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Malcolm X: Dignity, Self-Defense, and the Limits of Moral Appeal

Malcolm X is often positioned as the opposite of Martin Luther King Jr., as if the civil rights movement presented a simple choice between nonviolence and violence. This framing obscures what Malcolm X was actually responding to. His political philosophy did not begin as a rejection of civil disobedience, but as a rejection of the assumption that American law, morality, or goodwill could be relied upon to protect Black lives.

Where King treated civil disobedience as a tool to force the state to confront its own hypocrisy, Malcolm X questioned whether the state was ever meaningfully committed to justice in the first place. His skepticism was grounded in lived reality. By the 1950s and early 1960s, legal victories had accumulated without corresponding safety. Courts issued rulings, but police violence, economic exclusion, and racial terror continued unchecked.

Malcolm X's thinking developed in this gap between law and enforcement. He argued that a system that claims neutrality while tolerating violence is not broken but functioning as designed. In such a system, asking the oppressed to remain nonviolent while the state fails to restrain its own violence becomes a moral demand placed only on one side.

This is where Malcolm X departed sharply from dominant narratives of civil disobedience. He rejected the idea that suffering was inherently redemptive. Enduring violence without response, he argued, did not automatically expose injustice; it often normalized it.

Malcolm X did not advocate indiscriminate violence or chaos. His most famous phrase, "by any means necessary," is frequently stripped of context. What he consistently argued for was self-defense, dignity, and autonomy. If the law would not protect Black communities, then those communities had the right to protect themselves.

In this sense, Malcolm X's approach sits at the boundary between civil disobedience and rebellion. He was less interested in breaking specific laws to expose injustice than in challenging the legitimacy of a system that demanded obedience while offering no protection.

Importantly, Malcolm X's position evolved. After leaving the Nation of Islam and traveling internationally, he increasingly framed the struggle for Black liberation as a human rights issue rather than a civil rights issue.

In making this shift, Malcolm X drew a sharp distinction between civil rights and human rights. Civil rights depend on recognition and enforcement by a particular government, while human rights

claim legitimacy beyond national law, asserting that a state can be acting legally and still be fundamentally unjust.

This evolution reflected a deeper skepticism about American legal remedies. Human rights claims bypass domestic courts and appeal to global norms, implicitly acknowledging that national law may be structurally incapable of delivering justice.

Placed alongside King, Malcolm X reveals the conditional nature of civil disobedience. King's method assumed that creating visible injustice would trigger institutional response. Malcolm X highlighted what happens when that response does not come.

Understanding Malcolm X does not require choosing his approach over King's. It requires recognizing that both emerged from the same failures of law, but responded to different conditions within that failure.

Selected Sources

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