

Politics and identity



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Black civil right movements are considered as one of the most important phenomena of American history of the 20th century. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are considered as the most celebrated leaders of these movements. Despite the fact that their approaches to the issue differ from each other's, both of these leaders made a significant contribution to Afro-American civil right movements. In this paper, I will analyze M. L King's and Malcolm X's approaches to the problem of " being black" in America. My main purpose is to explore the similarities and differences in how both authors identify the category of " blackness" and to critically discuss the political solutions that they offer. The construction of the category of " blackness", or the answer to the question " what is being Negro in America like?" should be considered as the crucial point in both authors' works. In " The Dilemma of Negro Americans" King depicts two main factors - " being scarred by a history of slavery" and " family disorganization" (M. L. King, 1967, p. 103) - that affect the Negro life in the United States. I completely agree with King's point of view concerning these factors. In my opinion, having been a slave in the past and the lack of opportunity to establish a strong family has served as the main obstacle to forming the " black solidarity" in the United States. Through history these factors have impeded mobilization of black-American groups to struggle and weakened the power of the black movements. Moreover, they have served as the main source of the differences between Negro Americans and other immigrant groups. King rightly states that: Negroes were brought here in chains long before the Irish decided voluntarily to leave Ireland or the Italians thought of leaving Italy. [...] Other immigrant groups came to America with language and economic handicaps, but not with the stigma of color. Above all no other ethnic group

has been a slave on American soil and no other ethnic group has had its family structure deliberately torn apart (M. L. King, 1967, p. 103) Contrary to King, Malcolm X expresses his ideas on the basis of religious beliefs rather than historical facts. He argues that the main source of suffering of black Americans is the white man. In Malcolm X's words - "there has never in history been a more vicious and blood thirsty wolf than the American white man" (Malcolm X, 1963). He tries to connect suffering with lack of knowledge concerning the history of Negro Americans and unawareness about the "truth", or in his words - religion of Islam. According to Malcolm X, understanding the truth or accepting Islam will help Negroes to be free. All these ideas can be considered as an effort to create a new identity - to form a new, completely different identity of the "blackness" that differs from the "whiteness". In my opinion, maybe it was easy to convince ordinary black people by using such ideas in peak time of black movements in United States. But I think to force all black Americans to accept Islam is not possible. Furthermore, such approach weakens the power of struggle of the black movements by distancing Negroes who do not believe in Islam, but have the same grievances. Therefore Malcolm X's arguments based on the religion of Islam are not as strong as King's approach to the issue, which relies upon historical and social facts. Another approach to the construction of the category of "blackness" used by both authors is distinguish or to juxtapose "blackness" and "whiteness". However, while King shows the consequences of blackness or "color shock" as the "traumatic emotional burden" (M. L. King, 1967, p. 109) for each Negro in America, Malcolm X considers blackness as the "foundation or the basis of all colors" (Malcolm X, 1962). Again King's arguments are more persuasive than the arguments of

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Malcolm X. Malcolm X discusses at great length about the sources of blackness and whiteness and tries to establish the superiority of being black on the bases of religious beliefs or legends. His explanation is not based on real social facts, but on religious beliefs, which are also disputable or not acceptable for everyone. Furthermore, I think that the argument that "blackness is foundation for all colors" or it is superior is contrary to the general argument of the civil right movements - the every person is equal regardless of the skin color. Contrary to Malcolm X, M. L. King clearly shows what means to have black skin in America: If [...] one is rejected because of his color, he must face the anguishing fact that he is being rejected because of something in himself that cannot be changed. All prejudices is evil, but the prejudice that rejects a man because of the color of his skin is the most despicable expression of man's inhumanity to man ((M. L. King, 1967, p. 110). In my opinion, the fact that King relies upon the factors, which reflect the real situation or the social truth, makes his arguments stronger and more realistic. The biggest differences occur in the political solutions that both authors offer. The main point of the political solution suggested by Malcolm X is "complete separation on some land" that Negroes can call their own land (Malcolm X, 1963). Another permanent solution of the problem suggested by Malcolm X is sending back all black-Americans to their homeland and provision of the transportation plus other necessary means by the government for the start of a new life in the new homeland (Malcolm X, 1963). He does not believe that whites and blacks can live peacefully while they are together. I cannot agree with these suggestions, because, first, I simply do not believe that this suggestion is realistic. Secondly, in my opinion, these suggestions do not go along with the other argument of

Malcolm X about total acceptance of Islam by the whole black-American community. Let's assume that a seventh of American territory is given to blacks. According to Malcolm X, this territory will be only for those blacks who understand the "truth" or believe in Islam. But, what will happen with other Negroes, who are not Muslims? Thus this solution does not satisfy all black-Americans grievances. Contrary to Malcolm X, King's suggestions are based on the integration of blacks into American society and cooperation between black and white Americans. He outlines four important steps toward gaining equal civil rights. As a first step, King rightly states "development of a rugged sense of somebodyness" (M. L. King, 1967, p. 122) I also think that it is a very crucial step for Negroes to refuse to be ashamed of being black. "Group identification" is shown as the second step in this suggestion (M. L. King, 1967, p. 123). Contrarily to Malcolm X, for King it does not mean isolation and separation, moreover he urges Negroes for complete participation in the life of the nation. The third step - "to make full and constructive use of the freedom Negroes already possess" (M. L. King, 1967, p. 126) - should also be considered as an effective suggestion. King proposes "unification of Negroes around powerful programs" (M. L. King, 1967, p. 128) for the eradication of the last vestiges of racial injustice as the fourth step of his suggestion to solve problem. All these steps, together should be considered as a very efficient strategy, which has a logical sequence of certain steps directed towards to surpassing real social obstacles in the eradication of the suffering of Afro-Americans. In general, while King suggests the non-violent mechanism to achieve his goals and supports integration and cooperation, Malcolm X tends to support more violent methods and he is in favor of separation and isolation. Malcolm X's ideas are

mostly based on morality and therefore these ideas may be considered as easily understandable and acceptable for big masses of Afro-Americans. But, I think that King's approaches are more realistic and humanistic for the eradication of suffering of black Americans. The further development and the achievements of civil right movements have proved the reality of these arguments. In conclusion, I want again to emphasize that regardless of the differences between two approaches, both King and Malcolm X made a great contribution to the black civil right movements in the United States.