Introduction to Postcolonial Studies

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Black Nationalism and its relevance throughout history, from Malcom X' Organization of Afro-American Unity to current debates

When Malcom X came back from his travels on the African continent in 1964, he was deeply impressed by what the African leaders had achieved on a political and social level, in particular the Pan-African notion of Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah (cf. Waldschmidt-Nelson, 227). The Organization of African Unity (OAU) that had been founded in 1963 and manifested the continent's struggle against colonial violence by means of unification inspired Malcom X to establish an equal organization in the United States he would call the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) (Waldschmidt-Nelson 229). When speaking to the press after his visit to the African continent he expressed his conviction that unifying was the way to end the struggle the African American community and all communities of African descent had endured: "Can you imagine what can happen, what would certainly happen, if all of these African-heritage peoples ever *realize* their blood bonds, if they ever realize they all have a common goal – if they ever *unite*?" (X, Haley, 370). What likely sounded like a threat to the journalists then, for many African Americans is still today considered the remedy for their communities' problems caused by racism that is deeply embedded in American history. Black Nationalism, a race-centered view on Black politics, is one of the oldest ideologies emerging from post-colonial discourses on race and racism. It aims, first and foremost, at Black self-determination in a white supremacist society (cf. Price, 19). The ideology primarily developed and flourished in the United States, not without acknowledging, however, that the future of the African American community is deeply connected to the future of the African content, both being oppressed by the dominance of colonialism and racism (cf. ibid.)

This essay aims to address the concept of Black Nationalism and exemplify its basic ideas, goals and strategies by drawing on the Program of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), which was launched by Malcom X in 1965 shortly before his assassination. A historical overview will be given in order to comprehend the movement's origin and

contextualize the organization Malcom X founded on the very ideals Black Nationalism represent. A focus will be laid on two issues, namely economic independence and education, that can be found in the early history of Black Nationalism as well as in Malcom X' work and the Program of the OAAU. Lastly, in a brief outlook this essay will point to different movements and organizations that have been inspired by the Black Nationalist philosophy and have shaped the U.S.-American society in the twentieth century.

The origins of Black Nationalism

In the following, the origins of the ideology known as Black Nationalism will be portrayed. In its essence, Black Nationalism can be interpreted as a reaction to colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade that over a time period of approximately 300 years led to an estimated number of over 12 million Black Africans being forcibly relocated and sold into slavery to Central and North America (cf. Ashcroft, 195). The ideals of Black Nationalism can be traced back to slavery, when slave rebellions were a form of resistance by means of unification against the slaveholders. Another important early voice of Black Nationalism is abolitionist Martin Delany, often referred to as the father of Black Nationalism, who in the second half of the 19th century encouraged free Blacks and fugitive slaves to leave the United States in order to build a new, sovereign nation state where Blacks would live without oppression and in liberty (cf. Shelby, 666).

One 20th century key thinker of modern Black Nationalism is Jamaican born Marcus Garvey, whose *United Negro Improvement Association* founded in 1914 in Jamaica and moved to New York in 1916 echoed what many African Americans felt at the time. After the abolition of slavery in 1865, the so-called Reconstruction Era did not live up to its promise for Black Americans. After the supreme court case *Plessy vs Ferguson* decided that segregation was constitutional as long as there was no difference in quality – known as the *separate but equal* doctrine – the living situations of many African Americans did not improve. On the contrary, KKK terror and ghettoization had many doubt a peaceful coexistence with white society was possible (cf. Mauch et al, 219, Waldschmidt-Nelson 39). At this time of reconstruction two men who are nowadays mainly associated with Black leadership came up with strategic plans to gradually and sustainably improve the lives of Blacks in the United States. Although often portrayed as enemies with opposing objectives, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois essentially had the same goal which was the integration into white society in order for Black people to gain the same rights as

