

# *Reflections of Race and Protest in the USA*

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## Reflections of Race and Protest in the USA

By Charles McKelvey

Note: Charles McKelvey, a columnist for Radio Havana Cuba, English Program, has written seven columns reflecting on the protest in the United States provoked by the killing of George Floyd. We place the columns here in a single place, in chronological order.

“The need for racial reconciliation in the USA,” June 1, 2020;

“The infantile disorder of the Left,” June 3, 2020;

“The art of politics: Racial inequality and the police,” June 5, 2020;

“The legacy of Malcolm X,” June 8, 2020;

“The legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” June 10, 2020;

“Can we retake the project of Malcolm, Martin, and Jesse?” June 12, 2020;

“The possible and necessary road for the US Left.” June 15, 2020.

The need for racial reconciliation in the USA

June 1, 2020

The motto of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was “To redeem the soul of America.” Indeed, the mission of that organization of Southern black ministers, established in 1957 with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as president, was nothing less than the spiritual transformation of the nation, bringing it to the fulfillment of the promise of democracy proclaimed at its birth.

What came to be known as the Civil Rights Movement culminated in the Civil Rights Law of 1964 and the Voting Rights Law of 1965, which heralded significant gains with respect to the civil and political rights of African Americans and others. These gains were the result of the increased strength of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, due to black migration to the North and black urbanization in the South, and also as a consequence of the fact that its demands were for the most part favored by international dynamics. The gains were both in law and culture. Blatant discrimination in public accommodations became a thing of the past. Laws mandating equality could not eliminate racist attitudes that had been formed throughout the history of the nation. But a decisive turn was taken, and racism became more hidden and subtle.

However, long-standing goals of the African-American Movement remained unattained. Dr. King believed that the Civil Rights and Voting Rights laws meant that the struggle was moving to a new stage of focus on social and economic rights, such as food, housing, education, and health. King wrote of his disappointment that white allies of the Civil Rights Movement had disappeared, seeming to believe that the struggle was over, not recognizing that it was entering a new stage. King therefore moved from a strategy of forming what he called a “coalition of conscience,” which involved the support of whites who for moral reasons supported black demands; to the development of a coalition of all persons, regardless of race or ethnicity, with a common economic interest. To this end, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized the Poor People’s Campaign, demanding an “economic Bill of Rights,” including full employment, a guaranteed income, and the construction of low-income housing. The Poor People’s Campaign was constituted by blacks, whites, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans.

Malcolm X also formulated significant proposals, rooted in the Pan-Africanism and black nationalism of the urban North. Malcolm taught of the need for black control of the political, economic, and cultural institutions of the black community, as necessary for the social and economic development of the black community. This proposal has significant implications for law enforcement in the black community, which Malcolm argued ought to be under the control of the local black community. Local control of law enforcement and criminal justice institutions would empower the people, enabling the development of a police force that responds to the needs of the community.

At the same time, both Malcolm and Martin evolved considerably in the last year of their lives toward an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial critique of U.S. foreign policy, stimulated by trips to Africa, in the case of Malcolm, and opposition to the war in Vietnam, in the case of King. Both spoke of the significance of Third World revolutions.

But we have forgotten our prophetic voices. Jesse Jackson resurrected their ideas in his presidential campaigns of 1984 and 1988. However, in the final analysis, structural change is not forged by a new President. An alternative more just society is built by a political/educational mass organization that educates and organizes the peoples, with the goal of ultimately taking control of the legislative and executive branches of the federal government. From such a position of partial control of the state, a new

stage of struggle would begin, seeking to attain control, through constitutionally legitimate means, of other parts of the state, including the judicial branch, the military, and the deep state; and which seeks to reform as well the media and the educational system.

White society never listened to the prophetic voices of the American nation. It never arrived to understand that the message went far beyond black civil rights to proclaim the emancipation of the entire nation and the world. The white activist organizations today that are a legacy of the era of Malcolm and Martin do not begin to approach an understanding of their prophetic visions for the future of America.

But the black community also has forgotten the message of the prophets, at least that sector of the black community that somehow has presence in the media and as public intellectuals. There are important efforts in the community, like the efforts of George Floyd, the most recent victim of police violence, who worked as a community leader in a religious ministry. But more should be done to build black communities in accordance with the principle of local community control, including control of local law enforcement. And there should be a greater effort to work with other popular sectors in the forging of a political force that seeks to empower all of the people through the development of structures of popular education and through structural reform of the political processes of the nation; with the intention of taking political power as delegates of the people, in order to direct the state toward the protection of the social and economic rights of all citizens as well as toward cooperation with the nations of the world in the development of a more just, democratic, and sustainable world order. For the most part, spokespersons for the black community have focused on the subtle forms in which white racism endures, rather than the unfinished agenda of the African-American movement, proclaimed by Malcolm and Martin.

In political debates and street conflicts, we tend to focus on symptoms rather than structural and systemic sources. Such superficiality tends to lead toward greater polarization. But our task must be the formation of a societal consensus that is rooted in a comprehensive understanding and a commitment to social justice.

