Getting off the Victim's Back: A Critical Look at Modern Liberalism

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate modern liberalism by using radical expressions of protest against the position of blacks in American society as a paradigm. As examples of radical protest, I primarily use Nat Turner’s vision, but also incorporate the ideas of John Brown, Malcolm X, and Black Power, while I use the modern civil rights movement as an example of modern liberalism. Using these examples, I make the argument that unlike modern liberalism, which justifies an oppressive global political and economic system, radical protest movements epitomized by Nat Turner’s revolt refused to settle for material concessions at the expense of liberation.

In investigating both radical protest movements as well as the civil rights movement, I rely heavily on primary source analyses. These include written documents and speeches by leaders of the various movements, as well as newspaper articles by contemporaries of the movements. Secondary sources were used to gain further information regarding the context as well as different interpretations of the ideologies of the movements. After analyzing several primary sources I come to the conclusion that radical protest, epitomized by Nat Turner, is fundamentally different than the ideology of civil rights and modern liberalism. Radical protest involves complete, rather than ideological or abstract, love of the victims of our society. This calls for a denial of personal interest and a rejection of the dominant political economy.

Key Terms: Radical Protest, Civil Rights, Liberalism, Victims

Introduction

In his 1831 revolt in Southampton, Virginia, Nat Turner dramatically rejected the status quo. Turner took a position which opposed slavery as well as the prevailing political economy in the United States. By adopting this radical position, one that sought to attack the problem of dehumanization at its roots, Turner refused to settle for material concessions at the expense of liberation. Unlike the personal and individual conception of salvation of the civil rights movement, which sought material wealth by entering into and thus justifying the political economy, Nat Turner envisioned the world configured in such a way as to promote the humanity of all people. Because victimization of the people of the global South as well as the poor within the United States calls for a radical protest, we are prompted to return to Nat Turner’s vision in order to critique today’s response, modern liberalism.
When the United States sought to universalize capitalism in the mid-twentieth century, a new type of liberalism arose. Epitomized by the civil rights movement, this liberalism took a profit driven political economy with great victimizing capabilities and sought to make it acceptable. Liberalism is important to revisit now, as the Barack Obama administration begins its course amidst much hope. I will look at the ideology of modern liberalism, primarily by analyzing the civil rights movement, through the lens of a more radical notion of liberation that has been the undercurrent for protest movements since slaves were brought to the New World. I will specifically make use of Nat Turner’s vision, which prompted his revolt in 1831, as one of the representatives of the more radical current of black protest and its continuation in Malcolm X’s political thought.

**Broad Historical Context & Current Trends**

An entrenched capitalist economy and individualism have shaped modern liberalism. While the emergence of a money economy after the demise of feudalism in the 11th and 12th centuries began the process of individualization, developments within Europe starting around the 15th century served as a catalyst for a capitalist civilization. The Catholic Church had traditionally condemned usury, but by the 15th century, as historian Paul Kennedy acknowledges, “the basic fact was that there existed no uniform authority in Europe which could halt this or that commercial development.”

Without the Church as a governing body, a group of political elites and leaders opened their communities up to Jewish traders and other peoples not regulated by the Catholic Church, and these people brought their business expertise with them.

Between 1450 and 1600, “gunpowder empires” were established in Europe. A single country failed to gain dominance, leading to several centers of military and economic strength. This lack of a centralized power within Europe engendered what Kennedy refers to as “a primitive form of arms race among the city-states and then the larger kingdoms.”

This resulted in many countries adopting a policy of pursuing wealth, causing Europe as a whole to become powerful. But no one country established hegemony over the others.

As militarism and capitalism were set into motion as the imminent strongholds of a political economy stretching throughout the Western world, the stage was set for a new ideology which allowed for profit and wealth to take precedence over people. A relationship dictated by dominance and exploitation eclipsed the previous feudalistic system, and an individualism allowed for a new view of people as a means to wealth; their labor began to be seen as another commodity. Because the Catholic Church did not accept this new paradigm, there needed to be changes within the religious structure in order to sanction it and allow capitalism and the individual to flourish. This came through the European Reformation.

The Reformation and the subsequent Enlightenment and French Revolution created an unfulfilled optimism about the individual. The theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez describes this post-Renaissance individual as one whose ultimate horizon is “the satisfaction of its own interests in the enjoyment of earthly goods.”

