

THE SEARCH FOR FREEDOM AT THE EDGE OF CHAOS REQUIRES REVOLUTION
Which way the U.S.A.?
Reflections on the Legacy of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X
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by

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The expansion of democracy in the United States has to a great extent been based on the freedom struggle of the African American people. This has been a political struggle based on the unfolding dynamics of an expanding and transforming economy. Black people have fought through the successive stages of plantation slavery, sharecropping tenancy, and urban life based on the industrial factory system. African American history has always been guided by the deep and burning desire of Black people to be free and has been politically expressed as a fight for human rights, civil rights, and for equal rights. In each case, for most of the 19th and 20th century, the fights were within the "order of capitalism." While at times these fights were very radical and militant, they were nevertheless fights to reform democracy based on the quantitative growth of industrial capitalism.

Today, we are no longer experiencing this "order of capitalism" but are moving to the edge of chaos. The edge of chaos is the end of this old order, and the beginning of the dynamic revolutionary process of transformation by which society will leap into a new order.

Martin Luther King spoke of a dream, an idealized version of a society that has never existed. His speech echoed the poetry of Langston Hughes "Let America be America again, the land it never has been yet, and yet must be, the land where everyone is free!" Malcolm X spoke of a nightmare, the horror of the barbarism experienced by the most exploited and oppressed Black people trapped in poverty. How can we reconcile these two contradictory views as we approach the edge of chaos? Furthermore, what can/should we do about it?

The forces driving the society to the edge of chaos are irreversible in that the old order has been permanently undermined. The new economic order is being constructed on the basis of computers, robots, satellite communications, and a host of other new technologies. The new technology is permanently replacing workers while increasing productivity, and therefore companies are "downsizing." All of this is occurring while most of the countries in places like Africa are fighting to industrialize for the first time.

The Black struggle is faced with a great historical challenge, a challenge to contribute to the first great revolutionary

transformation of the USA since the country was founded. It was founded and developed on the backs of African slaves, and it will only be truly liberated for the 21st century when the descendants of these slaves rise up in revolutionary struggle. The fight is to organize the potential political power of the propertyless and permanently unemployed class forces to lead in taking control of the state in order to reorganize the distribution of what we need to survive.

These general comments can be made clear by examining some of the empirical trends. It is important to point out that Black people remain the main barometer of how far the USA falls short of a democratic society based on "freedom, justice, and equality." This point can be made by examining the related issues of income and crime.

1. INCOME: The good news is that from 1967 to 1990 Black families making over \$50,000 increased from 7% to 15% of all Black families. On the other hand, those families making less than \$5,000 increased from 8% to 12%. Based on official government statistics the following racial comparison can be made for people living below the poverty level:

FAMILIES BELOW THE POVERTY LEVEL (PER CENT)

YEAR	WHITE	BLACK
1960	14.9%	38.8%
1970	8.0	29.5
1980	8.0	28.9
1990	8.1	29.3

Further, overall the distribution of income adds up to slippage in median family income, as each decade Blacks fall behind in real purchasing power:

MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME (1990 DOLLARS)

YEAR	WHITE	BLACK	DIFFERENCE
1970	\$34,481	\$21,151	\$13,330
1980	34,743	20,151	14,640
1990	36,915	21,423	15,492

Within these data there is polarization in the Black community. In 1967 over 75% of all Black families were two-parent families, but by 1990 this had declined to 47.8%. Over 70% of all Black poverty was concentrated in the single parent household. However, the top 20 percent of Black families earned \$61,213, only 64% of the top 20 percent of white families who earned \$95,042.

2. CRIME: In the largest cities Black mayors have been elected and they in turn have appointed Blacks as Chief of Police, e.g., this has been true in New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles. Most of this is the result of Black political power in the cities, and an aggressive use of local affirmative action programs. There were almost 100,000 new police jobs created from 1970 to 1990 and Black got over 40% of them. In 1970 there were about 23,796 Black police officers in the USA and by 1990 the number had grown to 63,855. The bad news is that they were hired to arrest Black people.

While Blacks were less than 15% of the urban population in the US they were more than 50% of all arrests, and over 60% of all arrests for robbery. On any given day over 1/3 of all Black men are under some kind of jurisdiction by the criminal justice system. Blacks constitute over 10% of the work force but only 3.2% of lawyers, although in 1960 Blacks were only 1.3% of all lawyers. Within a bad situation one can see some progress, and one can at least hypothesize that the progress came as a result of some kind of affirmative action program.

The juxtaposition of income and crime helps us to see that there is a class polarization in the Black community. On the one hand there is the Black middle class who has gained from affirmative action, is leading a comparatively comfortable life, but is still discriminated against as compared to its white counterpart. On the other hand at the opposite end of the spectrum is a growing impoverished class of people who barely have enough to survive. The middle class is increasingly being brought into the police forces to deal with the impoverished section, especially in the cities. So far, Black progress is for some, not for all!

An economic revolution is taking place. As the society is being reorganized, we are forced to confront the nightmare of barbarism Malcolm described if we have any hope in attaining the dream of a new society that King longed for. We have the economic base to satisfy all human needs, but we can't do it if the distribution of all goods and services has to be based on income derived from employment. We have to choose between a society in which everyone shares the wealth, or we have to witness the brutal polarization of the majority of the world (and every society) into abject poverty and eventually genocide. Up to this point in history such a choice has been made as a matter of morality or ideology, but now this choice is a matter of historical necessity.

However, morality does emerge at the heart of the decision. In the current motion of society there is a massive polarization taking place, and increasingly what is good and right and just will be one thing for the masses trapped in poverty and quite another for those protecting the few. It is important to remember that in the slave revolts great Black heroes like Nat Turner killed men, women, and children. When we discuss morality in historical context, who would tell Nat Turner to choose slavery as the lesser of two evils (rather than killing the oppressors)? But the Black middle class did argue against the Los Angeles rebellion, mainly on moral grounds.

The Black struggle is dividing into two, with the masses of poor people increasing becoming the vanguard of an emerging class struggle of people forced to survive. This means that the unity of the new American revolution will be a rainbow of the dispossessed, of the disinherited, of the wretched of the earth.

Moreover, this is a pattern likely to make politics inside of the USA resemble more and more what is happening throughout Africa. As we move closer and closer to the edge of chaos our revolutionary commitment must be translated into action. NOW IS THE TIME!