Much depends on the way that issues are framed. Statistics show that unarmed black men are killed disproportionately by police, but they also indicate that, in absolute numbers, more white men are killed. Could not this issue be framed in a less racially polarizing way, as the problem of an overly conflictive relation between the police and citizenry, which, to be acknowledged, especially has manifestations in black communities? Might this be related to Malcolm's proposal of local community control of institutions in the black community?

The killing of an unarmed citizen by a police officer is something that simply should not occur. But we all must accept responsibility for it. We should have built the structures that would have reduced its possibility. And if it were to occur, we at least would have confidence that the institutions that we have built together would respond to the matter with fairness and justice.

Justice cannot be demanded from the street, where division and conflict dominate the discourse, and where there are constant efforts to manipulate images, even when the demonstration is nonviolent. In the uprising in recent days, the protests became violent, and whites could be seen among the violent protesters. Some may have been present to express the outrage that they also feel. But are there whites in the streets seeking to foment division between blacks and whites, motivated by a superficial political perspective either of the Left or of the Right?

A just society must be constructed by the people, all of the people united, with courage, commitment, discipline, and sacrifice; in the long term, one day at a time. Non-violent demonstrations in the street have their place, but as a supplement to working together to build a just and democratic institutions.

It is easy to blame the white cop, whom an undemocratic and unjust system placed as a police officer in a community that he did not understand. But castigating him will not compensate for our own failures.

## The infantile disorder of the Left

June 3, 2020

In April 1920, two and one-half years after the taking of power by the Bolshevik Party, V.I. Lenin wrote a pamphlet entitled the “infantile disorder” of “‘Left-Wing’ Communism,” with “Left-Wing” in quotes, implying so-called Left Wing. Lenin wrote: “The surest way of discrediting a new political (and not only political) idea, and to cause it harm, is, under pretext of defending it, to reduce it to an absurdity. And every truth, if it be carried to excess, if it be exaggerated, if it be carried beyond the limits of actual application, can be reduced to an absurdity.” Lenin described the disorder as a radical extremism not based on participation in a real revolution, in the study of the history of revolutions, or in objective analysis of existing national and world conditions; and as an idealism that projects a future society that could not possibly develop from existing conditions.

Lenin focused on one manifestation of such extreme radicalism, namely, opposition to the formation of political parties. Invoking the slogan “down with leaders,” this extreme radicalism implied an opposition to leadership itself. Lenin maintained that to give up on political parties is to disarm the working class before the centralized power of the capitalist class. It would result in the demoralization and corruption of the people, causing them to lapse into individualism, a lack of integrity, and alternating moods of exhilaration and dejection. He maintained that in the face of the centralized power of the capitalist class, a disciplined, centralized yet democratic party of the working class is necessary. The party would be democratic, in that all members, in regular local, weekly meetings, would express their views with respect to concepts and strategies; but when the party leadership ultimately adopts a position, the members accept it as the position of the party. For example, if the leadership calls for a non-violent demonstration, the members ought to be disciplined in adhering to the non-violent strategy, and also ought to explain to non-party members the non-violent tactic of the party in the particular situation.

Lenin conceived of the party as a structure for the organization and education of the workers, including the disciplined study of history and current affairs, analyzed from a revolutionary perspective. In Lenin’s time, the tendency was to think of the party as composed of the most disciplined and committed of the workers. But as vanguard revolutionary parties were developed in practice in the Third World plus China, they were composed of the most committed and disciplined of the people, from all popular sectors, and not merely workers. These evolutionary changes developed in practice were introduced in an indirect form by Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, and more explicitly by Fidel Castro.

In his critique of extreme radicalism, Lenin maintained that one must master the art of politics in order to advance the revolution. He called on the communist parties in the various nations to participate in the elections for parliament, which would provide a platform for the education of the people, where the party leaders could reach beyond the party’s membership. The first goal should be to focus on winning the elections in favorable districts. In the context of the United States today, districts with high percentages of blacks and Latinos or with a tradition of progressive politics. Party leaders that are elected to Congress, although few in number, would demonstrate responsible leadership, educating the people. The few Congresspersons from the party would form alliances with the major parties with respect to particular issues and legislative projects, in order to demonstrate in practice the positions of the party on various issues, and to demonstrate to the people that the party understands the art of politics, and that it is sensitive to the concrete needs of the people, even as it demonstrates that it possesses mature historical consciousness and a vision of a different direction for the future of the nation and the international community. The Congresspersons would be spokespersons for the party, with emphasis on the education of the people, speaking in all of the places where the people are found, exhorting them to disciplined study and to a commitment to that possible and necessary more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

Among the Left in the United States, there exists a disdain for the forming of an alternative political party, much less a centralized vanguard political party that Lenin considered necessary for revolutionary transformation. In the first place, there is disdain for the taking of political power, believing that power corrupts; when in fact, in revolutionary situations, the taking of political power by the leaders of the people increases their commitment to the people, because, having challenged powerful interests, their survival depends on the continued support of the people. The Left in the United States sees its role as speaking truth to power, as at most applying pressure on power with respect to certain measures; not as taking power in the name of the people and governing in accordance with popular needs and interests. In the second place, there is an emphasis on a form of localism that does not see that local initiatives most flourish when supported and nurtured by national power.

