

Civil Rights Movement Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X

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Abstract

Ever since the American continent was discovered by Europeans, the USA has become a place of opportunities for many underprivileged people from different parts of Europe. There was a discrimination against Native Americans, women and Africans. During the 19th century, many groups and individuals fought for their rights, but none of the fights for human rights were as important and long lasting as the one that finally brought the recognition of human rights to African Americans. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 guaranteed that everybody, regardless of race, was entitled to equally access, public transportation, theaters, and other entertainment venues. Despite this important step, the Supreme Court decided that the Act was unconstitutional. The Montgomery Bus Boycott and its successful resolution shed light on the anti-segregation and civil rights movement. This event also made Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. an important figure in the American Civil Rights Movement. He organized many important events in the 1960s that finally led to the victory of the Civil Rights Movement. Similarly, Malcolm X was also involved in a movement that fought for improving the rights of the African American people. One of the main purposes of this study is to explain how Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X differed in their struggle for equality of African Americans.

Key Words: Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Civil Rights Movement, Civil Rights Act, African-Americans, Equality, Freedom.

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It can be said that from the beginning of the United States history, in spite of some exceptions, African Americans were used as slaves. The racial subordination of blacks constituted an explosive national problem. (Kennedy 1989, p. 1005) In the 1950s, The USA was a society of segregation; especially in schools, in the workplace, and in the social networks of people. Segregation legally denied certain groups of people full access to American society. (Hillis 2013, p. 176) There were some developments like the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments in the constitution, and as a result of these amendments, African Americans were accepted as equal to whites. In southern states, a segregation policy was going on due to the Jim Crow Laws. African Americans and liberal people in Northern States started objecting to the situation. The Civil rights movement in the USA began to be raised, so lawmakers legislated new rules in favor of African Americans. According to the law, all citizens were accepted equal to each other. (Ornek and Ultan 2014, p. 85-86)

The racial segregation in America can be defined as the endeavors of white Americans to keep African Americans in a subordinate status. (Lawson, p.1) In order to compensate for the effects of the segregation policy, African Americans were provided some privileges; such as to be hired or to have some scholarships. Via these privileges some of them were able to become university professors, generals, businessmen, judges, politicians, and president of the USA. Even if it is better than before, segregation, prejudice and discrimination may have not been ended yet. (Ornek and Ultan 2014, p. 86)

Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are deeply connected to each other in the issue of the discrimination of African American people. It is not possible to have a discussion about the tensions between black and white people in the twentieth century without mentioning their names. They were the most important symbols of the Civil Rights Movement. (Yanar 2013, p. 66) In order to analyse their impact on American people, it is necessary to explain their lives, their point of views, their ideologies and their way of life.

A Short Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta in 1929; the son of a Baptist minister. He decided to become a pastor at the age of eighteen. After finishing his studies in his hometown, he moved to study theology in the North; first in Pennsylvania, and then in Boston, where he received a Ph.D. in 1955. His first involvement in the American Civil Rights Movement was during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He became a spokesperson of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and a national figure, later being elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1960 he was arrested for allegedly violating a one-year probation he was serving because of a conviction arising from a protest demonstration. (Burns and Siracusa 2007, p. 195) During the next few years, King worked in Atlanta, Georgia and Birmingham promoting civil rights and campaigning against segregation. He did not use violence; he followed the example of Mahatma Gandhi who, through a long struggle that excluded violence, finally succeeded in obtaining independence for his homeland of India. (Jackson 2008, p. 170)

In 1963, King was arrested again. In prison, he wrote his famous text "Letter from a Birmingham Jail". It became one of the most important and powerful symbols of the

Civil Rights Movement. After he was released from prison, King continued his campaign and in May 1963 he organized the children's march. (Schraff 2008, p. 46)

According to Martin Luther King, there were not so many differences between segregation in America and colonialism in Africa. Both of them can be described with the same words. He said that:

“There comes a time when people grow tired, when the throbbing desires of freedom begin to break forth. There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of the tramper. There comes a time when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of exploitation, where they have experienced the bleakness and madness of despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing in the pitying state of an Alpine November.” (King 1956, p.86)

