

“Marketing Justice: The Christmas Boycott”

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This paper explores the tension in the Civil Rights Movement over whether to boycott spending money on Christmas to protest the murder of six children in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Activists and Civil Rights leaders struggled with the anticipated backlash over their “methods of direct action” as they considered calling for a “black Christmas” in their local communities and wondered about the feasibility of doing so on the national stage.

Writing about moderate whites’ disapproval of civil rights tactics in his April 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr. characterized himself as “gravely disappointed” in whites continued reluctance to support African Americans. He charged the apathetic white response as a greater “stumbling block” than the white supremacists because, he contended, they hinder progress by stating: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a “more convenient season.”¹

Whenever the most mythical, convenient season was, it was most decidedly not the Christmas season. African Americans leaders found themselves divided on strategy and this paper will examine the rationales for and against the boycott, as well as their strategies in asserting the economic power of African Americans. The Committee of Actors & Writers for Justice, which was formed in the aftermath of the murder of the children in Birmingham, first proposed the boycott. Led by John O. Killens, James Baldwin, Odetta, Louis Lomax, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, they sought to take a leadership role in condemning the murders and demanding a national response.² Analyzing the richness of the group’s public conversations and their efforts will bring to light the efforts of these writers and actors, who through their actions, sought to teach dissent and to engage consumers on questions of race.

This analysis is informed by coverage in magazine and newspaper accounts, movement records, and articles in advertising journals, such as *Advertising Week* and *Advertising Age*, as well as scholarly works by Robert Weems, Jason Chambers, and primary and secondary sources pertaining to local and national chapters of the NAACP, SCLC, CORE, and other organizations.

Of particular interest is the role of the Committee of Actors & Writers for Justice, formed in 1963, which was quickly renamed the Association of Artists for Freedom. The organization sponsored the first national no-spending Christmas Boycott in 1963. Instead of the more traditional quid-pro-quo boycott that sought to exact demands of a company or a community, this boycott sought to use financial angst to compel a reckoning with racial justice writ large. Ultimately the Christmas boycott, advanced by northern, urban, secular intellectuals, celebrated artists and writers of their day, was unable to win the approval of the southern, religious organizational leaders who dominated the Civil Right movement of the period. After years of dissent, southern, religious groups had familiar strategies in seeking to bring about change. The civil rights leadership based their success on local strategies that pinned their aims on tangible aims. In organizations like the NAACP, for example, African Americans seeking justice sought to establish legal precedents to advance their cause, and then enforce or confront them locally.

Artists and writers, preoccupied with creating novels and plays and music, found themselves wrenched away from their creative works by the violence playing out in the news. They imagined a larger conversation and shift in behavior, perhaps building on the kinds of public scrutiny carried by Frederick Douglass’s anti-slavery campaigns and Ida B. Wells’s anti-lynching campaigns. Beyond shining the light on discrimination and violence in the South, the creative leaders imagined those in the West, the Midwest, and the North also being forced to confront their own racism and the institutionalized ways that racism pervaded the nation. The artists and writers may also have imagined the same kind of

international shame that Douglass and Wells capitalized on in helping to shame an American response to the critiques of inequality and injustice.

Of course, vital to any effort to effect social change through economic pressure is the ability to communicate with supporters. While the seven aligned civil rights groups had seemingly endless power in their ability to communicate directly with their communities, through the pulpit, church bulletins, organizational organs, black newspapers, and black magazines, James Baldwin and his allies found themselves at a disadvantage. *Time* magazine had declared on May 17, 1963 that Baldwin was “not, by any stretch of the imagination, a Negro leader.” And yet, he graced the cover that issue and with the murder of black children four months later, he asserted himself, along with other non-leaders, as moral leaders.³

As the Civil Rights organizations rejected as unreasonable a call for a national boycott, they used the idea of withholding spending money on Christmas to advance the idea that committed Americans could donate that unspent money to their organization. This paper will analyze the marketing these organizations did around this Christmas Boycott. For example, an article detailing the NAACP’s rejection of the Christmas Boycott in November of 1963 featured an ad on the same page, encouraging readers of their magazine *The Crisis* to “Say ‘Merry Christmas’ By Giving an NAACP Membership to a Friend.” The opening cover of the same issue featured images of young children, followed by a plea to buy young people (13 and younger) a “Junior Life Membership” to the NAACP. It implored, “As parents you provide them with religious, educational and social guidance. Unfortunately, you must also arm them against racial prejudice.” The cost was \$100, which adjusted to today’s value would be over \$800. Even if it was paid out in \$25 (\$200) installments, as suggested, it is clear that the NAACP sought to encourage African Americans and white civil rights supporters to forego Christmas presents in favor of advancing civil rights through their organization.⁴

The broad appeal of the Christmas boycott emerged out of a growing recognition of the power of the purse. And a boycott was itself a democratic opportunity, allowing individuals and communities to demand change without depending on “powerful leaders, outside protestors, student foot-soldiers, or people ready to go to prison.” As Ted Ownby noted, “Almost anyone could participate in a boycott.”⁵

This paper will trace the reluctance of publishers to engage in stories and advertisements concerning the Christmas Boycott, tied as it was to the potential to scare away valuable advertising dollars. They proved unwilling to engage in the dialogue because to do so could have jeopardized their financial standing.

¹Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 16 April 1963,

http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf

²Judith E. Smith, “‘It Is Time for Artists to Be Heard’: Artists and Writers for Freedom, 1963-1964,” *Kalfou*, Volume 5, Issue 1 (Spring 2018): 164.

³*Time*, 17 May 1963, cover; “Birmingham and Beyond: The Negro’s Push for Equality,” *Time*, 17 May 1963,

⁴*The Crisis*, November 1963, cover, 510, 555-556; Calculate the Value of \$100 in 1963,

<https://www.dollartimes.com/inflation/inflation.php?amount=100&year=1963>. Ted Ownby notes that Martin Luther King, Jr. called on protestors in the Montgomery Bus Boycott “to refuse to shop at downtown stores and to save their Christmas-shopping money or give it to charity or the Montgomery Improvement Association” *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, & Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 152.

⁵Ownby, *American Dreams*, 151.

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