Private property became the means to demonstrate how satisfied one really was, especially in the nascent Calvinistic theology, and Christians and non-Christians began to desire the same material reality of private property. People no longer organized society according to the common good, but rather according to individual decisions.
based on individual desires and usually motivated by amassing wealth. This changing world, dominated by wealth, formed the basis for Nat Turner’s response.

While this individualized world remains in place today, further complications have arisen. In Nat Turner’s context the economy was changing from an agrarian to industrial based economy, but in the current context the nature and scope of world capitalism is changing. Since the decline of socialism, an alternative to capitalism no longer exists, thus creating what the economist Franz Hinkelammert describes as “a future in which there is no longer any history or essential conflict, in which the First World has found its peace and the Third World is no longer relevant.” Without any significant challenges after the decline of socialism, capitalism can now dictate its own direction and function as it pleases, with the only limits being liberalism’s suggestions of cosmetic changes. This severely weakens the poor, as they become subservient to an unchallenged profit economy.

Advances in technology have also produced a transformation in the political economy. After the decline of slavery, the Third World replaced it, as the First World exploited the Third World’s population through cheap labor. However, technological advances have minimized the need for labor, making the Third World population less relevant, even as an exploited labor force. Hinkelammert shows that because the population of the Third World is increasing at a high rate and is no longer needed, it is now seen as a threat rather than as an opportunity for exploitation.

The United States has exemplified this view in its involvement in Iraq, where, although it is difficult to track figures for civilian deaths, estimates of the number of Iraqis killed from war-related causes range between 100,000 and one million. Since the war began, much evidence has been released that the United States staged the war on false premises. A July 29, 2008 report issued by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that investigates the use of intelligence in the March 2003 invasion of Iraq supports this. It concluded that the Bush administration grossly overstated its evidence to build a public case for war against Iraq. According to a New York Times article, the report “was especially critical of statements by the president and vice president linking Iraq to Al Qaeda and raising the possibility that Mr. Hussein might supply the terrorist group with unconventional weapons.” An editorial dealing with the report describes it as showing “clearly that President Bush should have known that important claims he made about Iraq did not conform to intelligence reports.”

The ability of the United States to cause such wide scale death on the basis of false or unsubstantiated intelligence demonstrates the small regard the United States had for Iraqi life. This is indicative of the situation described by Hinkelammert – the Iraqi population serves no purpose for the United States’ capitalist machine and can thus be eliminated, lest it threaten the machine. As the poor’s existence as disposable entities within the global political economy is brought to light, liberalism has continued its approval of the system’s general structure by maintaining its representation through the Democratic Party, a primary component of the American system.

The poor’s lack of power allows the First World to dictate the course of the Third World. By using their power, derived primarily from economics, the First World can work to ensure that
poor countries do not “develop” or become like the First World countries. This is necessary because the industrialization of the Third World would not be beneficial to First World countries. In fact, Hinkelammert points out that as a result of overpopulation and the growing acceptance of the limits of our environment, the First World cannot accept an industrialized Third World.\footnote{11}

This relationship existing between the First and Third worlds also exists between the rich and poor within the United States; the poor need to exist in order for a minority to live with excess. The recent election of Barack Obama has brought hope to many that there will be some sort of change in values and ideology. The problem is that for middle and upper class citizens (a large part of Obama’s constituency) to continue to live as they are living, Obama cannot make any fundamental changes to the political economy of the United States. The American system must function in such a way in order to ensure the continuity of the middle and upper class way of life, and that is by maintaining the position of the poor.

The significance of the past election should not be overlooked – it shows the wide scale support liberals of all races in the United States can now have for an upper class and Ivy League educated man of mixed race, something previously unimaginable. Despite this “progress” or “step forward,” as many have called it, it is important to examine thoroughly the situation so as not to be deceived. One way to do this is to critique liberalism using Nat Turner’s vision, one example of a more radical school of thought seeking liberation rather than material success.

**Political Theory of Civil Rights**

Hanes Walton critiques the political philosophy of civil rights and specifically of Martin Luther King, Jr., as being incomplete, “in the sense that King’s political philosophy offers no alternative to the present American system of government.”\footnote{12} King’s philosophy merely recommends the inclusion of African Americans into the American system – in this way, according to King, it will become more just.

