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From MLK to BLM

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a social activist advocating and fighting peacefully for racial equality in America. To Dr. King, equality, a value central to upholding democracy, was the state where all people, no matter their race, have the same status in opportunities, freedoms, rights, and services. MLK defended the need for equality in the United States in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”, wherein he emphasized that he is appalled that this topic provoked any sort of disagreement in the first place. In this paper, I will show that MLK Jr.’s ideas and words have a vivid presence today. In addition to inspiring individual Americans, his work motivates and guides a powerful, modern social movement known as Black Lives Matter. In constructing my argument, I will begin by investigating the events and conditions that led to the formation of the MLK and BLM movements and I will analyze the mission of the organizations (particularly in regard to safeguarding democratic values) as discussed in Dr. King’s broader literary work and in the article from the Black Lives Matter official website titled “What you need to know about Black Lives Matter in 10 questions”. I will discuss how BLM can be thought as an extension of Dr. King’s peaceful resistance movement and how MLK’s words serve as a constant reminder to all to maintain the core values of peaceful political demonstration and protect the Black Lives Matter organization from uncondoned violent means of protest. Lastly, I will compare and contrast the ways in which King and the founders of BLM respond to directed criticism and

analyze the nature of the particular opposition each movement receives. My discussion will lead to a broad parallelism between the work of Martin Luther King and the Black Lives Matter organization and overall show BLM as a modern version of King's work.

From the mid-1800s to the late 1900s there was widespread racial discrimination in the United States including the legally mandated segregation of African Americans from the rest of the white population. Such blatantly unjust separation of people in addition to frequent violence directed toward the black community from white citizens and authorities led Dr. King to initiate the Civil Rights Movement and commence his nonviolent civil rights campaign which quickly gained a large number of followers. The modern social movement Black Lives Matter, founded in 2013, "began as a slogan in response to police violence and racist violence against Black people" (Leazenby and Polk). There has been undeniable progress from the late 18th century to the present in that segregation is now illegal and people of all races are offered more opportunities, but instances of police and community brutality undeniably are still present. Dr. King personally played an integral role in the abolition of segregation, essentially the repeal of laws such as the Jim Crow Law. On a grassroots level, without necessarily a distinct face of a leader, the hope of BLM is to continue working toward the betterment of society following the work of MLK and soon putting an end to the persisting violence directed at the African American community. King's goal to abolish racial discrimination in areas including public transportation, employment, voting, and education aligns directly with the mission statement of the Black Lives Matter Network and its commitment to "creating a world free of anti-Blackness, where every Black person has the social, economic, and political power to thrive" (Leazenby and Polk). Although BLM places more emphasis on ending "the criminal justice system's abuse of Black people" (Leazenby and Polk) than MLK's attempt at an overall reform of how the

government views people of color, both movements try to actualize their goals through “various community-led efforts” including mass nonviolent protests as they “seek to promote peaceful interaction” within communities (Leazenby and Polk).

The main driver for Martin Luther King’s work was his moral belief in fundamental human equality. King initiated a discussion at the top of Page 3 of his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” about justice and injustice and morally correct versus incorrect actions. He argued that equality among people is a just law and “squares with the moral law, or the law of God” (King 3). He supported this assertion by stating that equality “uplifts [rather than degrades] human personality” (King 3) and does not distort the soul. “So segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful” as well (King 3). King seemed to convey that morality is a value universally attempted to be maintained in democracy and generally among people, so the creation and implementation of true equality, a morally correct principle, will in the end enhance democracy – a form of rule by the people for the betterment of *all* people. He emphasized that the ‘legality’ of something (segregation therein) does not make its following acceptable, stating for example that “everything Hitler did in Germany was ‘legal’” (King 3) yet there is collective agreement that his actions were sinful. The founders and followers of Black Lives Matter are driven by similar motives: morals for equality, equity, and its necessity in maintaining a democracy where all people truly have the same treatment and opportunities as other citizens. In fact, BLM directly states that they “operate under the principles laid out by the founders” such as King (Leazenby and Polk).

