

Response to the Martin Luther King Lecture by Prof. Dr. Pepijn Brandon

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First of all, let me thank prof. Tony Bogues for his inspiring lecture, and the organizers of the Martin Luther King lecture for giving me the opportunity to take part in this conversation. It is a great honor, as it is a great honor to work with Tony in our various joint projects.

The Martin Luther King Lecture is a moment of celebration of Dr. King's legacy. However, I believe that it is the job of professors not just to celebrate but to ask difficult questions. The questions that I will raise are not in criticism of Tony, with whom I actually am in full agreement, but are questions for us, collectively, to think through our current situation in relation to the lecture we have just heard.

Reading through that seminal collection of essays from the year 1963 published under the title "Why we can't wait" leads me to three questions. The first concerns the issue of radicality versus moderation. Sitting in that jail cell in Birmingham where he penned his famous letter to the clergymen, Martin Luther King could draw from many sources of strength. Faith, surely. Conviction. The fact that he was there as representative of a social movement, surrounded by rank and file activists who had gone through the same experiences. But the source of strength that he could not and did not draw on, was the knowledge that the whole world was with him. The image of Martin Luther King as the spokesperson for a broad anti-racist consensus was only fabricated much later. The actual Martin Luther King who found himself in Birmingham self-consciously wrote from a position of opposition. And the main adversaries on which he turned the power of his arguments were not the overt racists – there, the arguments were self-evident. His writings of 1963 were primarily in response to the moderates, who kept on urging the movement to go slow, to not be confrontational, in order not to upset the glacially slow process of legislative change.

For me, the most striking example of this argument is where Martin Luther King addresses a question he suggests was floating around the movement constantly in those years: "When will it be enough? When will the protestors be satisfied, so we can return to normality?" In countering this question, asked by non-participants in the movement, I felt that the always calm and measured style of reasoning of Dr. King is affected by a slight hint of impatience. In his response he emphasizes that the aims of the struggle are nothing less than full equality and the end of injustice, and equal rights and justice can never be the subject of negotiation. I believe this is of great importance to us today, here in the Netherlands, a country that has negotiation in its very DNA. Because I believe that such lingering questions – "When will it be enough? How much more will they ask? How much more should be granted?" – are accompanying every advance that the movement for social justice manages to make. These questions are now symbolically performed by thousands in a new ritual surrounding our Sinterklaas celebrations in cities and villages across the country, where those resistant to the abolition of the figure of "Black Pete" continue to try out how much soot one can put on

one's face to be able to stay just at the borderline between "chimney sweeper" and blackface. Behind the unwillingness to accept change stands a deeper issue: an unwillingness to accept that this battle over tradition is only the starting point for a much larger battle for full equality in all aspects of life.

I see a similar question confronting the fight over recognition of the Dutch slavery past. Like the minister who spoke before me, and I presume everyone in this room, I celebrate the enormous steps that have been taken in recent times. I commend the role that the minister has played in this process, a role that resonates with decades of work to put this question on the agenda, led by Afro-Dutch communities. However, I cannot fully share the optimism expressed by the minister. I have to admit to feeling a deep sense of unease when I was watching the face of our prime minister Rutte on 1 July this year, during the speech in which the King offered his apologies as head of state. I fully realized the reasons for my sense of unease when within the space of weeks, the same prime minister who had set there solemnly to confirm that black lives mattered in the past, pulled the rug from under his government over the issue whether the walls blocking people from Africa trying to enter Fortress Europe are high enough. And however difficult it is to say this in the current circumstances, I will admit to the same unease when I witness the response by the government to recent events in the Middle East. Tony in his lecture rightly emphasized how Dr. King connected the questions of opposition to racism and war. I understand the public outcry over the deaths in Southern Israel – for many reasons including personal ones I feel very strongly about this. Nevertheless, I cannot but compare this outcry to the deafening silence over decades of colonial settlement, occupation and cruelty suffered by the Palestinians. And this point becomes particularly salient when the Dutch government is effectively handing a blank cheque of support to the Israeli state that is set to make the 1.3 million brown people living in the world's largest open air prison suffer the fire of revenge in incomparable fashion.

This brings me to the second difficult question I want to raise: where are the boundaries of the "beloved community" that Tony spoke about? Earlier, I mentioned the sources of strength upon which Dr. King could draw when writing from his Birmingham cell. One of these sources, I believe, was his expansive vision of solidarity. Yes, the movement he headed fought for equality within the United States of America. But time and again in his 1963 essays, Dr. King emphasized that this struggle was part of a global moment of which decolonization was the key component. This set the boundaries for the issue of full equality well beyond the boundaries of the nation state. There is an unfortunate tendency in the official responses to the demands of anti-racist movements here in the Netherlands to continuously shift the boundaries back towards a more narrow perception of justice. We have to resist this tendency. As Dr. King said so eloquently at the very beginning of his Letter from Birmingham jail: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." My previous comments have to be seen in this light as well.

Finally, I want to thank professor Bogue once again for the sense of urgency in his lecture, by coming back to the ways in which we link past, present and future. That there is such a

link is expressed in every speech now made commemorating the Dutch slavery past. But there is a danger that a certain ritualistic and self-congratulating reading of that connection will drown out the more substantive issue of how we move from a past of colonialism and slavery to a future of equality. This – explicitly and with great immediacy – was the framework within which Martin Luther King wrote and acted. Writing in 1963, at the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, he keeps on coming back to how it is possible that the same structures, the same problems still have to be overcome one hundred years later. That is “why we can’t wait”. And here we are, sixty more years after that moment, and although many steps have been made I do not think we can genuinely say that we are now anywhere near approaching the full equality that for Dr. King was non-negotiable. That elemental fact should inform the radicality of our answers to the current situation. No-one here will believe that if we only implement enough diversity policy, in sixty years’ time we will not have to wage the same struggles. Of course diversity is crucial, and the initiatives in that direction at our university are important and precious. But it cannot be the summing up or the horizon of our work. That summing up must be full equality, in every aspect of life. We cannot afford another sixty years.