The consequences of the immature consciousness of the Left are evident in the protests over the heartless killing of George Floyd. Spontaneous popular outrage is present, but leadership is not, the kind of leadership that a vanguard political party ought to provide. What has unfolded in recent days is a largely spontaneous, leaderless movement protesting police violence. The organizers of the protests are reporting that as a result of the decentralized character of the protests, no leader or organization has the capacity to tell the protesters what they ought to do, and some have arrived with the intention of looting and setting fires. There are reports of white activists, both of the Left and the Right, exploiting this lack of direction to incite violence in order to discredit the protest in pursuit of their own particular agenda.

Some of the young protesters, black and white, without leaders to guide them, believe that the violence will force the world to pay attention and address the problem of police violence. Against this naïve view of the political effectiveness of looting and burning, The New York Times opinion columnist Ross Douthat argues that the recent history of the United States shows that crime, unrest, and social disorder provoke a regressive reaction among many whites. He maintains that popular manifestations of violence in the 1960s led to the electoral victory of Richard Nixon over the liberal Democrat Hubert Humphrey in 1968; and that rioting in 2015 contributed to the election of Donald Trump. He writes that “most spasms of robbery or arson aren’t the revolution but often a ritual reaffirmation of the status quo — a period of misrule that doesn’t try to establish an alternative order or permanently change any hierarchies, as a true revolution would.”

The incapacity of the movement against police violence to contain the spontaneous popular impulse to violence reveals its weaknesses. There is an absence of true popular leadership, that is based in an understanding of the sources of the problems of the nation, explaining the necessary alternative direction to the people. As one demonstrator declared, “The people turn to violence because they do not know what else to do.” The people lack guidance and true leadership.

The extremist groups of the Right and the Left invariably will attempt to subvert a sustained process of progressive social change. But a unified movement with politically intelligent leadership would be more able to contain this threat. In the absence of centralized leadership, the movement is easily disrupted by those who want to destroy rather than to build.

We who are citizens of the United States need to reflect together on how to create that alternative vanguard political party that our nation needs.

The art of politics: Racial inequality and the police

June 5, 2020

The protests over the killing of George Floyd and against police violence have been sustained for days, and they have been increasingly non-violent, for the most part; and they have included confrontations, initiated by the police against non-violent protesters. White youth have been participating in significant

numbers, in solidarity with the black community. The protesters have received support from high places, including Congresspersons, governors, former presidents, and military chiefs. All of this is good; a positive sign for the future of the nation.

The looting and rioting that occurred principally in the first few days are not good, and they may have outweighed the good that was done by the sustained non-violent protests by significant numbers of people. A movement for any cause has to try to influence as many people as possible to join the cause, and in the context of U.S. political culture, significant numbers of people tend to turn to regressive policies and to a "law and order" approach in response to political violence and social disorder.

The movement leaders should attempt to sustain non-violent demonstrations and try to contain the spontaneous or incited looting, burning, destruction of property, and violence against persons. In addition, they should try to create conditions that avoid confrontations with police, because confrontations do not play well with much of the public, even when it is the police that are provoking the confrontation, physically moving against non-violent protestors. The more that non-violent and peaceful demonstrations can be established in practice, the more people will be moved to join in the marches.

But the causes of police reform and broader social change also would be strengthened if the issues related to race and the police were framed in a more politically intelligent manner, that is, in a form that would attract greater numbers of people to the cause, reducing the influence of those that are determined to preserve an unjust social order defined by social inequalities.

It is not so good to cast the problem as white cops killing blacks. This is a polarizing way to frame the issue, nearly automatically alienating a not insignificant number of people, because it touches the unresolved historic racial conflict and white resentment. It would be better to frame the issue as a problem of the militarization of the police, a problem that especially impacts the African-American community. This framing would indicate a concern for the unarmed white men that have been killed by police, which has occurred less proportionately than with respect to black men, but in absolute numbers, it is more or less as large. One would presume that in many cases these young white men were killed in an equally unjust and brutal manner, and by omitting mention of them, you imply that they do not matter. It is true that black life in the United States is defined by a constant tension with respect to the comportment of the police, regardless of class; and that the situation is different with respect to white society, where middle class whites can in some circumstances depend on the protection of the police, and lower class whites experience police abuse less intensely. Nonetheless, it would be a gesture of solidarity with white society to acknowledge its loss at the hands of the police.

The militarization of the police has occurred in recent decades as a consequence of the reduction of the state, and the turn away from social benefits and social programs. As the people are increasingly abandoned and alienated, it becomes more necessary for the police to take on the characteristics of an occupying military force, controlling the upsurge in criminal behavior that is bound to occur. By framing the issue as the militarization of the police, we avoid the polarizing language of race, even as we acknowledge that the problem especially impacts the black communities.

A politically intelligent approach also would recognize that the issue of the police is itself complex. Police reform has to be addressed with sensitivity, and it should include visible efforts to connect with the sectors of police administration who share a commitment to reform. The militarization of the police is not the fault of individual police men and women. Although the police have power in street confrontations, they are hardly powerful actors in the society. They are not to blame for the fact that the elite took the option of abandoning the people and militarizing the police. They are not to blame for the pervasive social inequalities in our society, yet they are sent to do police work in a difficult situation that is created by those inequalities.

