

Racism and Segregation in America, Past and Present: Malcolm X in Ferguson

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Global Research, September 09, 2014

[Socialist Project](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Protests, riots and police violence in Ferguson (a suburb of St. Louis), Missouri, last August have laid bare “America’s racial rift” says The Guardian Weekly.[1] Mainstream opinion-makers have tended to interpret the Michael Brown case and the protests that followed his death in terms of police brutality, racial tensions, and legal responsibility (of the shooting of unarmed 18-year-old African American, [Michael Brown](#)), showing these events as specific to American society. Their significance is however much broader.

To capture this broader picture, one has to adopt a method of thinking which does not view Ferguson only empirically. Thinking these events as constituent parts, or outcomes, of a social and economic system is a necessary undertaking to those committed to social justice and emancipation. Such method of thought makes Malcolm X a contemporary of our problems even though his life and work were those of a Black nationalist of the 1960s.



Clouds of smoke rise from burning buildings in northeastern Washington, D.C. on April 5, 1968 after riots and demonstrations erupted following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King on April 4 in Memphis. [Photo: Associated Press, source: hypervocal.com/news/2014/american-riot]

Segregation is a key fact of the racial rift in St. Louis. Reports in the press have underlined that the relations of mistrust and hatred between the police and the local Black community were imbedded in the segregated geography of the city. Vickie Place – where the family of Michael Brown occupies one of these single-family homes built in the 1950s – doesn’t look different of the rest of suburbia. But it has a specific place in the social relations and the geography of the city. To the predominantly white police officers who patrol it, Vickie Place “appears to be a forbidding, alien, territory. A land of the other. It might as well be Falluja”, say *Observer* reporters Rory Carroll and Jon Swaine.[2]

Past and Present Segregation

Hence the question: why? Because of “white flight” out of the neighborhood. It has transformed it from a majority-white into a majority-black district in the space of the last decade. Moreover, this land of the “other” is the byproduct of the class divide within the city: Delmar Boulevard has become in the context of deepening class inequalities in St. Louis the dividing line between the north of the city, poor, working-class and Black (98 per cent Black, median income of \$18,000), and the middle-class south (73 per cent white, median income of \$50,000).[3]

Moreover, the military buildup that we have witnessed in face of the protests in Ferguson shares something colonial about it: white police officers using military might – armored vehicles, sniper nests, tear gas, state of emergency declared with a curfew between midnight and 5am – to cow black crowds of protesters. Bengali *Subaltern Studies* historian Ranajit Guha expressed the relation to authority and power in colonial India between the British rulers and the indigenous masses as being “dominance without hegemony”: a domination based on sheer force and coercion, with no hint of legitimacy whatsoever. This is all the more reinforced by the race-class divide of the city. In his classic 1961 study, [The Wretched of the Earth](#), Frantz Fanon underlined that the colonial city was profoundly Manichean: the natives locked up in overcrowded slums facing the modern European district, military barracks and police offices providing the demarcation between both.[\[4\]](#)

Perhaps, but St. Louis is not Algiers. The difference lies in the civil-rights movement of the 1960s which has abolished the Jim Crow system that was synonymous with racial barriers instituted through law and administrative practices of the state apparatus. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 established *formal* equality between citizens, putting an end to institutionalized racial discrimination in southern American states, in the same manner that independence has put an end to colonialism between 1945 and the seventies. Were we to use the words of academia, we could say that Ferguson is a *postcolonial* conflict, that is a conflict shaped by the legacy of a colonial and racist past that is now entangled in the inner workings of capitalist society.