King laid out a credo for the civil rights movement in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Although addressed to white clergymen who had argued that the fight against racial injustices should be confined to the courts, it was essentially an open letter. King begins by responding to his critics “influenced by the argument of the ‘outsider coming in.’”\footnote{13} In his response, he makes an important point: “I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”\footnote{14} This is a powerful statement, but civil rights do not address it adequately. The political philosophy of civil rights calls for blacks to be equal to whites. However, because there are significant problems and injustices on the white side of the equation, this goal of equality fails to look out for justice. Equality with whites should not be confused with justice.

In his letter, King next defends his use of nonviolent direct action, the method of the civil rights movement, which he describes as seeking “to create such a crisis (as the one present in Birmingham) and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored.”\footnote{15} This creative tension was vital to the civil rights movement which saw progress as coming through the confrontation of what is and what ought to be.\footnote{16} King borrowed from the
Greek philosopher Heraclitus’ concept of the dialectical which saw life as a balance of forces struggling for dominance and the Hegelian concept of growth coming through struggle in order to create the setting for change. King continues: “We must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.” Despite his high rhetoric, King errors by failing to see the gadfly as one who engages in a radical critique; the gadfly must reveal the root causes of oppression and protest against those causes. Negotiating with what King refers to as “the white power structure” does not constitute this radical critique, nor does it expose the root causes of injustice.

In response to critics who questioned the timing of his demonstration, King passionately writes about the inability to continue to wait while atrocities mount against the black community and black individuals. King expertly shows why blacks can no longer be told, “Wait!” One example King gives is that blacks can wait no longer “when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society.” King must have understood that poverty and wealth exist in a dialectical relationship – poverty is the result of the affluent society’s existence. If concerned with justice rather than material wealth, King should have been condemning the affluent society, not negotiating for permission to enter into it.

King next addresses others’ “anxiety over our willingness to break laws.” King draws on the works of previous theologians and distinguishes two types of laws. “A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God” and is the “only law that uplifts human personality.” An “unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law” and “a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law.” King declares all segregation laws unjust because “segregation substitutes an ‘I-it’ relationship for an ‘I-thou’ relationship, and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.” King correctly condemns segregation, but his critique must extend beyond this and consider how the society which he is seeking to integrate into functions.

King then discusses his disappointment with “the white moderate.” He describes the white moderate as preferring “a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice… where all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality.” King makes an important distinction between a positive and a negative peace, but King himself was seeking a sort of negative peace. The unjustness of white society extended beyond its racism, which brings up the question of why King would fight for black society to merge with white society. A more honest attempt at justice would consider the liberation of the human person, irrespective of race.

King uses his critique of white moderates to show his own position, which he describes as “in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency… The other is one of bitterness, and hatred comes perilously close to advocating violence.” While King may be making this comparison for practical reasons, in order to gain acceptance from the white community, he commits a huge error here; he needs to see the latter position not as one of hate, but rather of complete love for the victim. It is the position of those who are willing to give themselves completely over to the victim and deny self-interest. King
describes it as “made up of people who have lost faith in America.” This is true, and it is the key difference between King and the more radical current of black thought epitomized by Nat Turner and Malcolm X. This position does not have any faith in an American system which dehumanizes, and protests against it in order to transform it.

In concluding his letter, King writes, “Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America.” This is again a powerful point. Liberation must be sought for all, and blacks, at King’s time existing outside of the political economy, had the power to lead the way in advocating for liberation. Nat Turner and others saw this power and attempted to make use of it. Unfortunately, civil rights failed to see this and took the power away from the black community by getting blacks to embrace the destructiveness of the dominant white society.

Walton draws a critical conclusion of King’s political theory: “Despite its weaknesses as a political philosophy, and its abrupt uselessness in the black ghettos, it helped redress the balance of relationships between men of different races.” King did have a useful method; it provoked creative tension in the South, if not the North, and led partially to what King envisioned – the inclusion of blacks into white society. The deficiencies, however, are important to note. When looking at more radical black protests, it is important to consider why King’s message failed to persuade the victims of the United States’ capitalist economy in the ghettos of the North.

**Turner’s Vision**

Nat Turner’s revolt is representative of more radical protest. The only extensive primary source available on Nat Turner is *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Newspaper articles and court records offer the only other means available to offer a glimpse of Turner’s vision. Despite the usefulness of this source, however, it is important to note that Nat Turner did not write *The Confessions of Nat Turner*; it was jointly produced by Turner and Thomas R. Gray, a local lawyer and slave owner.