Many people in the nation have an appreciation for the difficult situation in which the police are placed, and for that reason, they have a tendency to come to the defense of the police when accusations against

them are made. And if there is a clear case of bad police behavior, many will rush to the defense of the great majority of police officials. Given this political reality, political intelligence mandates sensitivity in advocating police reform.

At the same time, the changes that the nations needs are larger than police reform. The problematic comportment of many police, as well as the resistance of police and other local institutions to police reform, emerge from a larger context of social and political inequality. Police reform ought to be part of a larger proposal for comprehensive social change.

Here again, reframing the larger issue of racial inequality would be helpful. Liberals tend to focus on the ways in which racism endures in significant, albeit less blatant, forms since the civil rights gains of 1964 and 1965; and they emphasize the disproportionate poverty of blacks. Although such formulations are true, if given emphasis, they can imply an indifference to the poverty of whites, which weakens their political appeal.

Following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, Cuba took a different approach to the problem of the disproportionate extent to which black Cubans suffered from unemployment, poor housing, and lack of access to education and health. The Revolution affirmed, as an unambiguous constitutional and fundamental principle, the full equality of all, regardless of race or color. At the same time, it undertook structural changes addressing unemployment, education, poverty, and health for all, forging improvements in the conditions of all those in need. In fact, blacks were benefitting disproportionately from the process of change, since they had disproportionate need. But the process was not framed as a project to overcome racial inequality, but as a revolution that was empowering all the people and was seeking to protect the social and economic rights of all the people. The benefits of the process of change for blacks were recognized and known by all, but not emphasized.

The Cuban approach to racial inequality was more subtle, addressing racial inequality with a frame of reference that was not racially polarizing. In retrospect, observing the difference in the two societies with respect to race, the Cuban approach was clearly politically intelligent. It was formulated by Fidel consciously, in order to avoid a white backlash, which concerned him as a real possibility, because of widespread racist attitudes among whites. He was aware that many white peasants and workers were committed revolutionaries, except on the question of race. He needed their support to carry forward with the revolutionary project, so he understood that the situation had to be managed with political intelligence. He believed that taking practical steps in defense of the rights of all would gradually reduce racial prejudices, which, he understood, could not be eliminated by revolutionary decree. He believed that through equal educational opportunity, in which black and white children would be attending school together and involved in recreational activities together, racism would be overcome. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., shared this belief, but Dr. King was denied the possibility of guiding his people toward its realization.

With the sustained structural crisis of the world-system, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the nation, a popular rebellion with respect to police violence against blacks, and a polarizing and unstable personality in the White House, the United States is in a critical historical moment. Is the Left prepared? I fear not, but perhaps an alternative, more politically intelligent Left will suddenly come to the fore, lifted up by the political demands of the historic moment.

The legacy of Malcolm X

June 8, 2020

The sustained protests in the United States against police violence toward the black population has impacted the entire world, and there have been many expressions of solidarity with the black community.

In Cuba, the government, the press, and research centers have been for years careful observers of the United States, with a perspective of solidarity with the black movement and with popular movements of the Left. In accordance with this historic tendency, in the context of the protests in the United States, Cuban television rebroadcast on Friday the film, Malcolm X.

The award winning 1992 movie, directed by Spike Lee and starring Danzel Washington as Malcolm, begins with direct quotes from Malcolm's speeches. Malcolm declares, "I accuse the white man of being the greatest murderer on earth." "I am not an American," he says. "We have not experienced American democracy, only American hypocrisy." The film soon turns to reenactment of Malcolm's autobiographical account of the Klan murdering his father.

The film treats with accuracy the major turns in Malcolm's life: his youth life of crime and drugs; his conversion to the Nation of Islam in prison; his rapid rise in the Nation of Islam, on the basis of his exceptional capacity to find a discourse that struck a responsive chord among black folk in the urban North, a discourse that was both political and spiritual, and that was for the most part carried out in the street or in small rented public halls; his breaking with the Nation of Islam, and his subsequent travel to Mecca, which led him to declare that he no longer believes that all whites are evil; and the events leading to his assassination on February 21, 1965. In its reenactment of Malcolm's speeches, the film also accurately presents fundamental principles that Malcolm formulated, including: black ownership of the businesses of the black community; black control of the institutions of the black community; and the need to overcome economic, cultural, and political colonialism in the United States and the world.

Beyond Spike Lee's film, a deeper understanding of Malcolm's understanding can be found in his autobiography as well as in a collection of his speeches, edited by John Henrik Clarke and published in 1969. Those committed to social justice ought to study these texts, so that Malcolm's legacy will be present among us today.

As a young man, Malcolm lived a life of crime and drug addiction, guided by materialistic and individualistic values, in Boston and Harlem. He seems to have chosen this life as a consequence of his consciousness of the hypocrisy of white society, which had brutally murdered his father with impunity, had broken up his family, had place his mother in a mental institution, and had offered him limited opportunities for education and employment, even as it recognized his intelligence and capacities. In sharp contrast, the Nation of Islam provided Malcolm with social support for a disciplined and spiritual life, and for the possibility to develop his considerable leadership talents. The Nation also provided an alternative narrative on the United States and human history. The Nation of Islam was Malcolm's emancipation from a deprived life.

