



**MALCOLM'S MESSAGE ON RESISTANCE:  
REFLECTIONS ON BALTIMORE, FERGUSON AND ELSEWHERE**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 05-21-15, p.A6*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**HIS month of remembering and honoring the birth, life and lessons of El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, Min. Malcolm X, finds us in the midst of a widespread and ongoing resistance against police violence. And in this month of our committing ourselves to study, embrace and live the lessons he taught us, no lessons are more important than those concerning the meaning and moral imperative of struggle or resistance. Here I use struggle and resistance interchangeably and define each as any and all personal and collective acts to lessen and eliminate the hold of a system of oppression—any acts to challenge and change it and ultimately overturn it and build a new context for human freedom and flourishing.

Malcolm taught us that resistance as a process and practice involves our self-conscious and sustained efforts to “*wake up, clean up and stand up*”. In a word, he calls us to *critical consciousness, moral grounding and transformative struggle*. Resistance is usually seen as focusing on what we are against, but here in Malcolm’s conception of resistance or struggle, we are to be both *against* and *for*, i.e., against evil and injustice and for justice and the good.

For Malcolm resistance begins, as in Kawaida, with cultivating a heart and mind committed to the liberation struggle. He tells us that “the logic of the oppressed cannot be the logic of the oppressor” if they want liberation. Thus, in his conversations with young freedom fighters from Mississippi, Malcolm stresses the essentiality and ethical imperative of self-determined thinking. He tells them: “one of the first things I think young people, especially nowadays, should learn how to do is see for yourself and listen for yourself and think for yourself. Then you can come to an intelligent decision for yourself”. He calls this self-determined thinking a “searching out” of things for

ourselves, indicating his commitment to *deep thinking* or *djaer* as the ancestors in Kemet called it.

Now, Malcolm here talks of learning how to think for ourselves, which means he understands this as an ability that must be cultivated through *study* and *practice*. Indeed, it is a struggle to break the hold the system has on so many of our minds that makes us unable to define or imagine freedom beyond the walls of our oppression and to conceive and dare to bring into being a new history and justifiable hope for the future of our people and the world.

Historical knowledge, Malcolm teaches us, is indispensable to understanding not only the past, but also the present. As he says, “of all our studies history is best qualified to reward our research”. Thus, if we look at Ferguson, Baltimore, New York, Los Angeles and elsewhere and study history, we know that this recent pattern of police violence is not new or isolated acts of violence. On the contrary, American has a *history of violence*, official and unofficial, toward Blacks and other peoples of color from its inception. And it is this systemic violence we confront and resist, a violence of domination, deprivation and degradation.

To deal with this systemic violence, Malcolm tells us we cannot struggle “within the ground rules that the people you’re struggling against have laid down” and expect to be successful or victorious. He states that the violence against Black people by both police and vigilantes means we are “being illegally, immorally and unjustly attacked”, even if the system does not concede it. And he says, “Just because a person has on a uniform does not give him the right to come and shoot up your neighborhood”, and we have a right and responsibility to resist this violence.

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Moreover, Malcolm stresses repeatedly the established order's use of the media in their counter-resistance and routine violence. He asserts that "With skilled manipulation of the press, they're able to make the victim look like the criminal and the criminal look like the victim". Indeed, they have often killed the person and then put their corpse on trial. Also, Malcolm notes how the system racializes crime and then criminalizes the race. He states that they build an image with statistics of crime in the community so that the public "begins to look upon the (Black) community as a community of criminals". And "once the public accepts this image, it also paves the way for police-state type of activity in the Black community". Thus, they resemble and become an occupying army and "can use any kind of brutal methods to suppress Blacks because they are (considered) criminals anyway".

Here, Malcolm reminds us that in such a situation of daily danger, terror and death, we are all vulnerable and that our freedom, dignity and security are indivisible. And he tells the doctor, lawyer, preacher, professor and others similar who might imagine themselves exempt from this racialized and racist violence that history proves that "despite your professional standing, you'll find that you are the same victim as the man who is in the alley...because you're Black" and belong to "a Black community which has been projected as a community of criminals".

Finally, Malcolm tells us that when Black people revolt, they are not doing it mindlessly as the media and the system suggests and asserts, but are resisting oppression and exploitation. "Blacks know

that they are being exploited and that their blood is being sucked and they see no way out". Thus, they "set fire to things" and attack property because of their oppression, exploitation and degradation by "a corrupt, vicious, hypocritical system". Also Malcolm reminds us that in calling those who revolt and resist "vandals, hoodlums, thieves"—the system "skillfully (takes) the burden off society for its failure to correct these negative conditions".

When the expanding resistance to police violence began in Ferguson, we noted that this could offer a model and incentive to rebuild the movement—or in another time and more radical context open the road to revolutionary resistance directed toward a radical restructuring of society. Ferguson was, indeed, the spark that inspired the urgent expansion of sites of struggle, strategic and general discussion and defiant confrontation that point the way toward rebuilding the movement. And it is important that we not let others define this historical moment for us, declare a movement that is yet to be built or divert us from the ongoing and unfinished fight for racial and social justice. *Nor should we confuse or conflate communicative activity in social media with confrontational actions in a social movement.* For in the midst of oppression, there is no real remedy but actual on-the-ground resistance; no strategy worth its name that does not privilege and promote righteous and relentless struggle; and no way forward except across the casualty-laden battlefield which opens to a new world and new way of living and flourishing for ourselves and future generations.

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