



# The Power of the Future: Prophetic Politics Between Political Crises and Civil Rights

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the political life of Malcolm X in the context of the Black Prophetic Tradition. By exploring historical, literary, and theological considerations of political violence and divine warnings, “Catch on Fire” evaluates Malcolm X’s legacy as one of the iconic figures within more contemporary prophetic politics.

## KEYWORDS

Malcolm X; black nationalism; black political theology; black political thought; race; racial politics

## Introduction

Prophetic politics appears at first glance to be an oxymoron. Unlike politics with other qualifiers – “democratic politics” or “identity politics” come to mind – Prophetic politics has a distinctive interest in the moral interaction between the citizen and the state. In the Western political tradition, it was Augustine who separated the City of God (*Dei Civitate Dei*) from the Earthly City.<sup>1</sup> Yet, even the earliest theories of politics could not escape discussions about the relationship between the moral or ethical nature of the individual, along with that of the state. Contending theories about power and public policies that shape people with real-world needs, have persistently returned to what it means to be good – or, put another way, in right standing with God.

Despite this recurring theme, the political science that arose during the Enlightenment attempted to separate, if not reject outright, forms of religious, and or prophetic politics, from rationalistic efforts to address human needs inside of a polity. One might push further and suggest, invoking Jefferson, that modern politics has at best been inclined towards helping make the lives of citizens *happier*; but this is not quite the same as making them righteous. And in the context of modern political philosophy’s connection to the rise of capitalism, happiness has become more tied to the accumulation of wealth than the progression of a human soul. Somewhat embarrassed, Jefferson substituted happiness for property in the *Declaration* – but the development of American political history has more than born out his instinctive wording. The “happiness” found in the American Declaration of Independence remains part of the American national mission statement, but it is far from standing operating procedures for government.

Politics certainly implicates history, and politicians do invoke the future; but politics is fundamentally about the present moment. This is especially true in the United States, a country where more elections are held, and more frequently, than in almost any other

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<sup>1</sup>Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*.

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nation. While this may seem like “hyper-democracy,” it has the effect of orienting political objectives along two-, four-, and six-year cycles.<sup>2</sup> This does not account for many other myriad local elections. So, American presentism is partly an embedded political phenomenon. We are not to “render unto some prospective or past Caesar,” but rather the one whose image appears on the coin, in the realm, in the moment we are living. The story of Western Civilization, properly capitalized in its narrative version, sees the clear separation of politics and prophecy; it wasn’t Jefferson who erected a wall of separation between the two, but Christ himself, we are taught. As such, the Lord’s work takes on the role of satisfying otherworldly needs while the work of politics is about the needs of this world. To be clear, this is the story of politics, at least in the Western world.

Prophecy, and prophetic teaching, on the other hand, implicates the future. It involves a warning – perhaps something more – maybe even a kind of threat. And while prophecy may be directed towards subjects and citizens, prophetic politics is principally concerned with the conduct of rulers. After all, prophetic teachings, including Jeremiads, are delivered, at least indirectly, through God’s messengers for those in power. As such, they are overwhelming in their sense of finality, about what is absolute, and indeed, what justice requires. Quotidian politics, one might presume, doesn’t need God’s warning – a kind of “red-line” as we might call it today; ordinary politics involves worldly power and this power is characterized by energy and force in government to accomplish whatever is required to improve the lives of citizens, irrespective of their moral conduct. As Madison wrote, “If men were angels, we would not need government.” But, better still, *because* men are not angels, we must have prophetic politics.

Prophecy – or prophetic politics, must enter where earthly politics cannot, or will not, do more. And therefore, in speaking of prophetic politics, we are describing an intersection of theological and secular movement towards the Good. But, we need another qualifier. Why a Black Prophetic Tradition? Are there things that “ordinary” prophetic politics cannot do? Will not do? Is there a white prophetic tradition, and if so, what does it mean for those of us concerned with the well-being of all? With these questions in mind, I employ James Cone’s invocation of a black prophetic tradition, to help guide my discussion of Malcolm X that follows:

