

Liberation Strategies in Black Theology: Martin Malcon, and Mao.

What follows are some notes that summarize the lecture and discussion of this article in class.

The article deals with a crucial issue in African-American history in this country: namely, the question of whether an under what condition and oppressed minority might use violence and civil revolt to fight against oppression. The article also illustrates, relative to the purposes of our course, differences in the use of rules in moral theory. The author considers three incompatible viewpoints on this matter.

Mao Tse Tung:

Mao Tse-Tung adopts the principle of "only the gun" on this matter. That is, it is not only morally permissible but morally obligatory for oppressed groups to use violence to fight oppression. Mao St Tung holds his view in light of his belief that oppressors are so completely corrupted by oppression that is pointless to try to end oppression by nonviolent means or by appealing to the consciences of oppressors. On one hand, this view seems to rely on a reading of history. On the other hand, it arises out of a classic Marxist analysis about the inevitability of class conflict and the view that only revolution can put an end to oppression.

Mao St-Tung's principle "only the gun" has an absolute nature. That is, he advances this is an obligation that holds in every case. For the seems to believe that it would be wrong for oppressed people not to engage in violent revolution. On the other hand, he does not give an unqualified justification of violence: always the gun.

"Dirty activism": this is developed as a strategy for fighting oppression oppressive force must be met with an equal or greater force. Mao cites the biblical teaching and eye for an eye to support his teaching. But Mao uses this principle in a slightly different sense than is often understood. That is, the biblical teaching is either understood to support vengeance or retribution. Recall, vengeance is concerned with getting even or satisfying one sense of being wronged. Vengeance comes to an end when the person inflicting the vengeance no longer desires to inflict it. Retribution, the other hand, is a doctrine of punishment designed to meet a certain wrong that has been done. Retribution only justifies punishment in proportion to the wrong. Mao's doctrine of dirty activism is neither vengeance nor retribution, but a strategy to deal with violence by oppressors.

A main problem for Mao's position is his claim that oppressors are always so corrupted by oppression that they will respond only to violence. For, so far as this view is based upon history, it is hard to see how a reading historical evidence: can support an absolute moral principle.

Martin Luther King

Martin Luther King adopts a principle that violence is always wrong. Therefore, violence to fight oppression is also always wrong. King was deeply influenced by the teachings of Gandhi and Christian pacifism. King believed that violence always begets further violence in part, he bases his view on a reading of history: there have been no wars to and all wars. (To this extent, his principle is subject to the same weakness as is Mao's). But King believes that when people use violence to end violence, they have to justify violence in general, and thus the use of it in the future.

Note: by denying the moral permissibility of violence, neither King nor Gandhi believed that people should simply be passive in the face of oppression. Rather, both believed there is a moral obligation to resist oppression, but that the resistance must be nonviolent.

In principle, neither King nor Gandhi allowed for a distinction between permissible and impermissible use of violence. Like Gandhi, King also believed in a moral dimension to the universe, or moral community. The use of violence always injured this community; in using violence, we also harm ourselves, by becoming violent people. Like Mao, King's principle "never violence" is absolute in nature, since violence is seen to be inherently wrong. (The central problem with

this position for many is a deep seated view that self-defense is morally justified even if it might require the use force. That is, many people believe that there is a distinction between justified and unjustified violence.

Note one difference between Mao and King: King thinks violence is inherently wrong, so it is absolutely prohibited and there's no distinction between justified and unjustified violence. On the other hand, Mao does not think that violence is inherently right. Otherwise, he would have to think that violence used by oppressors was right. Mao thinks violence use to meet oppression is inherently right.

Malcolm X:

Malcolm X adopts the principle "the ballot or the bullet" which means that oppressed people are first obligated to try nonviolent means within a political system to fight oppression and, only if such means fail should they have recourse to violence. As we noted in class, Malcolm X's principle is grounded on the same right self-defense that underlies the justification for the American Revolution as found in the *Declaration of Independence*. It is important to note that Malcolm puts the burden of successful use of the ballot squarely on oppressors. The reason; those who have power control access to a political system (e.g., men in the US prior to the enfranchisement of women. The enfranchisement occurred non-violently because men who controlled the electoral process eventually permitted women to vote.) By giving first place to the use of the ballot before the bullet, Malcolm at least in principle thinks that oppressed people can appeal to the consciences of or put non-violent pressure on oppressors to change.

Malcolm's principle of "any means necessary" must be understood in the context of the principle "the ballot or the bullet." In particular, he justified counter violence as a form of self-defense not a kind of unilateral aggression. Malcolm's principle amounts to a contextualized approach to using violence. That is, violence in response to aggression is neither inherently right nor inherently wrong but only justified under certain circumstances. Note that Jones cites four conditions Malcolm gives for determining when violence is justified to meet oppression: (1) there's a history of unpunished violence, (2) the society is grounded in moral system, for example, racism, (3) the society responds only to force or power, (4) the society sanctions violence inconsistently. However, these principles cannot be applied in some "mechanical" fashion to determine whether or not violence is justified in fighting oppression.