

Prologue

Reclaiming Radicalism

'Black Lives Matter', 'No justice, no peace' and even 'Black Power' were chants bellowed by the crowd of protestors. The killings of Philando Castile in Minnesota and Alton Sterling in New Orleans sparked a mass reaction. Watching Castile bleed to death on Facebook was bound to provoke a response. Thousands of people poured out onto the streets to demonstrate their anger and disgust at the slaying of yet more Black bodies at the hands of the police. As the march settled outside the police station, speaker after speaker stepped to the mobile podium condemning the racism and brutality of the 'pigs'. Family members of those who had died in police custody gave impassioned calls for justice. Tension on the streets of Birmingham crackled through the crowd. When Malcolm X spoke of a 'racial powder keg', it was this kind of scene he had in mind. Close your eyes, take in the crowd and you could well be in Alabama in the 1960s. But this is a protest in the second city of Britain in the twenty-first century and the picture tells us how little things have changed in the last fifty years, and speaks to the global nature of racism.

Crowds of Black people came onto the streets following events that took place thousands of miles away because they related directly to our experiences. Just as in America, the

police are often seen as ‘an occupying force’ in Black communities in Britain. There is a long history of over-policing, harassment and brutality. To be Black is to be a suspect. To live in a Black neighbourhood is to be a target. In the 1980s the situation came to a head, with large-scale rebellions taking place across the country in cities like London, Birmingham and Liverpool. Communities tired of the police taking advantage of the ‘Sus Laws’, where they had the power to arrest on the basis of suspicion, to crack the head of a ‘darkie’. Despite changing laws and police reforms, if you are Black and in Britain today you are up to eighteen times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police. You are more likely to be charged if arrested, and subject to a longer prison sentence if found guilty. The criminal injustice system means that in Britain, compared to our numbers in the country, Black people are actually more overrepresented in the prison population than in America. We only make up 3% of the population but account for 13% of prison inmates. Black people also represent 9% of deaths after police contact that were independently investigated.¹ The protest in Birmingham was actually a pre-arranged march for justice for Kingsley Burrell, who died in police custody after a chain of events that started when he had called the police. At the march the families recounted the names of Demetre Fraser, Sarah Reed, Mark Duggan and many more. You are unlikely to be shot by the police in Britain because the majority do not carry guns. But if you are Black you are more vulnerable to death after police contact.

Black Lives Matter protests sweeping across Britain were not just about the shared experiences of police abuse.

The shootings in America drew a much larger protest than the typical marches for justice for people killed in Britain. To understand the depth of feeling in Britain to slayings in America is to grasp the connections of Blackness, which cannot be contained by national borders. When we see Philando Castile bleeding out we are not looking at a distant stranger. We are seeing our brother, our father, our cousin, our friend. His killing happened to Black communities in Britain as much as it did to those in Minnesota. It is that connection, that pain, which drew the largest Black mobilisations for years onto the streets of Britain.

Black Lives Matter has re-energised Black political movements across the globe. In both Britain and America the battles and hard-fought victories for recognition and legislation have lulled us into a false sense of progress. Landmark gains for civil and voting rights in America, and race relations bills in Britain opened up the dreams of inclusion and equality for Black so-called citizens. The sad reality is that fifty years after these apparent gains racism is as embedded in the fabric of society as ever, coded into the DNA of the system. There may have been a Black man in the White House for eight years, but under his rule the value of Black life depreciated. The poverty rate, wealth gap, evictions and food stamp usage all went up under the watch of the first Black president.² It was truly a case of a Black man, White house. Meanwhile, the police continued to bring the hammer down on Black communities, providing the horrifying footage that relit the sparks of protest. Now that the fires of protest have been lit the question is what direction they will take.

There is no such thing as a unified Black politics. Mobilisations have taken forms so wide-ranging they have led to violent confrontations. Black people have disagreed with each other as to the way forward as much as, if not more than, we have with White people. One of the most frustrating rewrites of history is the common description of Malcolm X as a ‘civil rights leader’. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Malcolm was perhaps *the* fiercest critic of the civil rights movement, its tactics and its leaders. He famously called the showpiece 1963 March on Washington a ‘farce’, denouncing it as a ‘circus with clowns and all’.³ Though he and the figure he is most tied to, Martin Luther King, were active at the same time, they only ever met once, very briefly. We should not be surprised given Malcolm’s public scorn for King, including calling him ‘a twentieth century, or modern day Uncle Tom’.⁴ These disagreements were not some personal squabble between two men; they were based on a fundamentally different view of the world. Malcolm and Martin did not have the same goals; they did not even see the problem through the same eyes.