In the summer of 1963, there was an example of mass interest group pressure. Approximately 200,000 people participated in a March on Washington in order to protest against the discrimination. (Lytle 1966, p. 275) The most important part of the March was Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech which expressed his ideas and feelings. It was the speech about a dream of a colorless society which delivered on the occasion of accepting the Nobel Peace Prize. (Rathbun 1968, p. 53) The speech was called “I Have a Dream” because of its most significant part that King said: *“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character”*. (Schraff 2008, p. 46) This speech and the March to Washington became the iconic moments of the American Civil Rights Movement, and King became the most recognisable face, and the most eloquent, charismatic rhetor of the black Civil Rights movement in America in the 1950s and 1960s. (Appel 1997, p. 376) In contrast to other Civil Rights leaders, King gained support from both black and white communities for his program of change. (Sharman 1999, p. 85) In the beginning of 1964 he was named the *Time* magazine “Man of the Year“, the first African American to have that honor (the second would be Barack Obama half a century later), joining world leaders previously selected like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, Pope John XXIII, and Mahatma Gandhi. In the same year he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; becoming the youngest recipient in the history of the award. He pledged to give the entire cash amount to the cause of civil rights. (Schraff 2008, p. 46)

A Short Biography of Malcolm X

Malcolm was also the son of a Baptist minister who was involved in an organization for improving the rights of the African American people. Unlike King, however, Malcolm X was not coming from the American South. He was born in Omaha, in Nebraska, but his family moved to Wisconsin and then to Michigan. (Rummel 2005, p. 44) With his family moving several times, due to racist incidents, Malcolm's negative views towards white people and institutionalized racism developed at an early age. (Takamura 2012, p. 2) After his father's death, Malcolm moved to Boston. In 1946 he was sentenced to prison for burglary, where he became acquainted with the teachings of Elijah Mohammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. (Rummel 2005,

p. 44) He became a Muslim and upon his release he became a minister for the Nation of Islam. (Takamura 2012, p. 2)

After he was released from prison, he quit his job to devote himself to missionary work. In contrast to King, he was sending nationalistic messages to his followers, convincing them that they deserve to have self-esteem and self-respect for being black. He criticized the King's "I have a dream" speech and said that "while King was having a dream, the rest of us Negroes were having a nightmare." The speech of Malcolm X's speech contained two different concepts of revolution. One of them was the black revolution, and the other one was the Negro revolution. He was a proponent of the black revolution that would be violent. On the other hand, he criticized the Negro revolution. (Palmer 2006, p. 1364-1365)

Malcolm X was a famous African-American human rights activist and spokesperson for Black Nationalism in the United States. Departing from the passive practices of his contemporaries, Malcolm advocated a much more aggressive approach in the fight for the civil rights of African-Americans. His speeches attracted his audiences and terrified his enemies. (Takamura 2012, p. 2)

According to Malcolm X, the struggle was not about the civil rights, but about human rights, and it was not American, but a world issue. During the last year of his life, Malcolm established two organizations, the Muslim Mosque, and the Organization for Afro-American Unity. The former organization was religion-based while the latter, was established after the Organization of African Unity, so that he could achieve his goals and implement his ideas. (Tyner 2003, p.171) His independent operation lasted for only a year. While giving a speech in Harlem on 21 February 1965, he was assassinated by a gunman related to Mohammad. Even though he only lived 39 years (the same as Martin Luther King) he made a deep impact on the American public scene; his influence is still present among African Americans. (Alexander and Rucker 2010, p. 1118)

Comparison of their Vision

They were both African American civil rights activists who fought for racial equality. Their influence and speeches were effective on a divided America; the words and messages of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King touched the lives of so many people, both during their lifetimes and in the years following their deaths. They were both strong leaders, even though they had different spiritual beliefs and different approaches to the fight for black freedom. Although their approaches were different, both of them powerfully criticized racism and the policies that accompanied it; they were the leaders of many black people. (Black 2013, p. 2) They had the same point of view as a young black male in a system of whites, drifted apart from each other. (Yanar 2013, p. 66) Even if their rhetoric was different from each other, both of them wanted the same thing; freedom. (Alexander and Rucker 2010, p. 1118)

Their religion was an important determinant of their future life. King embraced his beliefs of Christianity which he illustrated in his famous speech in 1963: "*I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists... that one day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.*" (DeYoung 2008, p.2) Malcolm X

was a Muslim minister who tried to ensure equal rights for African Americans. (Lee 2011, p.1) As a member of the Nation of Islam, he believed in racial separation, the inherent evil of whites and the need to embrace African culture. (DeYoung 2008, p.2) King spoke often of the "American Dream", referring to the idea of equality in the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. King's dream was not limited to racial equality in the United States; it was universal and eternal. A universal dream means that it is for all - blacks and whites, men and women, the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and those of the United States and Europe. (Cone 1987, p. 459) Malcolm's style, in contrast to Martin Luther King Jr., was harsher in criticism of America and its methods for achieving equality. (Lee 2011, p.1) Malcolm experienced the problems of poverty, despair, and powerlessness. Thus he tried to inspire and enlighten black people as a person who had experienced the "American Nightmare" rather than the "American Dream". (Carson 2005, p. 18)

