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A Case Study Analysis of the “Letter from Birmingham Jail”: Conceptualizing the Conscience of King through the Lens of Paulo Freire

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The pedagogical qualities of Martin King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” can be observed through the lens of Paulo Freire as his illustration of thematic universe’s can be used as a framework to contextualize the conscience of King. King encountered obstacles, in his contemporary context, to his self-actualization that once cognitively subjugated were transformative to his being. Three questions are explored: What manifestations led to the writing of the “Letter from Birmingham Jail”? What were King’s transformative actions? Will an answer to the first help make sense of the second? I endeavor to briefly examine the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” through the lens of Paulo Freire.

Introduction

Martin Luther King, Jr. is a Civil Rights icon whose actions are firmly cemented in American history. Lewis Baldwin, a leading scholar on King's life and thought, argues, "Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of the greatest prophets and distinguished reformers to emerge from the American South."¹ While King was incarcerated, he wrote the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as a response to an article authored by eight white clergymen, entitled "A Call for Unity."² His involvement in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s makes him a prominent figure of discussion in academic circles. It is of no surprise, then, that his seminal work, the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," has been studied from a variety of perspectives, including its logic, philosophy, and prose.³

However, fewer scholars have analyzed the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" through a pedagogical lens. Undoubtedly, King was as an exceptional leader in the Civil Rights Movement, but by the nature of King's historical context, he held the power to improve the lived experience of black Americans. In this paper, I will engage King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" through Paulo Freire's pedagogical theory present in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.⁴ Paulo Freire asserts in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that because we are aware of life, we can "take it on," and construct it; and because we can construct it, we can transform its configuration.⁵ Moreover, for Freire the struggle for liberation is one that is rooted in the existential reality of human interactions, the products of these interactions, and the creation and challenging of historical realities. In this paper I use Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a framework to contextualize the thought process of King as it pertains to his understanding of the need for non-violent direct action in Birmingham, Alabama, which I denominate the conscience of King.

Following Freire's lead, I explore the thought patterns of the oppressed, and then that of King as it is present in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." I first provide a historical overview of the context in which King was writing by exploring the specific incidents in Birmingham, Alabama, that led to nonviolent direct action and King's subsequent arrest. I then turn to the text itself and focus on an obstacle of liberation for King - segregation in Birmingham. Next, I briefly discuss King's transformative action - nonviolent direct action against segregation. In particular, I argue that King's text suggests his disapproval of racialized signs posted by downtown businesses, and that through his awareness he was able to lead a nonviolent demonstration. Finally, I reflect on how King's letter provides a template for marginalized communities in America today.

Historical Context

In 1963, Birmingham appeared to be an ideal southern city to travelers. David Lewis observes, "Birmingham, the whites said, was a 'good' city."⁶ Upon entering the city limits, travelers would encounter a billboard posted by the Chamber of Commerce that read, "It's so nice to have you in Birmingham."⁷ Yet, there was drastic contrast in political participation between the white and black population. Of the 80,000 registered voters in 1963, only 12.5% (10,000) were black.⁸ Of the total population (340,887), Blacks accounted for 39.6% (135,113).⁹ Statistically speaking, many black residents were unrepresented by the city's political leaders. Even in the iron and steel industries segregation was rigidly and brutally enforced.¹⁰ The city's Commissioner of Public Safety, Bill Connor, helped enforce segregation in Birmingham by terrorizing black citizens who attempted to challenge it.¹¹

The ethos of segregation was seemingly a part of everyday life for residents of Birmingham. Jonathan S. Bass writes, "Even the younger generation of whites in the Deep South had instruction while on their 'Mother's knee,' that blacks were 'inferior, dishonest, diseased, degenerate,' happy with segregation, and perhaps not quite human."¹² A year prior, students attending Miles boycotted local stores in 1962. Their campaign insisted that blacks not shop at downtown merchants for eight weeks which resulted in a 40% decline, and two department stores desegregated their water fountains.¹³ Their political action in Birmingham was one of several events that led Martin Luther King to believe Birmingham was an ideal city to hold a nonviolent demonstration.¹⁴ It is useful to study how these conditions led to the emergence of activism in Birmingham, for these conditions

led to the establishment of Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth's organization, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). This organization had very strong ties with Dr. King's Southern Leadership Christian Conference (SCLC). The AMCHR supported the Miles College students in their boycott, and the SCLC followed suit by holding their conference in Birmingham in the autumn of 1962.