As Malcolm matured in understanding and political experience, the Nation of Islam itself began to shackle his evolution. The extent to which his intellectual and political development had been constrained became clear following his break with the Nation of Islam, which he had not initiated. The undesired and unanticipated break freed him to rethink a number of issues, at a time in which the nation was compelled by international events to adjust its domestic policy toward race and foreign policy with respect to the Third World. His break with the Nation of Islam was the foundation for his second emancipation.

The Nation of Islam, at that time, departed from orthodox doctrines of Islam. It taught that all whites were evil, and that blacks should live separately from whites. It embraced the unrealistic political proposal that blacks be conceded land in the national territory of the United States, where they would have self-government and independence.

Once freed from the need to internalize this conceptualization, Malcolm was able to reflect more fully on the possible relations between the black community and U.S. society. In numerous speeches in the last year of his life, he emphasized black nationalism, which he defined as black control of economic, cultural, political, and all institutions of the black community. He viewed black community control not only as fundamental for economic development, but also as providing a context for overcoming cultural colonialism. He saw Islam as important in this regard, because it taught discipline, self-control, and self-



respect.

He also was able to reimagine the relation of the U.S. black community to the world. During his second visit to Africa, he addressed the Organization of African Unity and met with heads of African states, seeking support for an African-American demand before the United Nations, accusing the United States of human rights violations. With deepened international consciousness, Malcolm emphasized the solidarity and spiritual connectedness of Afro-descendants with African peoples and nations. And he discerned a common international struggle by all the world's peoples of color against white colonialism in all of its forms.

In his rapid political maturation following his break with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm had evolved toward a mature black nationalism, seeking to promote the autonomous economic and cultural development of the black community. He envisioned an autonomous black community able to draw upon its own spiritual resources to overcome the sins of crime, drug addiction, alcoholism, and materialist individualism, which the white man had seeded in order to destroy the soul of the black community. Such an autonomous black community would necessarily have relations with the larger white society.

At the same time, in his last months, Malcolm expressed willingness to work with civil rights leaders that he had previously criticized in strong terms, and also to work with sectors of white society, insofar as they respected the black nationalist principle of black control of the institutions of the black community. His political evolution in the last year of his life established the basis for him to play an important leadership role in the African-American community, precisely at a time in which the nation and the world were moving toward a historic moment of social and political confrontation. He was 39 years of age when he was taken from us, and the consequences of that loss remain with us.

The black nationalist frame of reference formulated by Malcolm is fundamentally different from an anti-racist frame of reference. The black nationalism of Malcolm is the foundation for a comprehensive plan for community development and for an anti-imperialist foreign policy. In contrast, an anti-racist frame focuses on the persistence of racism in white society, and its tendency to lead to violence against blacks. The anti-racist frame is unidimensional, leaving aside the colonial context of the development of racist ideology, as well as the multifaceted anti-systemic movements forged by the colonized. Moreover, anti-racist discourse is often heard by whites as an accusation, thus provoking uncertainty, defensiveness, and resentment. In contrast, the black nationalism of Malcolm would make sense to many whites, because the notion of an oppressed people that wants to control its own community and destiny and to have relations with its continent of origin is consistent with their own experiences and struggles.

What is disseminated throughout the world in the context of the current protests is the analytically weak, less politically effective, and divisive anti-racist frame. Why? Because the anti-racist frame is in the interests of the U.S. power elite. Anti-racism diverts attention away from the principle of the full protection of the social and economic rights for all. Even when the anti-racism frame speaks of social and economic rights, it does not proclaim their universality; even less does it proclaim that blacks and whites should unify to attain universal social and economic rights. Nor does anti-racism focus on U.S. imperialist policies and the necessity in today's world of respecting the rights of the nations of the world. An anti-racist frame of reference is adaptable to the neocolonial world order and U.S. hegemony.

Although the anti-racist demands are what we hear outside the United States these days, there surely must be black nationalist voices in the black community. It cannot be that the legacy of Malcolm has been lost. Perhaps it is a question of others voices, speaking beyond an anti-racist frame, coming to the fore.

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## The legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

June 10, 2020

Slavery in the U.S. South functioned to provide cheap labor for the production of cotton; and the post-slavery system of low-waged tenant farming and sharecropping, supported by Jim Crow segregation, possessed the same economic functionality. However, during the course of the twentieth century, Jim Crow segregation became dysfunctional, because of its incompatibility with the U.S. role as the leading nation in a neocolonial world order.