Broadly speaking, Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement represent a liberal tradition in Black politics. Liberals acknowledge the problems of racial inequality but put them down to a lack of access to the system. So Black people are poorer because we do not have equal access to the job market. In order to get equal access it is seen as necessary to reform the system through legislation that outlaws discriminatory practices. A barrier to these laws being passed is that we also lack access to political power, and so it is necessary to get

Black politicians elected to bring about reform. This is the logic that made ‘69% of African Americans believe that Obama’s election mean that King’s dream had been fulfilled’.⁵ It is also the logic that leads to campaigns for more Black police officers, chiefs and commissioners. The system is not the problem in this analysis, just the fact we are not fully part of it. If Black faces were in high places then of course a different set of decisions would be made and equality would emerge.

In stark contrast, Malcolm represents a radical tradition in Black politics. He was never interested in being part of what he called the ‘American nightmare’. In the radical tradition the system is *the* problem. There can be no reform, no adjustments and we as Black people should not waste time daydreaming of equality. When Malcolm proclaimed ‘we want no part of integration with this wicked race of devils’,⁶ he was not attacking individual White people but condemning the system of the West as being evil at its core. So the battle is not to get good jobs or to be elected, but to end the system of oppression and create the world in a new image. No amount of Black faces in the police force will make it anti-racist. As the hip hop artist KRS-ONE pointed out, during apartheid (and after) it was the ‘Black cop killing Black kids in Johannesburg’.⁷

Black radicalism therefore calls for an overturning of the system that oppresses Black people, and for nothing short of a revolution. The aim of this book is to reclaim that tradition of Black radicalism because it has been widely misused and misunderstood. Radicalism has become a dirty and even dangerous word in the current climate. It has been distorted in association with violence and most usually Islamic

extremism. But radicalism and extremism are actually completely opposite concepts.

Extremism is based on taking the fundamental principles of an idea to the extreme. Making them solid absolutes, with no room for flexibility or different interpretations. The terrorism we are seeing across the world in the name of Islam is extremism, taking the principles of Islam so far that they become destructive. But as Angela Davis explained, ‘radical simply means grasping things at the root’.⁸ Radicalism is based on rejecting the fundamental principles that govern society and creating a new paradigm. So one of President Trump’s favourite phrases, ‘radical Islam’, is completely nonsensical. A radical version of Islam would do away with the principles of the religion and cease even to be Islam. The Jihadists who are wreaking havoc in the Middle East, Europe, Asia and Africa follow in the footsteps of a long line of extremists. Just as there was nothing radical about the Nazis, or Christian fundamentalism, there is nothing radical about Islamic extremism.

For the goals of the Jihadists to be radical they would need to be based on overthrowing the existing social order. Sharia law may seem radically different to us in the West but the Middle East is made up of many countries observing conservative Islamic principles. The Jihadists are simply following a well-worn path of taking these to the extreme. In many ways this rise of extremism is in direct correlation to the decline of truly radical alternatives to Western domination. Once you give up on overthrowing the unjust social order it is easy to fall into the trap of trying to find spiritual salvation. For all of the rhetoric about fighting the infidels in the holy land,

the main beneficiary of the chaos caused by extremism is the West. While Muslims are killing Muslims there is no prospect of the region uniting to challenge imperialism. The ongoing conflicts are a money-making machine for the war and reconstruction industries. Even if an Islamic caliphate were installed across the Middle East there is nothing to suggest this could not co-exist with Western interests. Saudi Arabia is governed by extremist principles and is one of the West’s closest allies.

Radicalism is confused with extremism because we incorrectly conflate what is radical with what is violent. This confusion is dangerous and has helped to spread the contagion of Islamic extremism across the African continent, in particular. In Professor Robert Beckford’s excellent documentary *The Great African Scandal* he chronicled the impact of Western trade policies on Ghana.⁹ Rice farming was one of the successes of the post-independence economy, because it was supported by government subsidies and there was a ban on foreign imports. In the 1980s the country wanted to improve its rice production by developing irrigation systems, so it turned to the West for a helping hand. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank loaned Ghana the money but on the condition that it ‘liberalise’ its markets to help boost the economy. Liberalise meant open its market to free trade, and therefore the end of government subsidies to rice farmers and of course no more banning of foreign imports. The inevitable happened when the West gets involved in Africa. Much cheaper and higher quality, mostly American, rice flooded the Ghanaian market. Worse still, America subsidises its rice farmers, in the way that the

Ghanaian government was now barred from doing. Even with the development from the loan, locally produced rice had no chance to compete and the deal with the devil ended up destroying rice production in the country. The first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, was right when he said that the relationship between Africa and the West has an ‘Alice in wonderland craziness’ about it.¹⁰ Beckford’s documentary highlighted the poverty that the collapse of rice farming had caused and the resentment of the people in Ghana. In a chilling and telling section of the film, one of the former rice farmers, who was living in poverty, showed Beckford that he had a picture of Osama Bin Laden as his phone’s screensaver. He explained that ‘he is the only one fighting the West’ and the system that had caused the destruction of his livelihood. The decline of radical liberation movements on the continent have left a space that is being filled by the violent rhetoric of resistance presented by Islamic extremism, and to deadly effect.