Dr. King’s principles and words serve as an ongoing reminder to uphold the stated core values of the Black Lives Matter movement and protect BLM from undue outside interference or manipulation. A common criticism is that BLM community members use violent means of

protest to pass their message along. However, “organizationally, we [BLM] certainly don’t have anything to do with – or condone - illegal activity [i.e. destruction or looting] that, you know, really frightens and, quite frankly, pisses off a lot of Black folk” (Leazenby and Polk). BLM focuses on fighting for equality through peaceful demonstrations, “organized meetings and events” (Leazenby and Polk), using “patient and reasonable terms” (King 1) as deemed most acceptable and appropriate by Dr. King. MLK proclaimed that ““justice too long delayed is justice denied”” and “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” so there is “no alternative except that of preparing for direct action... which is necessary for growth” (King 1, 2). This line of reasoning and belief is seen today in BLM in the movement’s persistence and growing support from its founding to present. Black Lives Matter is a widely distributed movement, much more than that of Martin Luther King’s and many think “that the movement is leaderless because of its grassroots, decentralized nature” (Leazenby and Polk). However, following King’s principles again observed throughout his career, BLM tries to empower its supporters making each of them a leader and advocate for the cause, creating a network that “is not leaderless ... [but one that is] leader-full” (Leazenby and Polk). Overall, Black Lives Matter uses the words of Martin Luther King as an everlasting driving force to protect the heart of the organization - fighting with peace - from unwelcome, immoral, violent intervention.

Dr. King in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” discussed the sharp criticism that he received from white religious leaders of the South, the white moderate. Opposition to BLM, although a bit more diverse in origin, tends to come mostly from the white moderate population once again and often has to do with political alignment. Both King and BLM organizers agree that the cause they fight for is both social and political and thus it is expected that political opinions of voters have an effect on the support, or lack thereof, of the respective movements.

Martin Luther King wrote, which directly correlates with the modern response of Black Lives Matter, that he is gravely disappointed with the white moderate. King was infuriated that these folks agree with the goal that he seeks yet do not agree with his ever so mild methods of action and refuse in practice to help fight. Currently, this is all seen in the “All Lives Matter” response slogan to BLM which is propagated by people who agree with the message that African American lives have value but refuse to effectively fight for change. However, until there is justice and equality in treatment for African Americans and all people, all lives do not seem to be treated as if they matter equally. “Blue Lives Matter” is another organization that seemingly falls in the same narrative as “All Lives Matter” expressing support exclusively to police officers as protectors of communities against crime. In fact, as King discussed, quite opposite may occur: “racial injustice engulfs the community ... with an ugly record of police brutality” (King 1). Dr. King presented at the bottom of Page 5 of “Letter from Birmingham Jail” many instances where the Birmingham police force brutally crossed paths with innocent African American people. Similarly to “Blue Lives Matter” supporting officers who maintain order in a time where African American protestors supposedly precipitate crime, Dr. King received criticism from Southern leaders that his “actions although peaceful must be condemned because they precipitate violence” (King 3). Both King and the BLM community respond to such accusation by firstly reiterating that their actions are solely peaceful at their core and do not intend to initiate any violent interaction. Further, if aggression does arise in a protest event, federal courts have consistently affirmed that it is immoral and legally unacceptable to urge an individual or organization to withdraw their efforts to gain basic constitutional rights - human equality, a broken promise – because the quest precipitates the danger of undue, external to the movement, violence.

In conclusion, by investigating the conditions that led to Martin Luther King Jr.'s Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter movement, their mission statements, practices, and responses to opposition, it can be seen that MLK's words ring as loud as ever today as his work influences and guides the modern BLM movement. King's work serves as a reminder to BLM and all to protect the peaceful heart of the movement from outside aggressive criticism and internal or external violence provocations. Standing between the "do-nothingness of the complacent" (King 4) and the bitterness and hatred of those perilously close to advocating violence, remembering that "there is a more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest" (King 4), Dr. King's words not only motivate the Black Lives Matter initiative but also set a basis for its values. The ultimate goal for King, and therefore BLM as an extension of his work, is true equality for the Black community, as defined by MLK, leading to a properly functioning democracy which encompasses *all* people.

Works Cited

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