white people and no longer be citizens of a lower rank. They advertised different measures to achieve their goal, Washington believed in a gradual process and called on Black people to assimilate rather than demand equal rights right away, which Du Bois regarded as not only insufficient but in fact irresponsible (cf. Waldschmidt-Nelson, 35). In his famous work *The souls of Black Folk* Du Bois poignantly described what life as a Black man in America feels like "One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder". (Du Bois, 8) However, Du Bois and the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP), he established in 1909, appealed to Black people to use every legal measure to fight for their rights and for a better future in the United States. He also called on young Black people to enlist in the army to fight in Europe in WWI hoping that would improve their situation after their return to the States, as they would be able to demand their rights having fought for their country. The goal that had to be achieved and was considered the only practical and desirable solution was to eventually live in an integrated society (cf. Mauch et al, 220, Waldschmidt-Nelson 36). Integration into white society was not Marcus Garvey's goal:

> "The Negro needs a Nation and a country of his own, where he can best show evidence of his own ability in the art of human progress. Scattered as an unmixed and unrecognized part of alien nations and civilizations is but to demonstrate his imbecility, and point him out as an unworthy derelict, fit neither for the society of Greek, Jew nor Gentile." (qtd. In Essien-Udom, 17).

Although it was important for Garvey that Blacks in the United States and elsewhere did not accept racial injustice but, as Klinkner writes "they should focus their efforts on separatist, not integrationist, strategies" (Klinker, 117). In contrast to the NAACP, which allowed and encouraged also white members to join, the UNIA allowed only people of African descent as its members. Garvey directly connected the struggle the African American community had with the the problem of colonialism in Africa. As Nigerian historian E.U. Essien-Udom writes in his seminal analysis of Black Nationalism:

> "He believed that until Africa was liberated, there was no hope for Black people anywhere [...] He sought to organize Negroes in the United States into a vanguard for Africa's redemption from colonialism and hoped eventually to lead them back to Africa [...] Above all, he believed that the Negroes of the world, united together by

consciousness of race and nationality, could become a great and powerful people" (Essien-Udom, 36ff).

Similar to Essien-Udom, Manning Marable in his biography of Malcom X points out that the long-term goal of Garvey's ideology, which had to be achieved not immediately but eventually, was, indeed, closely connected with Africa:

"What Garvey recognized was that the Old World and the New were inextricably linked: Blacks throughout The Caribbean and the United States could never be fully free unless Africa itself was liberated. Pan-Africanism – the belief in Africa's ultimate political independence, and that of all colonial states in which states Blacks lived – was the essential goal" (Marable, 18).

Like with other ideologies there are different interpretations and versions, ranging from moderate to more radical adaptions. Garvey was not only concerned for the future of the African continent but convinced that he and, in fact, all Africans living in the diaspora would play an active role in shaping it. His Back-to Africa movement became an appealing prospect for many people of African descent: "'Back to Africa' did not mean relocating all Western Blacks to the continent, but rather organizing a cadre of scientists, mechanics, and artisans to build railroads, establish schools, and broadly perform the 'pioneering work' necessary to resurrect the struggling Black republic as a flourishing negro homeland" (Ewing, 83). Within the complex ideology of Black Nationalism there are different interpretations of the aspired return to the so-called motherland. As Essien-Udom demonstrates, the Nation of Islam interpretation alone is somewhat arbitrary:

"In its ideology the Nation of Islam is political: its objective is expressed both in terms of a Negro homeland and in the wishful image of the post-apocalypse Black Nation. The former, improbable as its realization may be, lies within the realm of human experience and is therefore theoretically possible. The latter is a paradise located outside of society in some sphere transcending historical experience" (Essien-Udom, 250).

Malcom X again had his own conception of a return to Africa, as he remembers in his autobiography: "I said that physically we Afro-Americans might remain in America, fighting for our Constitutional rights, but that philosophically and culturally we Afro-Americans badly needed to 'return' to Africa […]" (X, Hayley, 357).

