

Martin Luther King Lecture by Prof. Dr. Anthony Bogues

9 October 2023

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Why we can't wait

- Your excellency Mr. Frank Weerwind, demissionary minister for Legal Protection,
- Rector, prof. Jeroen Geurts
- Linda Nooitmeer
- Spoken Word artists
- The president of the MLK lecture Foundation Dave Ensberg
- Distinguished ladies and gentlemen / audience – students, Faculty, colleagues, members of the public

Good evening and thank you for attending this event --- ML King annual lecture. I am deeply honored to stand here before you this evening. I am from the Caribbean and as a teenager I heard about and then read the speeches of King. Late in high school and then as an undergraduate student we had many debates about King and Malcom X. These two figures were central to a growing black consciousness of my young years along with the centrality of Rastafari and Dr Walter Rodney, so it is an honor for me to stand before you all and deliver this lecture on Martin Luther King.

It is 1963 – and American society is in turmoil. In the summer of that year, over 1000 cities were – in MLK's words – “engulfed in civic turmoil.” Writing through that moment, King noted that the events were “reminiscent of the French Revolution of 1789 [he continues] ...Just as lighting makes no sound until it strikes, the Negro Revolution struck the revealing flash of its power. After over three hundred years of domination, one cannot be expected to find voice in a whisper.”

In calling the events of 1963 a “Negro revolution” King was describing in radical, social, and political terms – a Revolution – a drive and a logic which had emerged in American society to overthrow the oppressive structures of racial injustice. Structures of injustice – first inaugurated by American settler

colonialism / racial slavery, then reorganized and readapted through processes of racial terror/ and juridical legal systems of Jim Crow segregation.

Revolutions are not just events which shake a society. They are human events which force new questions upon a society- that open new spaces for different questions about the social realities of a society.

The “Negro Revolution“ of 1963 placed squarely within the fabric of American society – not just the question of racial Justice but Freedom. This idea of freedom has been foundational to the idea of America. But what did it mean? The freedom demanded by the enslaved African was fundamentally different and distinctive from that of the white Americans who fought the war of independence. For these Americans freedom was about political liberty – Independence from the British colonial crown, for the enslaved African, freedom was about the end of human domination and therefore the abolition of racial slavery. Two distinctive ideas and practices of freedom. What the “Negro Revolution“ later on called the Black revolution did was to put on the table an idea of freedom which was deeply linked to issues of equality and then later on with economic justice.

It is the power of American elite hegemony that this “Negro revolution“ composed of many elements and currents of black political practices is today only referred to as the “civil rights movement.”

The “Negro Revolution“ had three elements to it.

(1) Black Power current. Black Power as a political slogan emerged out of debates and discussions in the meetings between SNCC and the ordinary people about what they wanted. The initial idea of Black power was a response to Southern segregation. Wille Ricks the SNCC activist then publicly pronounced it and then it was picked up by the late Stokely Carmichael. Quickly it became an ideology based on a radical Black analysis about racial domination in the USA. At the core of the analysis was what was called “internal colonialism“. The argument was that the black community was an internal colony of the American power structure.

(2) Second current was what one could call a Revolutionary Black nationalism one. In this current a leading figure was Malcolm X and his group, The Organization of African American Unity. Its political objective was the words of MX the “complete independence of African peoples in the USA by any means necessary“.

(3) Third current was the Southern Freedom Movement. This was a mass movement against racial segregation based firstly in the Southern USA and rooted in the Black Church, and over time it became a mass movement against the unequal structures of American society, its program can be summed up in very famous placard carried on hundreds of its marches – Freedom Now!

All these three currents created the Black revolution of the early 1960's and As I have noted one power of the American elite hegemony was to rename this vast complex movement which King called the “Negro Revolution” - the Civil Rights movement. The Caribbean thinker and novelist, George Lamming once noted that, the power to name is the power to control. It is about the power to frame. Those who have the power control and frame by calling the Negro Revolution the Civil Rights movement which essentially guts the movement of its most radical ideas and practices of freedom struggles, and in the process replaced these struggles by historical and political narratives about integration and civil rights rather than about freedom and radical forms of equality. I think it is essential to grasp this point.

