

### **End the Struggle: Power, Violence, and Resolution**

History contains multitudes of wrongdoings committed by those in power against those without power. When looking at the staggering number of examples, notably colonialism and slavery, it is easy to become pessimistic. Is it possible for a human revolution to occur *peacefully*? How can power be reclaimed without violence, when power is typically acquired and maintained *through* violence? Can we unravel the chains of violence woven through history without resorting to more violence? I believe it is possible and I will explain why by comparing the works of three authors. Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, and Achille Mbembe each discussed power and its relationship to violence in *The Nature of Slavery*, *Black Revolution*, and *Time on the Move*, respectively. By comparing their conceptualizations of power and resistance, it becomes clear that while power has historically been rooted in systems of violence and control, there is potential for us to resolve power struggles through non-violent means, such as education and government.

To begin, we must understand how each of the authors conceptualized power. In *The Nature of Slavery*, Douglass conceptualized power within the context of slavery. He begins with the relationship of slave and master, a “monstrous relation” (Douglass, 429). He characterizes this relationship as one of legal ownership and social reductionism. The master reduces the slave’s social status to be inhuman. According to Douglass, this absolute power over the slave is maintained by killing the spirit of the slave. The tool to accomplish this is physical, social, and intellectual violence, as the slave is tortured (430), stripped of social status (431), and denied education (433). Slavery is one of the clearest depictions of power in history. It is a weapon made possible *through* the application of power. In this way, Douglass conceptualizes power as the ability to control or strongly influence others.

Malcolm X conceptualized power with broader examples in his speech on *Black Revolution*. Throughout the speech, he gives examples of how power has been kept from blacks all over of the world through the “divide and conquer” strategy (9). America and the past colonial powers have put different groups of blacks at odds with each other, such that they no longer have the strength they would have in numbers as a united force. In this way, Malcolm X characterizes power as a divisive force that can be wielded against groups of people to weaken them. However, power is only divisive temporarily, as

Malcolm X argues that blacks are fundamentally united across the world, even when they cannot see it. This will play into his description of a black revolution as inevitable.

The main similarity between Douglass' and Malcolm X's depictions of power is its weaponization in the world. They both see it as weaponized against black people—with Douglass giving the example of slavery and Malcolm X giving the much broader example of global colonization. Mbembe's conceptualization of power in *Time on the Move* is the most distinct of the three, because he approaches the subject from an abstract perspective: power is the global value of a society. Again, power is utilized by colonizers to belittle the colonized; but—this time—it is for the purpose of self-identification. Western consciousness gives itself the power of superior consciousness by declaring itself as noble, wise, and *chosen*, while Africa is unimportant and desolate. Whereas Douglass and Malcolm X tie the social reduction of black people's value closely to the definition of power, Mbembe paints that as the byproduct of the larger purpose of power—to find a self-identity that is pleasing.

Now that we have understood power's three conceptualizations by three different authors, let us look at how they understand the role of violence in power's existence. For all of them, violence of one form or another is a natural effect of the cultivation of power by one group that excludes another group. For example, in Douglass' slavery example, power is necessarily maintained through violence: "To ensure good behavior, the slaveholder relies on the whip...the chain, the gag...the pistol... Wherever slavery is found, these horrid instruments are also found" (429-430). When one man holds power over another, violence is used to maintain this relationship which should end with retribution, according to Douglass. "There can be no peace to the wicked while slavery continues in the land" (436). Douglass hints at the possibility of a peace that comes to America once the guilt of slavery is washed away, and the method he offers is education (432). Education gives the slave a certain power that is of a different order to the master's power—it doesn't rely on superiority over others. Education gives people an entirely self-sufficient power. This is the proposed solution, and it certainly fits the argument that there can be a peaceful resolution to the cycle of violence caused by power struggles throughout history.

Continuing our exploration of violence's place in power's existence, Malcolm X saw violence as a historically necessary effect of power gaps that is not necessary anymore.

The fight of black Americans at the time was a fight for human rights, and it was urgent. Throughout his speech, he points toward the high probability of a violent black revolution: "...the racial sparks that are ignited here in America today could easily turn into a flaming fire...it could engulf all the people of this earth into a giant race war" (7). And, according to Malcolm X, there is only one way to peacefully secure human rights for black Americans. They must obtain voting power so that they can change the system from within. This situation is necessarily different from other power struggles throughout history, because it is not one group fighting another group from the outside, or one group fighting another group from inside (such as a civil war). It is one group legally changing the rules of another group from *within that group's government*. This is why it is the only nonviolent solution—it is the only solution that doesn't need to completely overhaul the system in place. Rather, it works through the system to change the situation. To summarize Malcolm X's view on the possibility of a peaceful solution to power and violence: it is possible through the government of the United States, but only if the black Americans are granted their voting rights, which the Constitution says they are supposed to have (14).

Similarly, Mbembe also believes that a peaceful resolution to the cycle of violent power struggles throughout history is possible. Given his conceptualization of power as creating a self-identity of purposefulness and importance that relies on reducing the status of another group, Mbembe sees violence as a natural byproduct of power gaps. Unlike Douglass and Malcolm X, he focuses on a historical and sociological violence, explaining that Africa *as a concept* has become the "receptacle of the West's obsession with...the facts of 'absence,' 'lack,' and 'non-being'...of nothingness" (4). Here, the violence described may have physically violent effects, but it is a more fundamental violence that is focused on the *idea* of a people rather than the people themselves. It is a violence that robs the West's collective knowledge of Africa, for even though "we now feel we know nearly everything that African states, societies, and economies *are not*, we still know absolutely nothing about *what they actually are*" (9). The solution that Mbembe proposes for this epistemic violence is to write a new account of Africa, such that it can be conceptualized from a fresh perspective, devoid of the harshness and unfairness of its past conceptualizations.

To synthesize the three author's perspectives on violence and its relationship to power: what they all agree on is that we can end the violence that comes from power struggles without resorting to more violence. Douglass offered us the tool of individual education to accomplish this goal. Malcolm X offered the tool of democratic representation. Mbembe offered the total reconceptualization of the historically disempowered continent of Africa.

Ultimately, the three authors conceptualized power in similar but different ways. Douglass saw power as the exercise of control and influence by one person over another. His solution was the individual education of the disempowered person. Malcolm X defined power as a divisive force that maintains itself through pitting the disempowered against one another. His solutions were the unification of disempowered groups across the globe and the representation of these groups within government. Mbembe described power as the perceived value of a society, at the cost of perceived lack of value in other societies. His solution was to rewrite the story of those societies that seem to lack power such that their stories are valuable outside of the context of any other society. All the solutions envisioned by these authors are nonviolent. Therefore, the comparison of their conceptualizations of power and violence leads to conclusion that it is possible to resolve power struggle that rely on violence *without* resorting to more violence. Given this, we can be a little more hopeful about the question I raised in the beginning. It seems that despite our saddening history of violent oppression, there is always potential to make our future more peaceful than our past.