Kenneth Greenberg, a historian who has done much of his work on Nat Turner, examines the motives Gray might have had in writing the *Confessions*. The most obvious motive was money. Gray was failing as a farmer and almost bankrupt and producing a document explaining Nat Turner’s rebellion would bring in much needed money. A second reason Gray might have been inclined to produce the *Confessions* in collaboration with Nat Turner was as a public service. Gray almost certainly knew most of the whites who had died during the rebellion, and he may have wanted to convey his perception of the rebellion. This hypothesis is supported by the normative language Gray uses in the opening note, as well as the insertion of words that Nat Turner probably would not have used. For example, “religious enthusiasm” had negative connotations in the nineteenth century and probably would not have been the way in which Turner would have described his relationship with God. This said, however, Greenberg acknowledges that the *Confessions* does include Nat Turner’s voice, because there are several instances where Gray would not have had any reason to distort Turner’s message.

In explaining his rebellion to Attorney Gray in his *Confessions*, Nat Turner begins, without being questioned, with what he calls “the days of my infancy.” By doing this, Turner
J. Drexler-Dreis demonstrates that his motives are deep within him; this was not a superficial decision, but rather something that engulfed his entire life. It was something he felt called to engage in from the beginning of his existence.

The particular episode he recounts is when adults found him describing events to others in great detail which had occurred before his birth. From this, Turner says that his community concluded that he would “surely be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth.” The adults of his community talked about this special ability he possessed in his presence, causing Turner to see himself as created for some special purpose at a young age. Further episodes and signs confirmed for Nat Turner as well as his community that he was called to do something that extended beyond his personal interests.

Turner reflects to Gray that, “Having soon discovered to be great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and prayer.” This isolation is a common theme among the Old Testament prophets, most notably Jeremiah, whom Turner would most likely have known about through his extensive knowledge of the Bible. While it cannot be proven that Turner sought to emulate Jeremiah or that he would have wanted to, their similarities show that both functioned as an intermediary – as one who sought to convey a perceived truth to his community.

Jeremiah’s message was critical of all – rich and poor, powerful and weak, and like Turner’s comes from a belief in a transcendent god rather than the things of this world. This critical outlook caused almost universal condemnation of Jeremiah by his community; his community’s subsequent unwillingness to accept his prophecies led to his marginalization and isolation. One such situation is exemplified when Jeremiah sat alone during a Passover celebration, thus distancing himself from community life (Jer. 15:17). The deep isolation felt by Jeremiah led biblical scholar Jack R. Lundbom to describe him as “a true divine mediator, which is to say his own personal grief upon receiving the divine word is every bit as intense as his preaching of that word to others.”

While Jeremiah laments about his isolation and marginalization throughout the book, prompting his nickname, “the weeping prophet,” the most comprehensive depictions of his rejection and marginalization are his five “confessions” (Jer. 11:18-12:6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:18-23, 20:7-13). These poems differentiate Jeremiah from the false prophets and express the strength of his conviction to speak for Yahweh amidst his rejection as a prophet. Turner shares in Jeremiah’s rejection of the prevailing political economy, causing his isolation, but Turner also shares Jeremiah’s subordination of his own self to the mission to which he was called, epitomizing the role of the prophet.

Turner said that when he began hearing scripture, “I was struck with that particular passage which says: ‘Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things should be added unto you.’” The kingdom was thus central in Turner’s thinking; the kingdom and a “something more,” rather than material or earthly concerns motivated his thinking. As Turner reflected on this passage, he claimed that one day while ploughing, the spirit spoke to him and repeated this passage. When Gray asked him what he meant by “the Spirit,” Turner responded, “The Spirit
that spoke to the prophets in former days." This again links Turner with the Old Testament prophets.

This revelation mediated to Turner, a human recipient, by “the Spirit,” an otherworldly being, shows Turner’s experience to have apocalyptic elements. Much of Turner’s vision fits the definition of apocalypse as defined by the apocalyptic literature scholar John J. Collins:

> ‘Apocalypse’ is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.

This “Spirit,” functioning as an otherworldly mediator, discloses a transcendent reality which elevates Turner’s concerns beyond a material reality by focusing on eschatological events as well as a supernatural world. Turner accepts this calling, saying, “I began to direct my attention to this great object, to fulfill the purpose for which, by this time, I felt assured I was intended.” This again emphasizes that Turner did not plan his revolt out of individual desire, but it was rather derived from his union with his community and with a divine reality.