Theology must be prophetic, recognizing the *relativity* of human speech, but also that God can use human speech at a particular time for the proclamation of God’s word to the suffering poor . . . . Theology is always a word about the liberation of the oppressed and the humiliated. It is a word of judgment for the oppressors and the rulers.<sup>3</sup>

Oppression in Cone’s rendering, is related to being ruled improperly. Godly judgment is not required for just political practices. At least theoretically, a truly democratic society would not need prophetic politics. In lieu of that, the Black Prophetic Tradition has had to rely on the institution of the Black Church to provide practical and symbolic forms of justice. As Cornel West has written, “the institutional roots of the prophetic tradition lie in black churches.”<sup>4</sup> This makes black spiritual life part of a distinctive group’s social and cultural reality, while also serving as a broader archetype for democratic possibilities outside of its community.

<sup>2</sup>See Streb, *Rethinking American Electoral Democracy*, 12.

<sup>3</sup>Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 75–6.

<sup>4</sup>West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 42.

A simple rejoinder to this idea is that Black Prophetic Politics is a part of prophetic politics writ large. This, I think is so, but the observation occludes something fundamental, at least in the American experience, and that is that the American public sense of the Good, of Justice, has rarely conformed to universal conceptions – certainly not where race is concerned. More pointedly, especially where race is concerned. This was one of Alexis de Tocqueville’s most honest assessments of American democracy. In invoking race for the first time, Tocqueville is nearly apologetic: it is a subject at once “American without being democratic.”<sup>5</sup> This despite the Declaration with its universal proclamation of all men being created equal. Lincoln read this as a promise. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, in his Dred Scot decision, issued in his ruling a kind of ridicule directed at Lincoln’s interpretation. Taney said, “this government was formed on the white basis” and that “the black man has no rights which the white man is bound to respect.” Taney was correct in reading the notes of American political history; Lincoln was prophetic in listening to the music.<sup>6</sup>

But prophecy is dangerous. It asks us to believe in a tomorrow we can ill-afford to be wrong about. It asks for faith when by definition, we are surrounded on all sides in a situation that asks us to see the world as it is. To return to Cone’s understanding of prophetic theology: it is necessarily political and it has three distinctive parts that imbue it with moral clarity. These are: the presence of God’s word, delivered in a specific moment in time; the content of God’s word directed towards the poor and suffering for the purpose of liberation; and finally, God’s word holds a message of judgment to rulers who engage in the oppression of God’s people. They face the wrath of divine justice absent a change in their behavior. And that behavior can only be described as political.

### **Malcolm X and the Black Prophetic tradition**

Malcolm X’s public speeches and rhetoric are part of a Black Prophetic tradition, and fit well within Cone’s framework for invoking politics in the context of black theology. But they are but one aspect of it. Malcolm’s account of black life in America is also in keeping with a Black Nationalist tradition that dates to at least the mid-nineteenth century; it also is part of an Exodus tradition – and this term may better serve than that of “black separatist,” insofar as the ideology of separatism may be too easily divorced from religious motivations. One need only examine Jefferson and Lincoln’s thought on the subject, in addition to many of the early white abolitionists, who, for purely practicable reasons, rather than ones connected to the spiritual world, supported, advocated, and advanced the idea of colonization rather than ensuring that black lives be accepted in the United States on equal terms.<sup>7</sup>

Malcolm X’s prophetic lineage runs through Elijah Muhammad, Marcus Garvey, Martin Delaney, Nat Turner, and David Walker. This is a line of righteous condemnation for ascribed American values, those applied selectively and lacking in connectivity to black lives. Malcolm’s religious life as a Muslim, certainly under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, precluded militant direct political action. Allah was to judge the wicked –

<sup>5</sup>de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 303.

<sup>6</sup>Harold Holzer notes that Lincoln likewise attacked Taney’s decision on the historical record. See Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 136.

<sup>7</sup>Guyatt, *Bind Us Apart*, 324.

and by wicked, the subject was meant to be the American government. “Don’t blame a cracker in Georgia for your problems,” Malcolm said. “The government is responsible.”