The African-American movement discerned the objective possibilities created by the increasing dysfunctionality of Jim Crow. The movement originally developed in the urban North, where blacks had migrated in large numbers beginning in 1917, pulled by factory jobs created by World War I. In the 1920s, in addition to demanding civil and political rights, the movement advocated self-government for peoples of color in Africa, Asia, West Indies, and the United States. From the period of 1930 to 1955, the movement adopted a strategy of mass action, including demonstrations, rallies, and boycotts, in support of civil, political, economic, and social rights, seeking to pressure the federal government. In the 1940s, it attained presidential executive orders banning racial discrimination in defense industries, federal government employment, and the armed forces. At the same time, the movement used the U.S. legal system to challenge the constitutionality of state-mandated segregation in education in the South, which culminated in a 1954 Supreme Court decision ruling that segregation in schools violates the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Beginning in the 1930s, various factors were changing the economic and social landscape of the South. The Roosevelt administration had adopted several effective measures that were designed to promote the industrialization of the South, in response to the increasing impoverishment of the region. The industrialization of the South stimulated black rural-to-urban migration in the South, leading to a strengthening of black churches, black colleges, and black protest organizations.

The industrialization and urbanization of the South created the conditions that made possible the application of the mass action strategy, previously applied only in the North. In the period 1955 to 1965, mass action was carried out in various cities of the South, putting forth demands such as the desegregation of buses, lunch counters, and stores as well as the right to vote. The movement was led by college-educated black ministers and black students. Major events of the period included the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956, the student sit-in movement of 1960, the freedom rides of 1961, the Birmingham campaign of 1963, the March on Washington of 1963, Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, and the Selma voting rights campaign of 1965.

During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the black ministers leading the movement formed the Montgomery Improvement Association, electing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as its president. The son of a prominent minister in the Atlanta black community, the 26-year-old King had recently been named pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. He had graduated from Morehouse College, a prominent historically black college in Atlanta, at the age of 19. He had obtained a divinity degree at Crozier Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, where he studied the teachings of Gandhi and the social gospel theological tradition of American Protestantism; which was followed by a Ph.D. in religion from Boston University. During the mass meetings, King quickly established himself as an eloquent and powerful speaker, defending the righteousness of the boycott as fully in accordance with the principles of American democracy and Christianity.

The direct-action strategy of 1955 to 1965 attracted national and international media attention, and it compelled the federal government to take the side of the movement. The Civil Rights Law of 1964 prohibited racial discrimination in employment and in public accommodations. The Voting Rights Law of

1965 established effective measures for the protection of black voting rights. These laws were effective in creating a new reality defined by the protection of the political and civil rights of blacks. However, the laws did not address the protection of social and economic rights; they had no provision for the elimination of the social and economic inequalities that had been created by decades of discrimination.

For King, the historic moment meant that the civil rights movement was reaching a second stage, in which the focus would be on the attainment of social and economic rights. As early as 1963, King had become aware that white allies were not prepared to support the movement in this second stage. When it came to calls for equality in jobs, housing, and education, white allies disappeared.

In 1964, King wrote of a need for some form of compensation for blacks and lower-class whites, which he called a "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged." It would include preferential treatment in education and employment as reasonable compensation for past discrimination.

In 1967, King wrote that the lack of support by white allies had the consequence that the economic program passed by the Congress was inadequately funded. The failure of the federal government to support the second phase of the movement, he maintained, had given rise to black anger and despair, expressed in urban rebellions and in the "Black Power" slogan.

In the last year of his life, King developed an increasingly internationalist vision. In three key addresses in 1967, King declared his opposition to the Vietnam War. He maintained that U.S. policy in Vietnam had violated the principle of self-determination, and it reflects a new form of colonialism. The United States, he declared, is trying to roll back the clock and perpetuate white colonial domination of people of color. The United States has developed [he said] a "pattern of suppression" of the Third World; the United States is on "the wrong side of a world revolution." He declared: "These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression. . . . The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are rising up as never before. . . . We in the West must support these revolutions."

In 1968, King envisioned the Poor People's Campaign, a campaign of lobbying and aggressive non-violent action that would compel the federal government to take action with respect to jobs and income for all Americans. King sought to forge a coalition with poor whites demanding economic justice, focusing on common economic interests.

In the period 1964 to 1968, therefore, with his famous March on Washington "I Have a Dream" Speech in the past, Martin Luther King proposed a multiracial coalition to pressure the U.S. government to act in defense of the social and economic rights of all citizens, and to lead the nation's public discourse toward an anti-imperialist foreign policy. This was a realistic proposal, consistent with U.S. conditions and possibilities. Indeed, it was the necessary road for the nation, inasmuch as its global hegemony was no longer sustainable, and the world-system itself was entering a sustained crisis that made structural change necessary.

But the U.S. power elite was morally and intellectually unprepared for the historic moment. It rejected King's proposal. It adjusted to national and global realities by taking the nation and the world to the Right, beginning in 1980. The neoliberal turn has deepened the crisis of the world-system, and it has accelerated U.S. decline. These developments have made King's proposal more necessary and more urgent than ever.

Paul Simon was not entirely right. The words of the prophets are not always written on the subway walls. Sometimes they are articulated by leaders with an exceptional capacity to discern the necessary road, lifted up by the people to speak in their name. Have we forgotten the prophetic words of that powerful voice that we once called the "King of Love?"

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Can we retake the project of Malcolm, Martin, and Jesse?

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From 1930 to 1965, the African-American movement, through mass action campaigns in the North and South, compelled the federal government to take decisive action in defense of the political and civil rights of black citizens, culminating in the Civil Rights and Voting Rights laws of 1964 and 1965. These changes were fully consistent with the simultaneous transition of the world-system from colonialism to neocolonialism.