This is further demonstrated by Turner’s escape for thirty days and his subsequent return. Turner describes the reason for his return: “the Spirit appeared to me and said I had my wishes directed to the things of this world, and not to the kingdom of Heaven, and that I should return to the service of my earthly master – ‘For he who knoweth his Master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes, and thus I have chastened you.’” Importantly, Turner was not deceived by the common slave-era interpretation of “master” as “slave master.”

Because of his return, which was motivated out of concern for the community, Turner says, “the negroes found fault, and murmured against me.” Scholars have also identified this as an important point in Turner’s relationship with his community, as it caused further isolation for him. For example, Patrick H. Breen calls it a “critical moment” in Nat Turner’s relationship with his community, as they faulted him for coming back to slavery, and “from this point, Nat Turner had lost his privileged place within the black community;” he was now “eccentric” and the community rejected his prophecy.

Around the time of Turner’s return, which was in the early 1820s, he reported that he had a vision: “I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened – the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams.” This again shows apocalyptic elements of a vision being mediated to a human recipient, as well as uses language common in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, such as a darkening sun. This caused Turner to withdraw himself even more, as he said that he withdrew “as much as my situation would permit, from the intercourse of my fellow servants, for the avowed purpose of serving the Spirit more fully,” which again draws comparisons to Jeremiah.

Turner said he had another vision, in which he said he “found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters, and numbers with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood, and representing the figures I had seen before in the heavens.” He describes this revelation as having made clear for him that Christ “was now returning to earth again in the form
It was plain to me that the Savior was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand. This coming Parousia, or return of Christ to earth, confirmed for Nat Turner that the eschaton was near. Turner believed, as he said in the Confessions, that “the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.” While this apocalyptic line of thought was not uncommon during his time period, even among whites, Turner used it to envision a radical readjustment of the status quo – an overturning of the political economy at its roots.

Continuity of Turner’s Vision

Nat Turner’s vision was not an isolated event, but rather a continuation of previous forms of protest, including prior slave revolts in the Caribbean and the United States. Events within the United States such as Gabriel’s conspiracy in Richmond in 1800, Denmark Vesey’s revolt in Charleston in 1821, and the publication of David Walker’s Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America in 1829, all preceded Nat Turner’s revolt but expressed the same line of thought. While difficult to prove that Nat Turner had knowledge of previous slave revolts or that he had read a copy of Walker’s Appeal, the common experiences of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism – oppression in the broad sense – seems to have engendered a similar response not limited to a particular time period or geographic area.

The vision that Nat Turner expressed, likewise, did not die with his execution. At Harpers Ferry, Virginia, John Brown led a revolt in 1859. After being captured, Brown delivered a speech to the court at his trial after his sentencing on November 2, 1859. In this speech, Brown acknowledged that his attempt was to free the slaves, but he also critiqued the United States judicial system and how the United States functioned as a whole. He claimed “that it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty…. Had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends… and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right.” The fact that this was not “all right,” that the United States needed to kill John Brown because he wanted to free the slaves it created, demonstrates how the United States and the powerful class that controlled it attempted to conceal its oppression.

Brown continued by evoking the teachings of the Bible, saying, “I believe that to have interfered as I have done – as I have always freely admitted I have done – in behalf of His despised poor was not wrong, but right.” Earthly laws did not govern John Brown and he had no intention of participating in an unjust American system. Brown was governed by God and, like Nat Turner, he refused to be constrained by the system that he saw as corrupt.

After the Civil War, a new type of ideology became popular which sought to create blackness as a binary other to whiteness – it sought to have blacks become equal to whites and function like whites. This ideology came to fruition in 1954 with the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Considering the state of white society, namely its destructiveness around the world and the poverty that existed among whites and the wide disparities in wealth domestically, many blacks saw a problem with setting the dominant white society as the ultimate goal. Thus, the radical stream of thought expressed by Nat Turner emerged with renewed energy during this period. This stream of thought often came from those labeled as “demagogues” and
condemned by the liberal press. The critiques coming from those continuing in Nat Turner’s line of thought sought to expose the nascent liberal politics for what it was by exposing the exploitation and the continuous suffering experienced by the American poor, particularly African Americans.