Critical to understanding Black radicalism is to completely untangle its politics from the tactic of violence. The key distinction between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King was not whether to use violence or not, it was the diagnosis of the problems in society. Non-violence makes sense for liberal movements for racial justice because they want to be part of the system and therefore do not want to alienate the mainstream society. Malcolm objected to non-violence because he wanted to overturn the system, so was not interested in placating White officials. As radical politics is based on overthrow it is more than likely that a revolution would involve violence. But this is not because radicals are blood-

thirsty and seeking violent confrontation. It is because the system of oppression is unlikely to give up its power without suppressing the struggle through violence. Black radicalism promotes violence only for self-defence and liberation, and recognises that the liberal forces of oppression are defined by violence. The hypocrisy of defining ‘political violence’ as the possession of the radicals, or the extremists, is truly frightening. Liberalism, upon which the West is built, is the most violent system that has ever existed on the planet. The West is founded on the genocide of 80% of the native people in the Americas. Once they had exhausted the native population they then brutally enslaved Africans for three centuries, murdering tens of millions of people. Colonial regimes were dominated by horrific violence; for example, it is estimated that Belgium killed half the population of the Congo during its rule. The legacy of underdevelopment and continued exploitation, like that which Beckford saw in Ghana, is a world where a child dies every ten seconds because of poor access to food.

Violence is not a choice that Black radicals want to embrace. In fact, in one of Malcolm’s most famous speeches he gives America the chance to have a ‘bloodless revolution’ by offering either the ‘ballot or the bullet’.¹¹ The ballot represented America deciding to give its Black population equal citizenship, and if they refused then the bullet would be the violence that erupted across the nation. But Malcolm understood it was a fantasy to pretend that you can overthrow the murderous beast of the West without engaging in violence. This is why he was so scornful of the civil rights ‘love thy enemy’ approach. Malcolm X’s most famous quote is ‘by any

means necessary', but this actually distorts the importance of his legacy. Radicalism is not about the means (violence/non-violence), but the ends (reform/revolution).

Reclaiming Black radicalism is vital because it is one of the few politics that presents an alternative to the iniquitous system of the West. In the words of Kwame Ture, 'a true revolutionary must provide an alternative, not just rhetoric condemning the existing system'.¹² There have been any number of false prophets clothing themselves in revolutionary rhetoric. But there are true radical politics that live up to Ture's challenge, that provide a blueprint for overturning the system. In 1963, Malcolm warned that 'many of our people are using this word "revolution" loosely, without taking into account careful consideration of what it actually means'.¹³ So starved are we for radical politics that Beyoncé's performance at the Super Bowl, the very pinnacle of commercialism, is being hailed as revolutionary.

Even if you do not believe in the politics of Black radicalism, its revival is essential. Without the radical alternative putting pressure on the state, even the liberal demands fail to be met. As Malcolm explained, 'at one time the Whites in the United States called him a racialist, and extremist, and a communist. Then the Black Muslims came along and the Whites thanked the Lord for Martin Luther King'.¹⁴ Black radicalism changes the nature of the debate and opens up space for liberal 'progress'. Malcolm expanded on the complementary relationship between radical and liberal politics in a meeting with Coretta Scott King in Selma. Martin was furious that Malcolm had visited directly before he was due

to speak, feeling he was trying to upstage him. Against her husband's wishes Coretta took the opportunity to meet with Malcolm, and she recalls that he explained: 'I want Dr. King to know that I didn't come to Selma to make his job difficult. I really did come thinking I could make it easier. If the White people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King'.¹⁵

A lot of credit is given to the civil rights campaigners for the legislative gains but it has to be recognised that the authorities were terrified of the alternative to supporting non-violent leaders. You will see a correlation between rebellions in the inner cities and civil rights legislation, as those in charge looked to the civil rights leaders to cool things down. It is also no coincidence that the initial police reforms in Britain followed urban rebellions. The uprisings in the 1980s led to the Scarman Report and acknowledgement of police racism, as well as the formation of the Police Complaints Authority, which significantly boosted the powers of independent investigations into the police. Anti-racism has stalled in the present day, and even reversed in America, without a radical politics to force the debate.