After the student-led protest, the AMCHR met with a white civic organization, the Senior Citizens Committee (SCC), to discuss solutions to relieve growing angst in Birmingham.¹⁵ The two groups created a contract as an attempt to eliminate the possibility of a larger demonstration in Birmingham. The SCC misled the AMCHR by failing to uphold the agreement that they would remove "whites only" signs from downtown department stores to relieve the racial tension between blacks and whites. Lewis explains, "aside from the organizational ties between the ACMHR and the SCLC and the warm friendship of Martin [Luther King] and Fred Shuttlesworth, the racism of this city was archetypal."¹³ With previous agreements to suppress large demonstrations having failed, Birmingham was an ideal stage for large-scale demonstrative action through nonviolent resistance. It seems that King was called by affiliation of suffering, and of conviction, to participate in the action in Birmingham. David Lewis contends, "To ameliorate the condition of the black in Birmingham would constitute a victory over Jim Crow, the repercussions of which would be felt throughout the South."¹⁴ Hence, thousands of blacks began to mobilize in order to claim a city that was gravely failing in issues of equality. Dr. King's much quoted line, that an "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," materialized from these moments of angst.¹⁶

Unfortunately, certain individuals in the local and federal government did not believe in the protestors' cause. Attorney General Robert Kennedy had been one of the first to voice his criticism.¹⁷ It is possible that the Attorney General's reproach influenced Dr. King's decision to meet with his brother, President John F. Kennedy, on October 16, 1963, to discuss discriminatory policies in the South. President Kennedy seemed to be committed to the cause of desegregation, but he was slow to move. Additionally, leaders in Birmingham refused to leave their offices, making it difficult for younger, more progressive, officials to emerge. Dr. King wrote in *Why We Can't Wait*, "Despite the results of the run-off, the city commissioners ... had taken the position that they could not be legally removed from office until 1965."¹⁸ This interaction with the President, in conjunction with less politically influential sources, impelled King and leaders of the demonstration to embark upon an intentional campaign, 'Project X'. The name of the campaign was changed when members of the council recognized the possibility of violence.¹⁹ Diane McWhorter observes that 'Project X' became 'Project C' "for 'Confrontation': jail-filling, history making demonstrations, during the symbolically freighted Easter season."²⁰

Their proposed strategy was devised so that it would not suffer from the same faults as campaigns of the past. For instance, King's campaign in Albany had ended in defeat, and his protest resulted in him being ousted from the city.²¹ As a result, some of the leaders in Birmingham lost their faith in King's ability to lead a nonviolent demonstration in their city. Birmingham's black leaders were cautious of Dr. King's movement as knowledge of the action had spread by word of mouth. King desired to maintain a level of secrecy until the action began. Still, anticipation around the planned action grew tremendously.

There was resistance within the black religious community from leaders who rejected the idea of a demonstration in Birmingham. Black preachers questioned King's ability as many had not gotten over his defeat in Albany, and believed that King was incapable of completing a demonstration without leaving the black community in a far worse condition than it was before the campaign began. The action was originally set to take place in early March at the end of the mayoral election, but Connor and his challenger, another white supremacist, were tied. The stage was set, but the campaign was postponed until late spring.

In early April of 1963, the 'Project C' campaign aides delivered a manifesto to the Birmingham newspaper. It was a purposeful tactic of activism because it made demonstrators' issues publishable. Newspapers could receive details from the perspectives of the protesters, and protesters could consolidate their message in one document. Those who volunteered went to great lengths to show their intended audience that they were loyal Americans fighting for their civil rights.

They approached the day spirit-led and tactfully. Before volunteers were separated by assignments, they had to sign an oath committing themselves to Christian values and nonviolent practices:

I hereby pledge myself - my person and body - to the nonviolent movement. Therefore I will keep the following Ten Commandments: Meditate, Remember, Walk and Talk, Pray, Sacrifice, Observe, Seek, Refrain, Strive, and Follow.²²

Dr. King and leaders urged demonstrators to accept these principles without enmity.