In the period of 1964 to 1968, Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., formulated a comprehensive project from an African-American perspective that challenged the neocolonial world order. The proposal included black control over the institutions of the black community, in order to promote the economic and social development of the community; a multiracial alliance that would pressure the government to act in defense of the social and economic rights of all citizens; and a foreign policy that set aside imperialism and respected the sovereignty of all nations. The proposals of Malcolm and Martin pointed to the necessary road from the perspective of the people; but they stood against the requirements of the neocolonial world order. They were ignored by the political establishment, just as the 1976 proposal of the Non-Aligned Movement for a New International Economic Order was ignored by the global powers.

In his presidential candidacies of 1984 and 1988, Jesse Jackson stood against the national turn to the Right and resurrected the project of Martin and Malcolm. He called for the formation of a Rainbow Coalition of whites, blacks, Latinos, indigenous persons, women, gays, workers, farmers, small businesspersons, and the poor; a coalition that would be the foundation for the empowerment of the people. In foreign policy, he called for an anti-imperialist policy based on the principle of North-South cooperation, which has been a long-standing demand of the governments of the Third World. Jackson was rejected by the political establishment, as incompatible with the established neocolonial world order; and by white society, which had a limited understanding of his proposal.

What political possibilities are emerging from economic, social, and political conditions today? These conditions include the sustained structural crisis of the world-system, a consequence of the fact that the world-system has reached and overextended the geographical and ecological limits of the earth, and therefore the conquest of new lands and people can no longer be the engine that drives the expansion of

the world-system, as it was for four centuries. And in addition, the colonized peoples of the earth no longer accept the role that the world-system has assigned to them, that of accommodating suppliers of natural resources and cheap labor. In the United States, this situation of global crisis is compounded by the U.S. fall from hegemony; it is no longer the dominant economic, financial, and political power that it once was. All of these dynamics demonstrate the unsustainability of the neocolonial world order.

Such conditions give rise to a resurgence of fascism and racism in the core zone, where the majority of the people materially benefitted from the colonial and neocolonial world-system, when it was functioning. The logic of fascism, which is of course a false logic, is strengthened when such conditions are combined with the elimination of restrictions for persons of color in the core zone. Especially vulnerable to the false logic of fascism are those that were not the most well off in material terms, but enjoyed certain material and status privileges in relation to people of color. They experience the changes in the world-system since the 1960s as a loss in their material standing of living and a loss of their privileges. They want to take back what they have lost. They are going to propose an aggressive nationalism in which the nation more aggressively protects its economic interests, and they are going to seek to restore lost privileges.

You cannot stop fascism and racism with anti-fascism or anti-racism; that approach leads only to endless conflict. Nor are you going to reverse rising fascism and racism with an appeal to the tenets of liberal democracy, which was the ideological guide of the world-system from the late eighteenth century to the 1970s. In turning to neoliberalism in 1980, liberalism demonstrated its incapacity to respond to the crisis of the world-system, and in the process, it lost legitimacy among the people.

To counter fascism and racism, you are going to have to point the way toward a possible next stage in the evolution of the world-system, one in which European and U.S. neocolonial domination of the world is overcome, and in which all citizens of the world have their social and economic rights protected. With such a projection for the future, you would attract citizens vulnerable to the false logic of fascism, in the context of their present anxiety and confusion.

The conditions of the time, therefore, call for a retaking of the project of Malcolm, Martin, and Jesse. But Jesse, we should understand, did not have it entirely right. A presidential candidacy is the road to political power only as a stimulus to a long-range project involving the development an alternative political structure that is dedicated to the organization and education of the people, with the intention of taking power in the long term.

Today, blacks have accused whites of racism, if not in practice, at least in toleration. But a more just society is not built through accusation. To the extent that the accusations are true, they are overcome through education. Not the formal misguided education of the universities nor the lame sensitivity training, but the learning that is forged in revolutionary practice, in which the people work together to construct a more just society.

The first step is the taking of political power, with politically intelligent leaders discerning the necessary road. It could be through the creation of people's councils (as in Lenin's Russia); or through a guerrilla struggle (as in Fidel's Cuba); or through the electoral processes of representative democracy (as in Allende's Chile). In the case of the United States today, the correct strategy is likely to be primarily that of Allende, with theoretical support from Lenin; a project that would have the unwavering support of that Caribbean island people that Fidel taught to be revolutionary. We should be humble enough to learn from those who have accomplished the taking of political power.

Many white youth are in rebellion today, in solidarity with blacks, a phenomenon that has moved the entire world. But rebellion is not revolution. Rebellion, or what Frantz Fanon called "revolutionary spontaneity," is the raw material from which a revolution is forged, by a politically intelligent and committed leadership that knows how to formulate an alternative narrative in a manifesto; to develop a platform that proposes a comprehensive plan of concrete steps in defense of the needs of the people and the dignity of the nation; and to call the people to disciplined study and political work. A manifesto and a platform based on the

teachings of the historic prophets of the African-American movement.