Garvey's dedication to his notion of Black Nationalism was manifested in the establishment of one of his most well-known business ideas. The Black Star Line, a shipping line, whose purpose was to eventually bring goods and people from America back to Africa. (cf. Marable, 18). His ambitious entrepreneurship serves to highlight another crucial point in his ideology, which has become a central motive for Black Nationalists since, is the utter self-determination and economic independence for Black people. According to Garvey economic co-operation through solidarity among Blacks was an important measure to achieve his goals (cf. Essien-Udom, 37). As a result, Garvey and his organization encouraged Black people to open their own businesses while simultaneously keeping a list of these business, which he had supervised by a UNIA division, called the Negro Factories Corporation.

The UNIA officially released the Principles of the United Negro Improvement Association, known as the *Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World*, which underpinned the Pan-African sentiment Garvey founded his ideology on. The declaration was signed by more than 100 delegates and observers in Harlem in 1920. It consisted of a preamble, twelve complaints followed by fifty-four demands, that covered a wide range of issues from general topics, such as equality of Black and white people, to more specific demands concerning school education or providing the "Negro race" with a national anthem as well as appointing the official colors Red, Black and Green (cf. Van Deburg**,** 26, ff).

Economic self-reliance and Education as a measure of Black empowerment

Unlike the NAACP, which primarily spoke to a rising middle class, Garvey and the UNIA found their main audience in the Black working class, rural workers and poor people. His capitalist focus on generating wealth in order to live independently of white power structures, especially appealed to this group of society. He made this focus clear by telling people "Be not deceived, wealth is strength, wealth is power, wealth is influence, wealth is justice, is liberty, is real human rights" (qtd. In Marable, 17). In one of his most famous speeches, known as "The ballot or the bullet", which was delivered in 1964, Malcom X also dedicated part of his speech to illustrate the larger economic context associated with the Black Nationalist ideology:

> "[...] all we're doing there is trying to collect for our investment. Our mothers and
>   fathers invested sweat and blood. Three hundred and ten years we worked in this

country without a dime in return -- I mean without a dime in return. You let the white man walk around here talking about how rich this country is, but you never stop to think how it got rich so quick. It got rich because you made it rich. You take the people who are in this audience right now. They're poor. We're all poor as individuals. Our weekly salary individually amounts to hardly anything. But if you take the salary of everyone in here collectively, it'll fill up a whole lot of baskets. It's a lot of wealth. If you can collect the wages of just these people right here for a year, you'll be rich -- richer than rich. When you look at it like that, think how rich Uncle Sam had to become, not with this handful, but millions of Black people. Your and my mother and father, who didn't work an eight-hour shift, but worked from "can't see" in the morning until "can't see" at night, and worked for nothing, making the white man rich, making Uncle Sam rich. This is our investment. This is our contribution, our blood." (Breitmann, 34)

Shifting the perspective back to the exploitation, African Americans have been subject to, and thus providing the necessary education about historical contexts is an important strategy of Black Nationalism. This perspective unites two of the most important issues the ideology deals with, economic agency and education, both of which are considered essential instruments of empowerment for African Americans. Not surprisingly, these issues were taken up by Malcom X when launching the Organization of Afro-American Unity which will be briefly introduced in the following.

As stated in the beginning, the Organization of the Afro-American was heavily influenced by the experiences Malcom X had made when visiting Mecca and African countries, speaking to African leaders, especially those embracing the Pan-African notion of unity as an instrument to gain freedom of oppression. However, his strong belief in Black Nationalist philosophy had been part of Malcom X's mindset since his childhood and always had a strong impact on his teachings and attitudes on the importance of Black empowerment. As he describes it himself in biography:

"If you will remember, in my childhood I had been exposed to the Nationalist teachings of Marcus Garvey [...] Even when I was a follower of Elijah Muhammad, I had been strongly aware of how the Black Nationalist political, economic and social philosophies had the ability to instill within Black men the racial dignity, the incentive, and the confidence that the Black race needs to get up off its knees, and to get on its feet, and get rid of its scars, and to take a stand for itself" (X, Haley, 382).