In 1964, an article by Alex Haley, who would soon become famous in his collaboration with Malcolm X to produce Malcolm X’s autobiography, appeared in *The New York Times* as a result of Muhammad Ali calling Joe Frazier an “Uncle Tom” just before their first fight. In this article, Haley analyzes the term “Uncle Tom” from its inception in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to its usage in the 1960s. He defines its meaning during his present context as “A Negro accused by another of comporting himself among white people in a manner which the accuser interprets as servile or cowardly; or a Negro who other Negros feel has betrayed, or sullied, in any way, a dignified, militant, forthright Negro image.” Haley writes, “represented a practical means of coexisting with the dominant whites” in the early twentieth century, but it was now looked down upon by the black population. Haley brings up several recent libel suits that black leaders had brought against others for naming them as “Uncle Toms” in order to demonstrate this point.

“Uncle Tom” had been applied to Booker T. Washington by W.E.B. DuBois, and then to DuBois by Marcus Garvey, which shows the growing radicalization of the black protest movement in the early twentieth century and the reemergence of Turner’s vision, which attacked the root of the oppressive nature of the American political economy. In Haley’s contemporary context, “Uncle Tom” was applied to all who took a gradual approach to the problem of structural victimization. “Uncle-Tomming” was especially prominent in the ghettos of America’s large cities, demonstrating a resistance to transplanting the civil rights ideology developed in the South to the urban poor in the North. While this article’s publication in a more radical newspaper such as the *Chicago Defender* would not be of great significance, its existence in a historically liberal publication, *The New York Times*, demonstrates the prevalence of opposition to the civil rights movement’s approach.

Haley describes Malcolm X as having “Uncle Tommed” practically every Negro leader in the nation,” and Malcolm X legitimated this claim a month later with his “Ballot or the Bullet” speech. He delivered this speech just as he was planning his Hajj and his tour of Africa that would mark the beginning of his personal transformation. In his speech, Malcolm X advocates Black Nationalism as both a pragmatic ideology and as a way to unify the black community, particularly the urban poor.

Malcolm X described the political philosophy of Black Nationalism as the black man “controlling the politicians in his own community.” He derided whites who tried to get black votes, or worse, politicians who sent black representatives into the black community in order to get votes. Although he did not specify, Malcolm X was speaking specifically of whites trying to get black votes for Lyndon Johnson.

This parallels the contemporary relationship between liberals and the poor. If it can be granted that class has begun to take importance over race, one can take the next step to see that middle and upper class liberals are now using the poor for votes. While this benefits the affluent
liberal, a poor person voting can be seen as contradictory; the poor person is simply voting for the system that perpetuates poverty. Voting Democrat or Republican does not alter the victimizing capabilities of the American system; it remains a vote of support for the status quo. Nat Turner clearly saw this, and thus did not consider joining the American system any longer than his brief thirty day escape. Liberals are too invested in the system to engage in this type of critique. Those who vote are generally those who reap the benefits of society – they are not the victims of it.56

Malcolm then moved on to the economic philosophy of Black Nationalism. He described blacks as “breaking their necks to take their money and spend it with The Man.”57 This is a condemnation of civil rights’ insistence that the best way for blacks to function within the American system is to participate in it in the same manner as whites, by engaging in an individualized pursuit of success without regard to other people or the community.

Malcolm rarely spoke without directly critiquing the government: “The government itself has failed us, and the white liberals who have been posing as our friends have failed us.”58 The “white liberals” were those who supported the Kennedy and Johnson administrations which failed to change the status of the poor. Malcolm saw the investment that “white liberals” had in maintaining the social order and pleaded to those who it was oppressing to stop throwing their support behind the politicians who perpetuated it. It would make no sense, he argued, for the “white liberal” to want to change the power dynamics within the system; if he wanted to change the situation, he would have to divest his power and become poor, as poverty exists in a dialectical relationship to wealth and excess. If white liberals wanted to maintain their good life and their power, they should continue as they are doing – giving their so-called help to the poor through charity and cosmetic changes in order to retain their support.

Malcolm then discussed how “the trickery, and the lies, and the false promises” have caused blacks to become “disenchanted,” “disillusioned,” and “dissatisfied.”59 Liberalism, he argued, has helped our society succeed in this deception among all races because there is no longer an explosive element since all – rich and poor alike – strive for the same reality of success defined by wealth. Approaching the climax of his speech, Malcolm X declared, “I’m not a Republican, nor a Democrat, nor an American and got sense enough to know it. I’m one of the 22 million black victims of the Democrats, one of the 22 million black victims of the Republicans, and one of the 22 million black victims of Americanism.”60 Malcolm named the poor as victims of the American system, not the victims of conservative politics and economics, as liberals claimed. Like Nat Turner, Malcolm X was not deceived by the possibility of material benefits by entering the American system; he clearly saw the problems inherent in the American system.