The displacement of the freedom question by that of ‘civil rights’. It is important because today in many quarters King today is understood only as a postage stamp and his “I have a dream speech” becomes **the** seminal speech. This speech then becomes devoid of its context, that it was the final speech made at the historic 1963 March in Washington focusing on jobs and freedom. When this replacement happens the radical King of ‘The beloved Community,’ the King who in August 1967 – in a remarkable speech, ‘where do we go from here’ says the following:

... Your whole structure (Yes) must be changed. [Applause] A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will ‘thingify’ them and make them things. (Speak) And therefore, they will exploit them and poor people generally economically (Yes) and a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and it will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tight together. (Yes) [applause]. What I am saying today is that we must go from this convention and say, ‘America, you must be born again!’

That king is forgotten.

The King that calls for America to be born again is a radical King. This is a King who expresses Black prophetic political thought. In the genre of Black Thought

that King practices there are calls for redemption, for transformation of society in the name of practices of freedom and human dignity.

My point here is that the King who penned the letter to the clergy men) (Christian and Jewish) in 1963 'Why we can't wait', that this is the King who grasped the fact that 1963 America was in the midst of a "Negro Revolution". In 1967 it is this King who called for America to be born again.

So why this letter? "Why we can't Wait' and how does it resonate in our contemporary world?

In framing this letter, we might wish to recall that one of the critical features of the mid- to late twentieth century was decolonization. The political formation of the world in the late 19th century was structured around various European colonial empires and as the 19th century saying went - "the sun never set at the British empire.

European colonial empires were the order of the day. Racial slavery which had begun with the Portuguese and Dutch incursions in Africa in the 15th century was not abolished until the late 19th century. In Brazil in 1868 and in Suriname 1863. Dutch colonies were part of this structure of the world. So, while racial slavery was abolished in the late 19th century it was until the late 20th century that political decolonization began. So, one feature of the 20th century was the restructuring of the world in which many colonies became politically independent after 1945. King recognized this, speaking all the time particularly since around 1956 about the anticolonial movement, particularly the movement in Ghana

Another feature of the world in the mid 20th century was the danger of nuclear warheads, exemplified by the Cuban missile crisis. But here the question was deeper than nuclear warheads. CLR James, the Caribbean thinker writing in 1967 noted that 'Today the whole world witnesses and is properly terrified by the barbarities of this technologies – a technology that is primarily geared to the production of weapons instead of to the satisfaction of human creative needs.' This threat of nuclear madness was a feature which King recognized, and he called it an element of militarism. In these contexts, King writing the letter "Why we can't wait" participated in the "Negro Revolution" His participation was shaped by African American religious practices and his own theological training. He was engaged in a practice of a **life of a mind in action**. What does one mean by this?

Action is a distinctive human activity. In acting not only do we reveal ourselves, but we intervene and make a human world. We then insert ourselves in this human world by both word and deed. King lived a life of both word and deed. He spoke often, but his speeches were about action, inviting us to act upon the unjust structures of society. He was a radical prophetic black intellectual who lived as he thought and spoke.

So, sitting in a Birmingham jail, arrested for his actions protesting racial segregation, King wrote a letter responding to a set of criticisms by clergymen, 'his peers' that said that the Southern Freedom Movement should slow down, that it should wait. King responds to this criticism in the following ways: "I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years that I have been greatly disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the negro's stumbling block is the white moderate--- who is devoted more to order than to justice, who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension, [than to support] a positive peace which is the presence of justice. "

This profound analysis of negative and positive peace, of how negative peace is a stumbling block itself to justice, is at the heart of King's letter. For him, positive peace occurs when an unjust law is challenged. In these challenges there are no time tables for he believes that the oppressor cannot set the time table for another person's freedom. Time for King is neutral. There is no never any well timed direct action. Power, he makes the point, does not give up its privileges voluntarily, it only gives up its privileges by demands. For King therefore, 'Why we can't wait,' meant that the African American who had been waiting for over 300 years for his/her constitutional rights, could not wait anymore. That struggle for constitutional rights in King's words would only come with the tireless efforts of human beings to create a different world. It was a struggle both for a radical, not a procedural form of equality and for freedom. In such a context, waiting was an ally of those who did not want to make change. To wait, therefore, was not to be reasonable but to be unreasonable. To wait was to allow oppressive social forces to consolidate their power. To wait was about inaction. To wait was to see black lives destroyed by segregation. To wait was to support the death worlds created by anti-Black racism. To wait was to ignore pain and suffering until the 'right time.' The right time for whom?

So 'Why we can't wait' is a political document, it is intervention against moderation and no action in the midst of the "Negro Revolution of 1963". It made it clear that moderation that had its logic- stopping the marches of freedom which in King's words would bring the "walls of segregation tumbling down."

