

Martin Luther King Jr on Racism

1. **Who** was Martin Luther King Jr and what are his key ideas on racism?

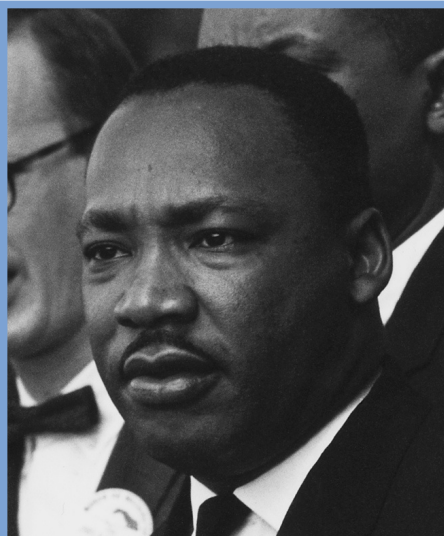
Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968) was an American Christian pastor and leader of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1948, he received a BA in sociology from Morehouse College, before following his father into the Church by graduating with a BDiv from Crozer Theological Seminary. Alongside preaching, Martin Luther King Jr continued his studies; he received a PhD from Boston University in 1955, and led the Montgomery bus boycott in the same year. The boycott was eventually successful and propelled Martin Luther King Jr to national prominence. During the following decade, he founded and presided over the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which organised numerous mass nonviolent protests against racial discrimination in the Southern United States. This activity culminated in the March on Washington in 1963 and Martin Luther King Jr's receipt of a Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. In 1967, he published his last book before his assassination in 1968, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Here he outlined several ideas about racism and how to eradicate it, including the three outlined below.

Racism is extremely deep-rooted for numerous reasons: slavery has left a legacy of racial discrimination in the United States. Slavery was accepted by the Founding Fathers and justified by businesses, churches, and universities; consequently, white Americans are still ambivalent about racism.

Racism is possible to overcome through nonviolent protest: despite the deep-rooted nature of racism, it is possible to eradicate through mass nonviolent protest. Importantly, violent protest will never be successful, because it will only amplify the white backlash against increasing racial equality.

Racism is connected to economic exploitation and poverty: racism is difficult to eradicate because it is connected to economic exploitation and poverty, which means black Americans are often trapped in poor and powerless communities. Ending poverty promises to help many white Americans and eradicate racism.

2. **How** do Martin Luther King Jr's key ideas on racism work?



Martin Luther King Jr

Martin Luther King Jr's key ideas form an argument that calls for mass nonviolent protest in order to eradicate racial discrimination. Additionally, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* introduces a new idea about the concrete measures that the Civil Rights Movement should campaign for. Instead of attempting to eradicate racial discrimination by protesting for legal change, Martin Luther King Jr argued that the Civil Rights Movement should protest for the eradication of poverty.

Racism is extremely deep-rooted for numerous reasons: Martin Luther King Jr's first key idea is that racism is especially ingrained in the United States. He claimed that some white Americans believe it is a superficial phenomenon; however, he argued that this opinion is mistaken. According to Martin Luther King Jr, racism is deep-rooted in the United States because it was instituted and protected from the birth of the American nation through the practice of slavery. Several Founding Fathers were slave owners (e.g. George Washington), and various institutions attempted to rationalise the practice; consequently, white Americans became ambivalent to the injustice of racism.

Racism is possible to overcome through nonviolent protest: Martin Luther King Jr's second key idea is that mass nonviolent protest is the only method capable of applying the pressure required to eradicate racism. He strongly disagreed with the violent methods of the Black Power movement, and claimed that they only intensified the white backlash against increasing racial equality. Nevertheless, Martin Luther King Jr did not believe that nonviolent protest should be passive; he argued against patiently waiting for progress, and encouraged ordinary black Americans (rather than the pastors, lawyers, and lobbyists who were historically the loudest advocates for change) to participate more actively in Civil Rights Movement campaigns. Additionally, Martin Luther King Jr argued that protesters are corrupted by violent action; given the suffering that black Americans have endured at the hands of white Americans, they should not seek to emulate such brutal or barbaric behaviour in achieving racial equality.

Racism is connected to economic exploitation and poverty: when Martin Luther King Jr introduced his third key idea, it was startlingly original and miles ahead of its time. He argued that racism is interconnected with economic exploitation and poverty, because black Americans found themselves trapped in poor communities after being freed from slavery; so, eradicating racism will require ending poverty. Martin Luther King Jr condemned the fact that an accounting error in the Vietnam War budget (\$10 billion) cost five times more than the annual budget for antipoverty programmes (\$2 billion). He questioned whether it was morally right that the city with the highest average income on Earth (i.e. Chicago) did not provide its black inhabitants with access to decent education, healthcare, or employment opportunities. Martin Luther King Jr claimed that campaigning for a guaranteed income (i.e. universal basic income) would lead to the eradication of poverty for all Americans and the end of racism.

3. **Why** are Martin Luther King Jr's key ideas on racism important?

They build on other mass nonviolent protest movements: Martin Luther King Jr's ideas are opportune, because they build on the successful methods of other activists (e.g. Mahatma Gandhi in India). He was convinced about the power of nonviolent protest because of its success in different places during recent history.

They frame the social issue of racism optimistically: unlike the leaders of the Black Power movement, Martin Luther King Jr was hopeful that integration and racial equality would be achieved. His optimistic message attracted numerous white American allies and mobilised ordinary black citizens.



The March on Washington: an example of a mass nonviolent protest.

They are bold and original: additionally, Martin Luther King Jr's key ideas are novel. The argument that racism can be rooted out by the payment of a guaranteed income to all American citizens, whilst simultaneously ending poverty, is an imaginative solution to a pair of significant social issues. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* is a studious analysis of racial discrimination, but it also uses this analysis to create a road map out of the divisive environment created by the conflict between the Black Power movement and white backlash.

George Thinks

Martin Luther King Jr is a global icon, and his tireless campaigns against racial discrimination are still used as sources of inspiration by civil rights activists organising protests today. Obviously, his incredible work leading the Civil Rights Movement in its fight against racism remains his most lasting and tangible legacy; however, his concern with poverty (regardless of the race it inflicts) was prophetic. Today, the various inequalities created by the material disparity between rich and poor are astonishingly pronounced.

Although Martin Luther King Jr advocated for the introduction of a guaranteed income, this doesn't mean he was a communist (a fact he took pains to point out). His motivation was the fact he couldn't work out why black Americans hadn't flourished after liberation in quite the way they'd hoped to, and he concluded that they'd remained poor due to a whole host of social factors that perpetuated racism. His basic insight seems to be this: in societies where people's share in the blessings of life are fairly similar, discrimination can't survive.