Protestors took to the streets and began to march in downtown Birmingham. However, there was an unusual quietness exuding from Commissioner Connor, who acted uncharacteristically polite, although he allowed police officers to briefly show their dogs to the crowds on previous days. It is possible that his involvement in the runoff led him to use more diplomatic means to suppress the action. Contrarily, Dr. King made his stance clear on the use of nonviolent tactics used to suppress the struggle towards justice. "So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends," he evinced, "But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, even more, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends."²³ They continued to protest for several more days, and Connor began to change his approach. On April 10th, the city administration secured an injunction from Judge William A Jenkins Jr., banning all protest.²⁴

Dr. King and leaders in Birmingham were faced with the decision of whether to violate the law or abide by it. Dr. King was vigilant in his desire to be guided by his Christian faith. His theological background influenced his actions heavily. As a student at Atlanta's Morehouse College, King studied sociology and developed a strong interest in the behavior of social groups and the economic and cultural arrangements of southern society.²⁵ It is of no surprise that Dr. King was prepared to break the law as a black Christian who understood social class and racism. It seems that his actions were so heavily influenced by his need to be in accordance with his Christian faith that he was willing to risk jail time for the sake of his religion. "By combining social analysis with biblical piety and theological liberalism," says Lewis Baldwin, "King employed creative nonviolence and civil disobedience as he and his followers challenged the structures of racial and economic injustice in Albany, Birmingham..."²⁶ King was well aware of the repercussions of his actions and was ready to face the legal system for his civil rights.

Yet King's dilemma grew worse. Word had gotten back to the black leaders in Birmingham that a large portion of the protesters would be jailed if the protest continued. King was forced to either acquiesce to Connor or go to jail. If he were out of jail, he could raise funds for the release of the other protestors, maids, janitors, and others who had families that would need them after the demonstrations had been completed. It was a difficult dilemma for him at that time. He reflected on his thoughts in this moment in *Why We Can't Wait*:

Then my mind leaped beyond the Gaston Motel, past the city jail, past city lines and state lines, and I thought of twenty million black people who dreamed that someday they might be able to cross the Red Sea of injustice and find their way to the promise land of integration and freedom. There was no more room for doubt.²⁵

He knew that he would personally sacrifice time in jail and believed that through his faith it would work out. "I'm going to jail. I don't know what will happen," he stated. "I don't know where the money will come from. But I have to make a faith act."²⁶

On April 12, King spoke the next morning at a church, and selected fifty people that were willing to go to jail. Demonstrators left the church and were subsequently arrested by Eugene Connor. After his arrest, King was separated from the group and was denied access to a telephone and legal counsel. Though King was startled by the conditions he faced in solitary confinement, he was prepared by the means of his nonviolent approach. Chaiwat Satha-Anad asserts in *Between Non-violence as a Pragmatic Strategy and a Principled Way of Life* that practitioners of "principled non-violence view the opponent as a partner in the struggle to satisfy the needs of all; if anyone suffers, it is the practitioner of nonviolence. More fundamentally, this practitioner may view nonviolence

as a way of life.”²⁷ Thus, Dr. King, in the darkness of his cell, suffered only to be granted contact with his lawyer days later. When King’s lawyer arrived at his cell on Good Friday, April 12, 1963, he brought a newspaper article entitled “A Call for Unity” with him. The article, written by a group of white clergymen,²⁸ referenced a previous article they published in the city’s newspaper entitled “An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense”. In the short “An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense”, they abjured the protest efforts of citizens and urged demonstrators toward the courts as a means to rectify the racial divide. It is of no surprise, then, that “A Call for Unity” held a similar stance on issues of race. In it, the authors acknowledged the crisis in Birmingham but admonished demonstrators’ nonviolent approach. They believed it created more tension than reconciliation. King disagreed with the authors and wrote a response in the margins of the newspaper that his lawyer snuck in to his cell. In this way, we can begin to understand King’s thought pattern, and how he challenged segregation for himself and other blacks in Birmingham.