More important than trying to achieve the illusory goals of the liberal project is to re-engage with the politics of Black radicalism. Black Lives Matter has caught the imagination of a younger generation who understand the system has failed them. The thousands who came onto the streets across the world to protest need to choose the kind of society they want to fight for. The last thing Black Lives Matter needs to become is the new civil rights movement. The legacy of civil rights

struggle is the current system, which has opened up enough for some to ‘make it’ and receive some of the food from the table. However, the majority remain locked out, left to fight for the scraps. If fifty years of so-called progress has taught us anything, it should be that ‘this system can never provide freedom, justice and equality’ for Black people in the same way that ‘a chicken can never lay a duck egg’.¹⁶ The West is built on and maintained by oppressing Black people and this oppression cannot end without overturning the system.

We need to reclaim the politics of Black radicalism, connecting the struggles today to the long history of Black freedom movements. In doing so, we should stop thinking of Black radicalism as a tradition and start to understand it as its own political ideology. The aim of the book is to lay out the basis of this politics and how we can re-engage with Black radicalism in the twenty-first century. Essential to this project is to debunk the myths and distinguish Black radicalism from the various other forms of Black politics it is often confused with. The first misunderstanding that will be debunked is that Black Nationalism equals Black radicalism. In order to do this, we must undo the ugly caricature of Black Nationalism as ‘divisive, fanatical, dangerous, unprincipled, racist delusional and even mad’.¹⁷ We must also distinguish between radicalism and the many different forms of nationalism, most of which are narrow and regressive. Black radicalism has always been based on the connections that cannot be contained by national borders. We will outline the radical concept of ‘Black is a country’, which links the Black Lives Matter protests across the globe.

Another important idea to detach from our understandings of Black radicalism is that of ‘cultural nationalism’. In Los Angeles in the 1960s there were actual gunfights over the differences between the revolutionary Black Panthers and the US cultural movement headed by Maulana Karenga. The Panthers rejected the idea that any salvation could be found in wishing ourselves back to Africa, culturally or spiritually. With the decline of radical politics, cultural nationalism has been confused with an actual radical politics of resistance. Much of the resistance to embracing Black radicalism is in truth a reaction to the restrictive forms of cultural nationalism. We will severely critique the limits of cultural nationalism and explain how Black radicalism is in part built on a rejection of fixed, regressive ideas of Africa, gender and the Black family. Blackness emerged as an identity rooted in the liberation of people of African descent, and has never been closed off because of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any of the other differences within the Diaspora.

In terms of charting a way forward for movements today, the Black Panther Party is important both in America and globally. One of the key debates in Black politics has been the issue of class and Black Marxism has often been viewed as *the* Black radical tradition. While Marxism is certainly radical, we will explore the key departures of this politics from Black radicalism. We will consider the contradictions of the Panthers, who were Marxist in their rhetoric but Black radical in their activities. For all the talk of the Marxist revolution, most of the members were engaged in ‘survival programmes’, providing support for Black communities that the state would not. This

is a crucial lesson for movements today: as romantic as the idea of Marxism may sound, it can never provide freedom for the African Diaspora. We will explore what the Black revolution has historically looked like and imagine what that means for the politics of today.

When it comes to outlining a vision for Black radicalism today, it is important to critique the limitations of my own position. I work in universities, spaces that are historically and structurally overwhelmingly White. Universities were culpable in producing the very racism that Black radicalism emerged to combat. Those of us privileged enough to enjoy the benefits of being part of the system have a complicated relationship to Black radicalism. In fact, it is not really complicated; Black academics have tended to take one of three options in the situation I find myself in. Complacency is common, where we enjoy the spoils and ignore the problem. Becoming complicit in the system of racism by denouncing radical alternatives from our pulpits is also a favoured route. But the most harmful has been what I call liberal radicalism, where academics embrace radical theory but reject revolutionary practice, calling out the system as inherently racist and then pretending there is nothing we can do about it. If the system is the problem, then the university cannot be decolonised, so we are basically fighting to be part of the oppressive machine.

One of the biggest problems with mobilising around Black radicalism is that the analysis can make the issues we face feel insurmountable. If nothing can change without revolution, and the overthrow of the West seems unimaginable, then it is easy to lose hope, to get stuck. We will end with tying

the bigger issues into a programme of local action. All global movements are based on local groups coming together on the national and international stage. The struggle for Black liberation starts in your home, your community, your school. Black radicalism has always offered a concrete politics of liberation, and a blueprint to struggle where you are. Fifty years of so-called progress, false promises and symbolic change have meant we have moved away from a political programme that can lead to liberation. If we want freedom, justice and equality we need to root the next generation of mobilisations in the politics of Black radicalism.