How can Ferguson be put in historical perspective? One possible way to do so is to imagine a scenario grounded in historical facts: Malcolm X (1925-1965) in face of the protests and riots in Ferguson. Such method *seems* at first hand profoundly fictional and irrespective of the fundamentals in history. In fact, such a procedure allows *comparison* – undeniably a central operation in social sciences.[\[5\]](#)

The Capitalist Roots of Racism: Then and Now

Malcolm X's thought and action represent a radical path within the Black liberation movement of the fifties and sixties when the pillars of the oppression of African-Americans were shaken through mass political actions.[\[6\]](#) Such mass movement is clearly not part of the picture today in the United States even if radical politics, as the Occupy movement testifies, registered new developments lately. But, in both cases, then as now, oppression remains the predominant feature of the African-American condition. Putting in relation Malcolm X (1964-65) with Ferguson (2014) thus allows one to bypass the lack of a mass Black liberation movement today in the understanding of the August events in St. Louis.

In that sense, three points can be stressed. First, segregation today – the key issue embedded in the Ferguson events – shares a postcolonial character, in the same manner that it was depicted by Malcolm X in 1964:

“A segregated district or community is a community in which people live, but outsiders control the politics and the economy of that community. They never refer to the white section as a segregated community. It's the all-Negro section that's a segregated community. Why? The white man controls his own school, his own bank, his own economy, his own politics, his own everything, his own community; but he also controls yours. When you're under someone else's control, you're segregated. They'll always give you the lowest or the worst that there is to offer, but it doesn't mean you're segregated just because you have your own. You've got to control your own. Just like the white man has control of

his, you need to control yours.”[\[7\]](#)

In his “[Ballot or bullet](#)” speech he underlines that segregation does not only designate race barriers and discrimination inherited from slavery and its cultural legacy within American society. Segregation means above all dispossession and exploitation. It is shown in this speech in the combined form which was taking shape in the urban centers of the industrial North at the beginning of the sixties. In these cities, segregation in 1964 had the same roots as today: a legacy of racism and discrimination, as well as the workings of capitalist market economics, especially in housing, real estate and education.

Hence, then as now, the fundamental issue in the condition of Blacks is not really formal equal rights for all citizens. It is the second point. Equal rights can only be a step forward: the end of racist discrimination in housing, in education, in jobs, in relations between police officers and local communities, etc., would undoubtedly improve the condition of African-Americans and, more broadly, would raise American society as a whole, in the same manner that the *Civil Rights Act* did in 1964. But such formal equal rights could not serve as a measure for the emancipation of African-Americans. In his radical commitment to speak the truth in the name of the voiceless, Malcolm X was calling such equality “tokenism”.

“Kennedy’s new approach was pretending to go along with us in our struggle for civil rights and different other forms of rights. (...) So in my conclusion I would like to point out that the approach that was used by the administration right up until today was designed skilfully to make it appear they were trying to solve the problem when they actually weren’t. They would deal with the conditions, but never the cause. They only gave us tokenism. Tokenism benefits only a few. It never benefits the masses, and the masses are the ones who have the problem, not the few. (...) The masses of our people still have bad housing, bad schooling and inferior jobs, jobs that don’t compensate with sufficient salaries for them to carry on their life in this world. So that the problem for the masses has gone absolutely unsolved. The only ones for whom it has been solved are people like Whitney Young, who is supposed to be placed in the cabinet, so the rumor says. He’ll be the first black cabinet man. And that answers where he’s at. And others have been given jobs, like Carl Rowan, who was put over the USIA, and is very skillfully trying to make Africans think that the problem of black men in this country is all solved.”[\[8\]](#)

Today, it would simply be wrong to view the African-Americans as a marginalized group of American society. Whether one looks at the field of American culture, the state apparatus or the corporate world, African-Americans can be noticed, occupying key positions and playing key roles. Paradoxically, statistics show that the condition of the mass of African-Americans bear the marks of discrimination and oppression. Police brutality such as the Michael Brown case – or Rodney King (1992) – are part of a wider picture of lower life expectancy, unequal access to higher education and culture, day-to-day discrimination in housing and employment, not to mention discrimination in the law courts and prisons of the country.