As one reads this letter, listens to the voice of King, grapple with the content and style of his numerous speeches, there is an urgency about King's -- thought and action – it is an urgency for action and for a different time. It is this urgency and the urgencies of our time that I wish to end on.

One is not able in this talk to enumerate all the features of our contemporary world which require urgent attention and action. But I wish to posit three: Climate change; anti-Black racism; War.

For each of these elements there are practices that shape our world in directions that will destroy us. We cannot wait.

First: Anti-black racism. The modern world was shaped by colonialism and anti-black racism. Race is a scientific fiction, but anti-black racism is not fictitious. Anti-Black racism is a structure of domination, not a fiction. It is based upon both a discursive practice of human classification, developed in 16th-17th century European thought, but it also structures the everyday life of people, violence, lack of adequate jobs, lack of housing, lack of proper education, and just plain living. In an anti-Black world to be Black means to question your existence every day, and to face the challenges of the structures which dominate your life. Europe understands itself both historically and contemporarily as White. Just visit the House of Europe Museum in Brussels. There is a false universalism which parades under the rubric of not mentioning race, of eliding race based on an argument that speaking about race creates anti black racism It is a false argument. Not speaking about racism elides racism, rather than understanding that race is already a structured presence in European society and that by ignoring it will not go away. Silence is not golden in these matters. Only confrontation, direct action, to quote King, challenges the ills of the present.

Within the Netherlands, recently the monarch of the Kingdom recent apologized for slavery. It was an important occasion, but naming is just as important as an apology. To understand that slavery as practiced by the Dutch

colonial authorities was not just slavery or indeed colonial slavery as it was called in France, but was racial slavery, is actually to name the problem. There is no blueprint, of course, for healing and reconciliation, as the monarch said. But I would suggest to you that an apology is but the very first step. There are historical precedents on which acknowledgement and apology of a historical wrong must lead to action, otherwise an apology is empty. These historical precedents are about creating policies and actions which challenge the contemporary structures of society, and the ways in which the historical catastrophe of colonialism and racial slavery have left legacies that need to be confronted.

We can't wait and live only with apologies. Why?

Because what the Black British theorist, Stuart Hall noted what he called "authoritarian populism" is at our doorsteps. This political current Hall notes is dominated by a set of so-called moral panics. To this I would add it is dependent upon an anxiety, a set of feelings of displacement and nostalgia, of loss. This loss has led to creation of fortress Europe and attacks against so called immigrants. Another stream of this nostalgia is about the loss of colonial empires. We cannot wait to challenge white nostalgia and loss in the present, nor the structures that perpetuate racism, otherwise we will be faced with another catastrophe that will engulf us all. The remarkable Surinamese radical intellectual, Anton de Kom died fighting fascism. We should hold his memory and life close and dear to us, when we think about the challenges that face us in the struggles against racism.

Climate change - All the current scientific evidence now points to dramatic global warming. Extreme weather patterns are becoming the new normal- from heat waves; wildfires, torrential rains and flooding and hurricanes.

We have crossed the tipping point. The social system which we inhabit was built upon colonialism, capitalism, and racial slavery. It had a unique feature to it. That was those humans in charge and who built the system thought that they were now masters of the universe. Not only did the logic of reason in the various European Enlightenments claim to understand the social world and therefore could create social scientific knowledge but it could bend the earth to its will. That bending went with practices of extractivism and destruction. Today we have reaped the whirlwind of those practices. We cannot wait. We have to not just make corrective action against climate change, but at the

epistemic level, we have to reframe who and what we are as human beings, and how we inhabit the earth.

The third element is War. If in the 1960s, nuclear destruction was part of the world's consciousness through the Cold War between the United States and the then Soviet Union, today many countries have nuclear weapons. As well importantly, we have new technologies of war. Drone weapons allow for murder and death, while those who push the buttons live. War is about the kill, is about the destruction of human lives. Victory in war is understood to be about who kills the most humans. War is not just extension of politics by another means it is politics practiced through death. The destruction of human life is a rationale for the practices of war. Are we not at a stage where, as Bob Marley says, we cannot study war no more? I am not naïveté. War is an outcome of conditions. There are aggressors and there are occupiers. To get rid of war we need to remove the conditions which create war. Can we wait for more human beings to die? has human life no other meaning than its market value, are we not living in a system in which the disposability and destruction of human plays out its logic? Can we wait to end this system?

In 1963, MLK from his cell in Birmingham jail made it clear that we needed direct action to make America be born again, and that we could not wait. Today perhaps, the survival of our species demands action, and for that action, we cannot wait.

Thank you.