021.

And so, Dr. King inverted the extremist-as-epithet framing that the clergymen had tried to employ by extolling the virtues of historical figures who had been considered radical in their own times for voicing ideas of love, human equality, or brotherly unity. And King inserted himself into each of those traditions. Now, the question became one for those clergymen: “The question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?”<sup>14</sup>

All people now had a choice to make, particularly white Birmingham residents. A hallmark of Dr. King’s ministry, however it manifested, was about moving people to action. Words were not sufficient. People needed to act in constructive ways in order to bring about the just society King envisioned, which was also the vision of itself the United States held up rhetorically. Dr. King held up models of the ideas that were necessary to promote in order to develop a just society. But he also expressed his disappointment in the “white moderate,” whom these seven clergymen embodied. While condemning the protests that Black residents engaged in, his fellow clergymen did not, as Dr. King noted, “express similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being.”<sup>15</sup> Later in his “Letter,” Dr. King expanded on this theme:

I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action;” who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a “more convenient season.” Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.<sup>16</sup>

Herein lied Dr. King’s disappointment and frustration. “I had hoped the white moderate would see this,” referring to the need to be “creative extremists.” “Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action.” Dr. King revealed that seeming pessimism in his thinking precisely because

14. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 12-13, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf), accessed on January 7, 2021.

15. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 2, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf), accessed on January 7, 2021.

16. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 9-10, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf), accessed on January 7, 2021.

he had not succumbed to it. He used this revelation in an effort to make white Birmingham residents and Americans generally more reflective and hopefully more empathic toward Black Americans, whose oppression they were participating in, even if only tacitly. Dr. King also made it known that it would take persistent action in order to dismantle Jim Crow and white supremacy. Whites would have to participate in this activism and become “creative extremists” in order to bring about the “beloved community,” the truly just society.

If we had not realized the prophetic wisdom of Dr. King’s words before, the events of January 6 should remind us that what follows its wake will go a long way in determining what we, as a country, will become “creative extremists” for. There is no ability to remain “lukewarm”; there is no “more convenient season”; we can no longer prefer “order” over justice. Our most recent moment of national reckoning began last spring; the coup attempt was part of that. But it would be naïve to think that with hundreds of years of inequality to ameliorate, that one summer, or one year, would be long enough for a “moment.” We cannot be afraid of “tension.” Breaking down systemic racism and coming to grips with the privileges our current political, economic, and social positions provide us are extremely uncomfortable. And that’s a good thing. ■