

Synthesis Paper

To be quite frank, the civil rights movement is often thought of in a far too simplistic manner. Due to the oversimplified and white-focused way that this period of history is taught, people tend to falsely perceive the movement as entirely unified and sharing a collective goal of the advancement of African American rights. While the latter is most definitely true, in all actuality the civil rights movement was characterized by a wide variety of philosophies. Nowhere can this be more clearly seen than within the staunch ideological differences between Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Both of these men were fervent advocates for the advancements of black people outside of their respective communities, however, they disagreed on whether integration was necessary to achieve this. They also disagreed, largely due to their religions, on whether violent resistance should play a role in the movement. While they both labeled the movement as a “revolution”, only Malcolm X’s version could truly fit this definition.

Reverend King and Malcolm X came from vastly different educational and religious backgrounds, yet shared a commonality in dedicating their life to the advancement of the black population. King was a highly educated and devoted Christian, that was raised by a Baptist minister whereas Malcolm X was a Muslim that never completed high school, and whose own father was maliciously killed by the Ku Klux Klan. Despite these very different upbringings, they ultimately were both black men in a Jim Crow America. This shared experience of injustice

is arguably the reason why they share a common goal of advancing the entirety of the black population. This can be seen within “Letter From a Birmingham Jail”, where King is faced with the criticism of advocating for civil rights outside of his home state of Georgia and stirring up trouble in Alabama. King is adamant in his refusal to “sit idly by” while witnessing racial injustice outside of his state of Georgia (1). This refusal is largely rooted in the notion that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (King 1). A similar sentiment of support for the advancement of the black community as a whole can be found in Malcolm X’s speech “Message to Grass Roots”. Malcolm X characterizes what he deems the “black revolution” as being “world-wide in scope and in nature”(9). Moreover, Malcolm X voices his enthusiastic support for the “black revolution” throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America (4). These aforementioned examples bear striking resemblance to one another, due to the scope of both King’s and Malcolm X’s advocacy outside of their local community. While ultimately King and Malcolm X differed vastly in approaches, they shared an identical goal of seeing progress made throughout the entirety of the black community.

To say the very least, the goal of advancing the black community is broad. This leaves an abundance of room for various approaches that greatly differ from each other to take shape. Firstly, one sector of the movement led by King believed that African Americans should strive for “equal rights” via the process of integration (King 4). Leaders such as King who support integration believed that black people are not inherently different than white people, and they can be successfully integrated into a predominantly white society. Nowhere can this more clearly be seen than King’s “I Had a Dream” speech. Throughout this speech, King expressed his desire for people to “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (2). This notion serves as a catalyst for King's belief that one day, “sons of former slaves and sons of a

former slave- owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood” (King 2). In other words, King believes that one's race is not a determining factor to their character, so this will cause both harmony and comradery to be formed across racial lines. Malcom X's view is much more radical and bombastic in nature. As opposed to advocating for integration Malcolm X advocated for what he deems “black nationalism (King 3)”. This idea is astronomically different than integration since “black nationalism” expresses a want for an “independent nation” that is separate from the Caucasian race (X 10, 9). This ideology is rooted within a very pessimistic view of white people, with Malcolm X describing them on multiple occasions as the “common enemy” for black people (5). Ultimately both integration and “black nationalism” seek to elevate the status of black people, but they have very different ideological bases (X 10).

Furthermore, another distinct difference between the philosophies of Malcom X and King can be found within their opinions regarding whether or not violence should play a role within the civil rights movement. King was notable for his steadfast commitment to nonviolence. His nonviolent approach can be specifically seen within his four steps to activism, “to determin[g] whether injustices are alive, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action” (King 1). Specifically, within the “self-purification” step, King describes hosting workshops where he instructed people to “accept blows without retaliating” (King 1, 2). Conversely, Malcolm X asserts that these tactics stem from Christianity and they are ultimately useless since a “turn-the-other-cheek revolution” is impossible (X 9). Moreover, Malcolm X argues for violent resistance on the basis of his religion by saying that “if someone puts his hand on you” then you should “send him to the cemetery”, and describing a “good religion” as “a eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, and a head for a head, and a life for a life (X 12)”. Outside of a religious context, Malcolm X further justifies violent resistance by drawing distinct parallels to

international violence committed by America. Malcolm X unapologetically asserts: “If violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad. If it’s wrong to be violent defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it’s wrong for America to draft us and make us violent abroad in defense of her” (X 8). This statement further cements the obvious difference in respect to Kings and Malcolm X’s overall acceptance of violence in the civil rights movement.

Lastly, while King described his movement as a “social revolution” and Malcolm X described his as a “black revolution”, only Malcolm X’s movement is truly a revolution (King 4; X 7). Not only are King’s four steps to activism nonviolent; they are fundamentally not radical. By the very presence of a “negotiation” step, King arguably possessed too much faith in a system that had allowed a continuity of racial injustice to form (King 1). Moreover, King specifically writes that the purpose of the “direct action” step, is to “establish such creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue” (1, 2). In more simplistic terms, this is King's way of bringing the opposition party back to the negotiation table seen in step two. While King argued that changing laws from the inside is wise since it avoids anarchy, Malcolm X was critical of this approach to a revolution. He even deemed it to be a “negro revolution” since it was “nonviolent” and centered around both compliance and obedience to the white man (X 7,9). This “ negro revolution” is inconsistent with Malcolm X’s statement that: “ Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality” (X 7,9). This statement regarding what a revolution is and what it entails is hard to discount, due to the historical connection between revolutions and land. Malcolm X argues that King’s movement cannot be classified as a revolution since it is far too focused on minor changes such as “desegregat[ing] lunch counter[s]” as opposed to focusing

on achieving “land” independence from their oppressors (X 9). This is a very fair critique to be had against King’s approaches, and how they are inconsistent with the ideas of a revolution.

Overall, even though both King and Malcolm were relentless advocates for the advancement of the black community, upon close analysis of their work, their philosophies were profusely different. While King supported the advancement of the African American community through integration and largely nonviolent tactics, Malcolm X wholeheartedly disagreed with these notions. Malcolm X, unlike King, saw black liberation as preferable to integration. He also saw violence as being a completely justifiable resistance tactic. In addition to this, Malcolm X’s ideas were much more radical in nature and resembled a revolution much closer than Martin Luther King’s did. This sharp difference in opinion is just one example that points to the myriad of diverse ideologies present within the civil rights movement. The focus on less radical ideas such as King’s in the context of our education system serves to make the history of the civil rights movement more digestible for white people. Ultimately, this does nothing but foster a lackluster understanding of the civil rights movement in the general public, and filter out the more radical ideas from the pages of history books.