Analysis

To synthesize King’s historical reality with Freire’s theory of liberation, I will analyze King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” alongside Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. King’s letter was a product of his historical reality, as an oppressed black man in America in 1963. Because of this, we can engage King, as Freire engaged the oppressed, as one who was oppressed but became unfettered from oppression through objectifying and acting against social structures and institutions that inhibited his ability to act freely. King was aware that unjust laws and racism were structures that could be changed. He viewed these systems and institutions as the product of a racialized system in which blacks endured substandard conditions comparative to their white counterparts. Ultimately, King challenged segregation as an institution that inhibited his human agency,²⁹ King was able to educate other oppressed people and assist them in recognizing their potential to overcome situations that limited their agency. I begin this section by providing a brief summary of King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Then, I explain the transformation process, from oppressed to liberated, as detailed by Freire. Lastly, I provide a comparative analysis of King’s letter alongside the themes present within *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

The “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is an eloquent response to “A Call for Unity.” King begins by first explaining why he is in Birmingham, noting that an affiliate organization invited him. He expresses his disappointment in liberal white churches, arguing that their repudiation of demonstrators was unsound. Moreover, he admonishes them for not repudiating the events that brought about the protest. He further reproves his critics for urging protestors to be patient with the legal system, noting that silence and complacency against racism are far worse than overt racist actions. He explains that he is doing what he believes is right and explains how blacks are reacting to segregation differently. For example, one group agrees with segregation because they are benefitting economically, and others are black nationalists who are radically advocating a violent separation of the races. King insists that he stands between the two, and offers his passive approach as a way to bring about change in Birmingham. He believes the Black community has waited long enough for equal access to downtown businesses and should not have to walk in the backdoor of businesses. He closes the letter by lamenting his disappointment in the actions of liberal white clergy members, as he thought they would be his greatest allies.

The “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is a channel through which one may view the deep complexities of King’s reality and the reality for many blacks in Birmingham in 1963. For instance, on the fourth page, King reveals black Americans’ desire for equality when he writes, “Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come. This is what has happened to the American Negro.”³⁰ Through examining “The Letter from Birmingham Jail” through the framework of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* we can contextualize King’s historical reality, and examine how his letter was used as a medium for teaching oppressed blacks in 1963.

Freire asserts in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that human history and historical periods are the product of human action. The world would no longer exist if human action, and the results of these actions, did not exist. The world in which humans live is one that is always being challenged, due

to the finitude of human imagination and ability. However, humans throughout history have triumphed over such challenges. A human being's triumph is contingent upon the human's understanding of the product of its action, which ultimately allows the human to adjust and adapt in a complex world. As human action and the product of its actions aggregate, social institutions, culture, and concepts, intangible and tangible realities are created. Hence, historical periods are characterized by a complex interaction of social institutions, cultures, and ideas, intangible and tangible.³¹

Freire's theoretical elucidation of an oppressed individual's reality in a given historical moment, or epoch, helps explain from a theoretical standpoint the complexities of King's socio-historical context:

"An epoch is characterized by a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites striving towards plenitude. The concrete representation of these ideas, values, concepts, and hopes, as well as the obstacles which impede the people's full humanization, constitutes the themes of that epoch."³²

"The juxtaposition of competing themes within a historical epoch," says Robert London Smith in *A Practical Theology for Black Churches*, "makes up a thematic universe."³³ Thematic universes are complex historical realities, comprised of social institutions, ideologies, cultures, and customs, that affect individuals and historical groups in a positive or a negative manner. In a manner of terms, history is the creation of human beings.

History, to the human being, is tripartite: the past, present, and future are direct reflections of human beings' ability to create products that are separate from themselves, while at the same time in interaction with other products from other human beings. The past has been, the present is becoming, and the future is what has not yet been. The future is forecasted through human understanding of the process of the past becoming the present. Humans understand the past has become the present, the present will become the past, and the future will become the present. Freire asserts that the complex interaction of these systems constitutes the relationship between humans and historical themes, or the social institutions, cultures, and set of ideas of a historical period.³³

Themes can have a geographical component, however, and many can exist in a given historical period. Nevertheless, Freire asserts that domination/subjugation is a universal aspect that is underlying in every theme.³⁴ Liberation, its antithetical opponent, is thus the goal of those who are obstructed by its limits.³⁵ Smaller themes, which are more likely to be geographically based, are compiled together to make larger national themes. Freire argues that it is impossible for the larger themes of a historical period to not exist within its subsets. If individuals in a particular area cannot perceive elements of a larger theme, then they may face a limit situation.³⁶ Hence the American ideal of democracy was present in Birmingham. However, racism, its subset, inhibited the agency of many blacks in the city. In King's geographical context, he stood at odds with the larger theme of America democracy because he was black in the South in 1963. King displayed that he could not participate in the larger theme of American democracy unless he overcame his limit situation in Birmingham.