Speaking as a victim, Malcolm differentiated himself from the civil rights movement and placed himself within the radical line of thought of Nat Turner. He was completely in love with the victim and unaffected by motives for personal gain. He sought a radically different system than the one in place, which he emphasized by saying, “you don’t have a revolution in which you are begging the system of exploitation to integrate you into. Revolutions overturn systems. Revolutions destroy systems.” Malcolm X had no interest in the goals of the modern civil rights movement. He was fundamentally opposed to them.
As the decade of the sixties came to a close, Charles Hamilton attempted to make sense of another black protest movement, Black Power, in an article for the *New York Times Magazine*. Due to the many connotations of Black Power, Hamilton tried to present a credo for the movement. The result is a mixture of civil rights ideology and the more radical protest which found voice in Nat Turner and Malcolm X; it is an ideology which seeks the same ends as civil rights – inclusion into mainstream society – but advocates different means.

Hamilton describes Black Power as “concerned with organizing the rage of black people and with putting new, hard questions and demands to white America.” This “rage” was the result of the political and economic system which discriminated on the basis of race. Thus, Hamilton is indicating that he is concerned with the victims of this system.

Hamilton lists three objectives of Black Power. First, “Black Power must deal with the obviously growing alienation of black people and their distrust of the institutions of this society.” He moves towards the ideology of civil rights here, as he suggests that there is a solution which will make blacks trust the institutions of society. Distrust exists, however, due to the severe imperfections of the institutions; rather than being concealed and discredited, this distrust should be the catalyst that reveals the imperfections. Hamilton’s second objective of Black Power is for it to “work to create new values and to build a new sense of community and of belonging.” There should be an emphasis on “new values” and “a new sense of community,” which implies that the old ways are inadequate. A system built upon individuals trying to exploit others in order to profit and be successful does not constitute community, so this new community must be radically opposed to the old status quo. Hamilton’s third objective is for Black Power to “work to establish legitimate new institutions that make participants, not recipients, out of a people traditionally excluded from the fundamentally racist processes of this country.” In writing about “new institutions,” Hamilton goes beyond civil rights, which seeks participation in currently existing institutions, but his call for blacks to be participants in the processes of the United States suggests a continuation of civil rights ideology.

The goal of blacks entering into American society thus stays consistent from civil rights to Black Power, according to Hamilton’s definition of it, but the means change. Hamilton insists on the necessity of developing “people who are psychologically and mentally healthy... people who have a sense of their history and of themselves as whole human beings” before integration happens. Then, Hamilton believes that rather than entering white society as victims of it and then continuing to function as victims within that society, blacks will have the opportunity to function as whites – both as victim and victimizer.

In order to first build a community that is not dependent on white society, Hamilton advocates small economic enterprises which encourage the development of resources for the black community beyond their labor. In this, Hamilton considers the place of the black middle class. He writes, “Some people adopt the viewpoint that most member of the class opt out of the race (or at least try to do so), they get good jobs, a nice home, two cars, and forget about the masses of blacks who have not ‘made it.’ This has been largely true.” In this way, the black middle class has mirrored white society by seeing success as an individual pursuit.
Hamilton then discusses the necessity of help coming from whites. The “realization by white America that it is in her interest not to have a weak, dependent, alienated black community inhabiting the inner cities and blowing them up periodically” is what Hamilton sees as the starting point for getting white cooperation. He writes, “Society needs stability, as long as there is a sizeable powerless, restless group within it which considers the society illegitimate, stability is not possible.” With civil rights and Hamilton’s ideology, the unlikeliest of all groups – the victims of American society – must declare the society legitimate. When this happens, the dominant society can function as it pleases, without opposition. The power of the poor is essentially taken away.

Hamilton calls for blacks to be more pragmatic in their approach, and “work with the existing agencies, but this must be done only from a base of independent, not subordinated power.” The problem is that the “existing agencies” depend on the concept of “subordinated power,” and they cannot function without some people being under the power of others and manipulated by them. Hamilton is right, however, that there is a need to be pragmatic. One cannot trivialize reality by continually engaging in ideological exercises. However, one must be cognizant so as not to be deceived and attempt to bring society’s victims into the same system which relegated them to the status of victims in the first place.