The organization was founded in 1964, three months after Malcom X had officially left the Nation of Islam and eight months before Malcom X was assassinated at an OAAU event in Harlem in February 1965. Although, after Malcom's death, his half-sister Ella Little-Collins took over for her brother, she could not prevent the organization from collapsing without the leadership and charisma of its founder (cf. Waldschmidt-Nelson, 295). Judging by the immense popularity and uprise Malcom X had generated for other organizations, such as the Nation of Islam, it can only be assumed what might have become of an organization he dedicated his energy to right from the beginning. In a speech Malcom held in Harlem in 1964 to introduce the OAAU for the first time, he gave an outline of the most important goals that were to be achieved and measures that were to be taken. A charter, modelled on the Charter of the United Nations, was presented to the audience. The main issues that were addressed were later also included in the organization's official program. They included the issue of economics as well as education. As has been demonstrated above, economic independence was a main concern for both Garvey and Malcom X. In his speech in Harlem, Malcom illustrates how the exploitation Afro-Americans were subject to during slavery has continued and that the majority of the Black community are unaware of it. A connection was drawn between the focus on economic self-determination and security and political power, as Malcom pointed out, as gaining agency in both of these realms is essential in order for communities in America to gain control over their destiny. This coincides with what Price asserts in her analysis of Black Nationalism:

> "First, all Black Nationalists support Black self-determination. For them it is vital that African Americans be able to exert control over the institutions that define their world. Some Black Nationalists have asserted that this can happen only through self-governance of a Black nation; others emphasize having control over community institutions with which African Americans interact daily (e.g., schools, businesses). Second, a self-determining Black community is also one that has a clear plan for independence and self-sustenance by virtue of its own financial, political, and intellectual resources in the form of self-help programs" (Price, 19).

In the OAAU's program, these objectives can be found, especially with regards to the establishment of nine different committees (Cultural, Economic, Educational, Political, Publications, Social, Self-Defense, Youth, Staff), each targeting an important communal area and thereby contributing to the larger goal of complete self-reliance. Based on the

assumption that neither actual emigration to Africa nor the actual establishment of a nation outside of the national borders of the U.S. was the main concern of the OAAU, it is interesting to look at the palpable measures the organization drafted concerning education. The issue is introduced by referring to education as "an important element in the struggle for human rights" (OAAU address, 1964). The criticism that Malcom, on behalf of the OAAU, expressed targeted not only the state of most educational facilities in Black communities, but also the content that was being taught. Especially, a lack of African American history and important contributions made in the national history by Black people was asserted. It must be remembered that in 1964 only ten years had passed since the seminal Supreme Court ruling *Brown vs Board of Education* which had officially declared segregation - especially in educational institutions - unconstitutional. The aftermath of decades-long segregation and second-class education for Black children and adolescents, was still evident in African American communities. According to the OAAU education serves the purpose of providing children not only with knowledge about hard facts but plays an equally important role in generating self-respect and a sense of identity. In order to repair the damages years of race-based oppression, slavery and segregation have caused, it is an important strategy of Black Nationalism to teach about Black history, to include Black figures in the curriculum, students can look up to. As Malcom highlighted in his speech: "Every little child going to school thinks his grandfather was a cotton picker. Why, your grandfather was Nat Turner; your grandfather was Toussaint L'Ouverture; […] But the textbooks tell our children nothing about the great contributions of Afro-Americans to the growth and development of this country" (X, 1964)[1]. The organization's program proposed certain measures to tackle these institutional deficits. These measures included the employment of Black teaching staff and Black principals for the school that in the process of desegregation have been neglected by the Board of Education. The program further demanded textbooks written by African Americans as well as Black representatives to serve on local school boards to be included in decisions concerning the local educational organisation. Parents were called on to rather homeschool their children than let them be educated in the system that justified slavery. The long-term goal here, too, was not the permanent cooperation with white society but, in fact, as the organization's Basic Unity program states to "completely control our own educational