Some may suggest that racism in Birmingham was not a limit situation for King because King lived in Atlanta. However, King saw the struggle for the civil rights of black Americans as one that was connected:

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider."³⁷

King's words suggest that his limit situation was not one that was isolated to a particular city, state, or to himself. He realized that segregation was an impediment to his self-actualization and that

because the limit situation was based on the color of his skin, that those who looked like him must undoubtedly encounter the same limit situation. That is, segregation was an obstacle to King's and black Americans in Birmingham's liberation. He took several steps to participate in transformative practice: first, he observed the situation in Birmingham, then he identified the limit situation, then he, through nonviolent direct action, participated in transformative practice.

King perceived that Birmingham, though a prosperous society, treated blacks differently than its other citizens. The subjective reality of blacks was drastically different from that of whites. Some may argue that is a statement of the obvious, however, I argue in any oppressive historical period there are complex interactions that create varying perspectives, or opposing views, in historical situations. Hence, oppression may serve the needs of the oppressor, but seldom if ever of the oppressed. Objectification of reality by the oppressed is necessary for them to overcome limit situations and to teach others to do the same. King is no exception:

"There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal, and unbelievable facts."³⁸

To King, segregation was an obstruction and an opportunity. He saw in it the ability for blacks to be free, and overcome their societal constraints. Though seemingly minuscule, Freire states that an individual's ability to overcome limit situations are what makes them differ from animals.

Humans have the capacity to commit themselves beyond the present. Animals are ahistorical, meaning that they live in the present and cannot escape it. As conscious beings, humans exist in the relationship between their limits and their freedom: their past, their present, and their future. Hence, an obstacle of liberation is a situation that though in the present, which eventually becomes the past, can be overcome in the present leaving unforeseeable possibilities in the future. King understood his primary obstacle to be segregation, and he sought to eliminate it through nonviolent direct action.

Limit situations are created when themes of a historical period inhibit the production or action of individuals in a historical period. These situations either serve or negatively affect people - they either support the structures, institution, and ideas of a historical period or they obstruct it. Limit situations do not create hopelessness, rather, it is the subjective perspective of one's reality that gives credence to hopelessness or optimism.³⁹ Overcoming limit situations is cyclical. As one limit situation is overcome, new ones emerge so that the individual must overcome new obstructions to their agency.

From a pedagogical standpoint, it is important that the many dimensions of a given historical reality are presented in a manner that allows the populace to engage them. Secondly, an individual's subjective experience should be understood as portions of a larger historical construct, or theme, so that individuals can grasp the reality of their oppression in concreteness. By this, the presenter may introduce to individuals a new critical way to view their limits.⁴⁰ It is through reflection and action that people may become independent of created cultures, social institutions, and concepts, tangible and intangible.⁴¹ King's participation in 'Project C' offers a realworld circumstance to examine Freire's pedagogical theory. As the leader of 'Project C' he was able teach oppressed blacks in Birmingham how to challenge their limits and increase their ability to act in life:

"Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false

sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an "I - it" relationship for the "I - thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court because it is morally right, and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.⁴²"

King identified segregation as an immoral code that affected black Americans negatively. As a pedagogical leader, he led blacks in a struggle to increase their ability to act as human beings. In short, 'Project C' gave blacks who may not have been able to see the reality of their oppression a chance to overcome it and participate in the larger theme of American democracy.

Conclusion

The preceding paragraphs highlight the thought process of King and how he came to the conclusion that nonviolent direct action was a necessary struggle to take place in Birmingham. I argued that King's nonviolent demonstration is equivalent to Freire's idea of transformative practice. On the one hand, King challenged his socio-historical context by defying laws he saw as an impediment to his and others' civil rights, as a citizen of the United States. On the other, King identified the American south, particularly Birmingham, Alabama, as an ideal location to confront his limited ability to act in the American democratic system. King influenced the historical reality of many as a pedagogical teacher who taught oppressed blacks to challenge segregation, a situation that limited them. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire presents a theory that explains the course that oppressed peoples must take to achieve liberation. His theory, though abstract by nature, has particularities that can be applied and understood in realworld situations. It is no surprise, then, that when examined alongside King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," similarities in their approaches and methodologies arise.

Acknowledgements

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35. Ibid.
36. Ibid, 103.
37. King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail", 1.
38. Ibid.
39. Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 104.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid, 101.
42. King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail", 3.