They represent two different responses; to violence versus non-violence in the black freedom movement during the 1960s. King was the most famous advocate of nonviolence in America. According to him, nonviolence was an effective strategy for social change and also the core of his philosophy of life. He stated that nonviolence would be a successful weapon for blacks in the American Civil Rights Movement and also for other oppressed people throughout the world. (Cone 2001, p. 173) King's optimistic point of view was derived from the success of the civil rights movement in America and the liberation movements in the Third World. The power of nonviolence could be underlined with these achievements: Montgomery bus boycott (1955), the student sit-ins (1960), the Freedom Rides (1961), Birmingham demonstrations (1963), the March on Washington (1963), the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Voting Rights Bill (1965), and the Selma March (1965). (Rathbun 1968, p. 42-46) They were all related to the success of anticolonialist movements in the Third World. According to King, segregation in America and colonialism in the Third World were the denial of dignity and worth of human beings. (Cone 1987, p. 457) His aim was to dismantle racial segregation through boycotts and marches. He believed that the end of segregation would increase the possibility of integration. However, Malcolm X led a movement for black empowerment. His aim was to restore the power of oppressed black people via spiritual teaching of racism, economics development and training in self-defense. (DeYoung 2008, p.3-4) The connection between the struggle of African Americans with other oppressed peoples of the world was the basis of his political thought. He stated that "*It is not a Negro problem, nor an American problem. It is not a problem of civil rights but a problem of human rights*". (Malcolm X 1965, p. 75)

King's thinking can be described in two periods. The former began with the Montgomery bus boycott in December 1955 and ended with the enactment of the Voting Rights Act in August 1965. The latter commenced in the fall of 1965 as King began to analyze more deeply the interrelationship of racism, poverty, and militarism in the policies of the United States government. The first period of his thinking can be explained with the feeling of 'love', that he identified with nonviolence. (Cone 1987, p. 455-456) According to King's conception, the meaning of love was understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. (Hillis 2013, p. 177) He thought that the Third World liberation movement would lead to the rise of a new world order of freedom and equality. The similarity of these periods was the definition of his ideas with the God of justice, love, and hope. The difference between these periods was the shifting emphases that he gave to each of those theological attributes as he sought to

develop a nonviolent philosophy of social change. He believed that this would eliminate racial and economic exploitation and establish peace in America and the world. (Cone 1987, p. 455-456) Their impact in the media was also different. Martin Luther King was seen as a promoter of love and nonviolence. In contrast to King, Malcolm was seen as a preacher of hate and violence. (Cone 2001, p. 181)

Malcolm X criticized King and his thoughts about nonviolence. As a member of the Nation of Islam, he adopted the value-system of white America by making everything black good and everything white evil. Unlike King, Malcolm viewed violence as a necessary response to criminal acts. Actually, he did not advocate violence, he advocated self-defence. He thought that the right of self-defence is the core element of humanity. So he could not understand how blacks could be regarded as human beings if they do not defend themselves. If the government does not protect blacks, they have the right to protect themselves. (Cone 2001, p. 179-180)

According to the history of black movements in the USA since the days of slavery, the struggle for emancipation and equality has followed two distinct ways: integration, the latter was about requiring separation, either returning to Africa or forging a distinct African-American society. Martin Luther King committed himself to the first, and Malcolm X chose the second. (Zolberg 2012, p. 1841) During his lifetime Martin Luther King received numerous citations and recognition for his accomplishments to better the lot of oppressed people. (Willhelm 1979, p. 3) Malcolm would challenge the dominant representations of African and African Americans via his speeches and writings. The representation of people, places, and events would figure into the political thought of Malcolm. (Tyner 2003, p. 171)

Conclusion

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X understood the African-American dilemma from different perspectives because of their different experiences. Each of them exhibited remarkable leadership skills, and they were visionary. Nevertheless, each was also a product of an era of remarkable mass struggles. (Carson 2005, p. 18) Both of them were thirty-nine when they were assassinated. They had different characteristics and point of views but they worked together for the same cause; the freedom and equality of black people. They both devoted themselves to the achievement of their goal. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X have become the two most recognizable African-American symbols of the twentieth century. Their speeches and ideologies made so many references to the global connections of colonialism, exploitation, oppression, and segregation.

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