Therefore, when Malcolm X asserts in 1964 that civil rights do not solve “the problem for the masses”, he offers an outlook that seems contemporary to us – third point. Taking the condition of the masses as one’s starting point leads to radically different conclusions and strategies in politics. Indeed, the logical conclusion of such a stand is to embed the anti-racist struggle into socialist politics. Malcolm X’s sympathy for socialism is unquestionable during his last year (1964-65):

“As was stated earlier, all of the countries that are emerging today from under the shackles of colonialism are turning toward socialism. I don’t think it’s an accident. Most of the countries that were colonial powers were capitalist countries, and the last bulwark of capitalism today is America. It’s impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism. You can’t have capitalism without racism.”[\[9\]](#)

If many liberal voices have condemned the killing of Michael Brown and the repression of protesters in Ferguson, criticized biased media coverage and pleaded in favor of reforms in the police departments throughout the country, no voice has been heard conveying such a systematic condemnation of the social relations that breed violence, hatred and oppression. Such a difference explains why massive riots and protests in our epoch haven’t led – as in the sixties – to political shifts and progress for the subaltern classes. At last, “You can’t have capitalism without racism” underlines to what extent the events in Ferguson – as well as Malcolm X – have global echoes today: the London riots in 2011 and the 2005 riots in the poor suburbs of France unquestionably demonstrate it. •

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Notes

[1.](#) Rory Carroll and Jon Swaine, “America’s racial rift laid bare”, *The Guardian Weekly*, 22-28 August 2014, front cover.

[2.](#) Idem.

[3.](#) Idem. Figures quoted in *The Guardian Weekly*, 22-28 August 2014, p. 12.

[4.](#) Frantz Fanon writes in 1961 (Grove Press, 1993, p. 37-39): “The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. It is probably unnecessary to recall the existence of native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans; in the same way we need not recall apartheid in South Africa. Yet, if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies. (...) The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. (...) The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous. The settlers’ town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. (...) The settler’s town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settler’s town is a town of white people, of foreigners. The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs. The look that the native turns on the settler’s town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession – all manner of possession: to sit at the settler’s table, to sleep in the settler’s

bed, with his wife if possible. The colonized man is an envious man.”

5. The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm argued in a published interview in 2000: “In my view, comparison is at the heart of history. The problem is illuminated when we confront a phenomenon that we study with other situations in which it could have been raised.” Eric Hobsbawm, *L'historien engagé*, Paris, Editions de l'Aube, 2000, p. 29. Translated from French.

6. Malcolm Little was born in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 19, 1925. A dropout from school at 15, he was convicted of burglary and sent to prison in his twenty-first year. There he was converted to the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims). When he left prison in 1952, he dedicated himself to building the Black Muslims, and adopted the name Malcolm X. He withdrew from that movement in March 1964, organizing first the Muslim Mosque, Inc., and later the non-religious Organization of Afro-American Unity. He made two trips to Africa and the Middle East during 1964. After his return to the United States, he was assassinated in New York on February 21, 1965. See his own story of his life in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* published in 1965.

7. Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet”, speech delivered in Cleveland on April 3, 1964, at Cory Methodist Church where the Congress of Racial Equality organized a symposium entitled “The Negro Revolt – What Comes Next?”. Speech transcribed in *Malcolm X Speaks*, New York, Pathfinder, 1989, p. 23-44. The excerpt above is taken from p. 42-43.

8. Malcolm X, “After the Bombing”, *Malcolm X Speaks*, New York, Pathfinder, 1989, p. 173-174. Speech delivered on February 14, 1965, at a meeting in Detroit sponsored by the Afro-American Broadcasting Company, right after the bombing of his home in Queens at 2:30 am.

9. Malcolm X, “The Harlem ‘Hate-Gang’ Scare”, *Malcolm X Speaks*, New York, Pathfinder, 1989, p. 68-69. Answer to a question during the question period at the Militant Labor Forum held in New York on May 29, 1964.

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