While Hamilton focuses on the black-white relationship, the situation must be opened up and examined under the broader scope of an oppressor-oppressed relationship. The individualized nature of identity politics will continue to suffer from the desire to compare individual groups and make one group become like another. It is therefore important to use Nat Turner’s protest against his society which, despite being chronologically separated, is connected ideologically because the United States’ political and economic systems have retained a similar basic structure. The rich continues to exploit the poor in order to maintain their position, and there continues to be an attempt to legitimate exploitation and also an attempt on the part of the victims to become like the rich.

It is important not to be drawn into an individualistic conception of history; although John Brown, Malcolm X, and the Black Power movement can be seen as continuations of the vision that Turner expressed, this vision does not belong to any particular individual. Each individual spoke as a victim – to use Malcolm’s words, as one of the “victims of Americanism” – in order to, as Hamilton put it, “organize the rage” of an oppressed people. Nat Turner, John Brown, Malcolm X, and the Black Power movement are not meant to be extracted from their contexts; their importance lies in their articulation, as victims, of the structures which dehumanized their respective communities.

**Implications**

The structures which Nat Turner and Malcolm X condemned remain in place in the contemporary context and are still supported by those in power and, to a greater extent today, the general population. Liberals are not free from criticism in playing a significant role in this victimizing system either. Despite his campaign motto of change, President Barack Obama is likely to function within the same paradigm of the civil rights movement. As the leader of the United States, he will most likely continue the American foreign and domestic policy of seeking to bring all into the American political economy.
In Jean-Paul Sartre’s introduction to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, he describes the situation of colonialism and the subsequent decolonization on the African continent: “The pacifists are a fine sight: neither victims nor torturers! Come now! If you are not a victim when the government you voted for and the army your young brothers served in commits ‘genocide,’ without hesitation or remorse, then, you are undoubtedly a torturer.” While it may be inaccurate to call what the United States is involved in “genocide,” Sartre’s point should be noted; liberals too, are indicted in the United States’ destructive policies.

Sartre adds that, in a situation of colonialism, the “liberal” or the “metropolitan Left” is “in a quandary: it is well aware of the true fate of the ‘natives,’ the pitiless oppression they are subjected to, and does not condemn their revolt, knowing that we (the colonizers) did everything to provoke it.” However, liberals plead with the ‘natives’ to control their rage, giving the warning that if it is not controlled, they will no longer support the colonized peoples. Sartre responds to this paternalistic attitude: “They don’t care a shit for its [the metropolitan Left’s] support; it can shove it up its ass for what it’s worth.” This response comes out of the realization: “we are all equally as good as each other.”

Although Sartre is responding to the situation of the West’s colonization of Africa and the African countries’ attempts at decolonization in the 1960s, it is important to see how his condemnation of the paternalistic attitude of the colonizer applies to modern liberalism. The poor do not need the modern liberal; the modern liberal is, in fact maintaining the situation of poverty by claiming the current system will be legitimate if cosmetic changes are made to it. This makes a mockery of the poor because it allows one to feel comfortable in a system with great victimizing capabilities and, in effect, conceal the existence of wide scale poverty.

**Conclusion**

Leo Tolstoy wrote in his classic 1886 work, *What Then Must We Do?*, “I sit on a man’s back, choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for him and wish to ease his lot by all possible means – except by getting off his back.” The only way to “get off the victim’s back” is through loving the victim – complete love of the other and denial of self. Turner did not love the victim in an ideological or an abstract way; he denied his own personal interest, rejected his opportunity to enter into the dominant political economy, and gave himself to his community.

The power of Nat Turner’s vision exposes the ideal of civil rights and liberalism as inadequate. It shows that the ability for all Americans to have equal access to the American Dream does not constitute social justice. Turner called for a radical transformation of our society, one which must be approached with love for the victims and be motivated by the belief in something more important than the material reality on earth.

Nat Turner was not deceived; he did not want to become the slave master, who has now evolved into the American citizen. He rejected this ideology and demanded something more – recognition as a person who refused to accept oppression. In a society which resembles his in its capability to dehumanize select populations, Nat Turner’s vision which erupted in his 1831 revolt is today being concealed and needs to be exposed. Whereas the expression of Turner’s
vision took the form of armed rebellion in 1831, the contemporary context calls for a different form of response. Because of a now deeply entrenched and widely supported violent and destructive political economy, one must use Nat Turner’s vision to critique, oppose, and protest against not only unjust policies, but an unjust system.

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