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[1] The speech delivered to introduce the OAAU can be found under https://www.Blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1964-malcolm-x-s-speech-founding-rally-organization-afro-american-unity/ 22.07.2021

institutions," (Van Deburg, 110). The current debate about what should and should not be taught in American public schools is evidence of how the issue of education is still a contested subject. According to journalist Kiara Alfonseca, several states have introduced bills that aim to prevent topics such as race and issues of racial inequality from being included in the curricular. Legal scholar Crenshaw has been contributing to the debate: "Crenshaw said she believes the latest legislation on education and the teachings about structural racism are not about the curriculum itself, but about the power that education about racism can have on fixing systems of oppression" (Kiara, 2021). Even though the debate is not about the education of only Black students, it does, however, illustrate how education is still an important tool in the process of empowering marginalised groups.

The history of Black Nationalism in the United States, particularly in the twentieth century can only be understood when considering the many fundamental changes and developments within American society at the time. After the assassination of Malcom X many of his followers were, once again, frustrated by the reality many Afro-Americans were faced with in urban America. During the sixties and seventies many Black artists, intellectuals and activists called on their communities to take pride in their African heritage. *Black power* became a buzzword for many who would no longer accept the oppression Afro-Americans had been faced with. The *slogan Black is beautifu*l encouraged Black people to dissociate themselves from white customs in fashion and beauty products. The gradual decolonisation that was beginning on the African continent inspired radical Black Nationalists to take more direct action to gain their own freedom. One of these measures lead to the establishment of the Black Panther Party by radical Black Nationalists in California in 1966. The party was perceived as a domestic threat and their activism and messages gained attention throughout society. The on-going public focus on the racial dichotomy of Black and white eventually led to an increased political awareness and interest within the Afro-American community. (cf. Mauch et. al. 335, Waldschmidt-Nelson 309). The essential thoughts of the Black Nationalist ideology, self-determination and empowerment, remain important topics in African American political movements and community work.

Conclusion

Ideologies such as Black Nationalism can be perceived as prolonged reactions to the injustices caused by European colonialism and the unjust distribution of power ever since. Black Nationalism as a movement is intricately connected with the history of the United States. The first Black Nationalist thoughts were expressed by enslaved people, who exercised resistance to white oppression in various forms. Marcus Garvey perceived the fate of people living in the African diaspora as directly linked to that of the African continent, identifying the common oppressor by whom they had been colonised and enslaved. His notion of Black Nationalism invoked the establishment of an all-Black State and the eventual return of all Black people back to Africa. His primary goal was unification of all people of African descent and independence of white power structure. His strategies and measures, some more successful some less, helped make him a heroic figure in the Black fight against oppression and his legacy inspired many Black leaders after him, such as Malcom X. The establishment of Malcom's Organization for Afro-American Unity can be seen as an attempt to achieve Black Nationalist goals by focusing on the Black communities within the United States, shifting the perspective from an actual physical return to Africa to an identification with one's African heritage and solidarity with Africans on the continent. As with many ideologies there are moderate and radical interpretations and inner discrepancies often cost the movement relevant progress. Black Nationalism has inspired and influenced different movements, groups and activism, such as the Black power movement or the establishment of the Black Panther Party. Lastly, it is embedded in the American history and should be studied and analysed in the context of that history. All in all, it can be asserted that the philosophy of Black Nationalism can only be understood when one looks at the history of European colonialism and racism. The desire for an all-Black nation can only be appropriately interpreted when one considers the centuries-long oppression and unjust distribution of power that lie at the bottom of such desires. **4052**

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