## The possible and necessary road for the US Left

By Charles McKelvey

June 15, 2020

We need first to understand that the United States of America is not a democratic society. It is a political-economic-ideological system with a democratic façade, but not a democratic substance. It has been so since its proclamation in 1776 and its constitutional founding in 1787. Its mechanisms for the control of the political system and the nation's ideology by an economic elite have evolved over these more than two centuries. At present, the principal mechanisms are the need for politicians to raise large sums of money to finance their political campaigns, the ownership of the media by large corporations, and the framing of public debate by elite financed think tanks. The various defects of the political process, including its tendency toward conflict and gridlock, the superficiality of public debate, and the divisions and confusions of the people, are consequences of these structures.

Next, we need to study modern human history, with humility. Other peoples in the past have confronted a situation in which the nation was controlled by an elite or their political representatives, which had abused the political, civil, social, and economic rights of the majority; in several situations, there emerged a small group of people, led by an exceptional leader, that guided the people in the taking of political power from the abusive elite. This occurred in Russia in 1917, Vietnam in 1945, China in 1949, Cuba in 1959, Chile in 1970, Nicaragua in 1979, Venezuela in 1999, Bolivia in 2006, and Ecuador in 2007.

Then, we have to ask, how did they accomplish the taking of power? Their methods and means were various, but they had certain components in common. First, their explicit goal was the taking of political power from the abusive elite. In order to accomplish this goal, they needed the support of the majority of the people; therefore, they were constantly speaking to the people. They formulated alternative narratives on the nation. They articulated a comprehensive plan of action or platform, announcing a variety of steps that they were going to carry out when they arrived to power. Their manifestos and platforms were effective in mobilizing the support of the majority. They understood the sources of the concerns of the people, and they never castigated them for their ideological backwardness, understanding that this was a consequence of decades and more of abuse.

In the case of the United States today, an alternative narrative has to include an understanding of modern human history. It needs to explain the role of conquest, colonialism and slavery and other forms of forced labor in promoting the economic development of Western Europe and the United States. It ought to explain the emergence of movements among the colonized throughout the world, giving rise to a transition to neocolonialism, involving unequal exchange and the superexploitation of labor in the context of new political norms. The narrative needs to explain the alternative posture toward the neocolonial world powers of China, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Vietnam, as a consequence of the continuation in political power of popular revolutions in those nations.

With respect to the history of the United States, the alternative narrative has to explain the factors that gave rise to the spectacular economic ascent of the United States from 1789 to 1965, including the specific connections of the U.S. economy to the unfolding global process of conquest, colonialism, slavery, neocolonialism, and imperialism. It ought to analyze and identify with the popular movements in the United States formed by artisans, farmers, workers, blacks, women, students, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican Americans from 1774 to 1972, all of which sought to make real the promise of democracy formulated at the founding of the nation; with special emphasis on the African-American Movement from 1930 to 1972, which lifted up exceptional leaders, such as Malcolm X and Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr., whose projections for the future of the nation were theoretically advanced and remain vibrant today.

The alternative narrative has to make clear that the established world order is not sustainable. The modern world-system has expanded economically on the basis of the conquest of new lands and peoples, and since the middle of the twentieth century, it has reached and overextended the geographical and ecological limits of the earth. All the world knows that human production threatens the ecological balance of the earth, as has been explained by the ecology movement since the 1960s.

Nor can the United States maintain its position of dominance. The fall of a dominant power relative to other powers is a normal tendency, as occurred with the previous dominant powers of the world-system, the Dutch and the British.

The alternative narrative has to be accompanied by a platform, a comprehensive plan of action. The foundation of the plan has to be the proposal for a strong state that acts to protect the political, civil, social, and economic rights of all the people, debunking the myth of the free market. The platform needs to make specific proposals with respect to the concerns of the people.

The platform has to be articulated with political intelligence. The goal is to persuade as many of the people as possible to commit themselves to the popular revolution. The platform and the discourse have to reach out to all sectors of the people, beyond the social base of the revolution, not by modifying positions, which gives the impression of insincerity; but by continually reflecting on the creation of more effective ways of communication, knowing that the proposals defend the objective interests of the great majority. Idealism, the making proposals that are not possible in the context of existing conditions, has to be avoided, as do exaggerations.

We have to think of the long term. We have to focus on the development of a political party or organization that has a permanent presence and is able to begin the necessary process of leading the people to popular revolution.

In the late 1960s, we were well positioned. We had hundreds of thousands of people in the streets, demanding an end to the Vietnam War, in a process that would culminate in the second great defeat of U.S. imperialism, after the Bay of Pigs. We had the political establishment on the ropes, their legitimacy questioned from all quarters. We should have been able to advance the movement from that point, through popular education and the building of mass organizations. But we failed to do so. We engaged in excesses of all kinds, and we lost credibility among our people.

The US Left has never recognized its historic error of failing to teach the people the necessary road. But it is not too late. The task is not insurmountable. We have truth and universal moral values on our side. We should be able to discredit and delegitimize the pretenders to leadership of our nation, demonstrating their profound historical ignorance and moral decadence. Let us return to that necessary task that we should have attended more systematically beginning five decades ago, leading our people toward that possible just and sustainable world that the peoples who form our humanity rightly demand.

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