Ironically, Malcolm’s status in the Nation of Islam prohibited overt political behavior, rendering his fury at American racism and neocolonialism largely symbolic; Malcolm envied the SCLC and Dr. King in this way – their theology afforded them a practical avenue for confronting white supremacy, albeit in a manner Malcolm found disempowering. The Black Church’s political heritage was long and profound; the Nation of Islam’s politics was nascent and largely eschewed by its leadership.

But, things began to change in 1962, when Malcolm spoke on 22 May in Los Angeles, at a rally for the recently slain member of the Nation of Islam, Ronald Stokes, whom days before had been the victim of a police shooting. Stokes was unarmed and the police had violated the sanctity of the Muslim Temple by forcibly entering and shooting Stokes, along with several other Muslim members. Stokes was a good friend of Malcolm’s and his death was an object lesson in Malcolm’s teaching about the evils of an American police state blacks were living under for hundreds of years. Stokes died, arms raised, unarmed, shot through the back. A Korean War veteran and devout Muslim, Stokes’s death triggered something deep in Malcolm. Later, in his famous speech, “The Message to the Grassroots,” Malcolm would say: “How are you going to be nonviolent in America as violent as you were in Korea?” And he added bitterly, “You bleed when the white man says bleed; and you bite when the white man says bite; and you bark when the white man says bark.”<sup>8</sup> It is hard to imagine Malcolm not thinking about his friend, who submissively went to his death at home, while being willing to kill with impunity for a country that did not recognize his humanity, abroad.

As Manning Marable has written, Stokes’ murder produced a profound internal crisis for Malcolm.<sup>9</sup> The title of this article – Catch on Fire – is the conclusion Malcolm reached in his Los Angeles speech at the rally for Stokes; it was from his oft-used analogy about America as a house that needed cleaning up. Here is the context of the speech – and what it meant both then and perhaps going forward, in thinking about all forms of Prophetic Politics.

I, for one, as a Muslim believe that the white man is intelligent enough, if he were made to realize how black people really feel and how fed up we are without that old compromising sweet talk ... why you’re the one who makes it hard for yourself. The white man believes you when you go to him with that old sweet talk, ‘cause you’ve been sweet-talking him ever since he brought you here. Stop sweet-talking him. Tell him how you feel. Tell him what kind of hell you’ve been catching and let him know that if he’s not ready to clean his house up, if he’s not ready to clean his house up, he shouldn’t have a house. It should catch on fire, and burn down.<sup>10</sup>

“He shouldn’t have a house. It should catch on fire, and burn down.”

Restrained by Elijah from responding directly to the police shooting in Los Angeles, something he desperately wanted to do – and “responding” in this instance meant violent retaliation – Malcolm’s language here went to the very precipice of threatening

<sup>8</sup>Malcolm, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 7.

<sup>9</sup>Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 207.

<sup>10</sup>The speech was delivered at a Los Angeles rally for Stokes on 22 May 1962. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilz2tOSOJ9Q>.

a violent revolt in America.<sup>11</sup> Malcolm in this moment, and in other instances, would argue that blacks in the United States had every reason to respond in kind to American violence inflicted against them; and yet, his politics, and in a sense, his theology, prevented an outright suggestion of violent overthrow. But that did not mean America wasn't worthy of divine retribution. The Master's House had long been a metaphor for America in Malcolm's teaching.

There is good reason Malcolm was said to have been a devotee of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, dating from his time in prison when he was first exposed to him.<sup>12</sup> We cannot know because he did not appear to have spoken publicly or written about it, but Malcolm appeared to have quite logically, placed Hegel's Master and Slave dialectic in an American racial context. Malcolm loved employing the House Negro and Field Negro analogy, a dialectic (an inner racial struggle) within a dialectic (an external racial struggle); like a Russian doll, the American racial context had layers of conflict, most of which for Malcolm, emasculated radical black responses to injustice.

If Jefferson was prophetic, then righteous black fury had a legitimate place alongside white fury. To deny black fury is to deny black humanity. It is one reason why Malcolm and members of the Nation of Islam so loved employing the Old Testament in their theology. Ecclesiastes allowed a time for anger. There was also the justice of an "eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

Again, Malcolm's words speak for themselves – once again, in "The Message to the Grassroots":

If violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad. If it's wrong to be violent defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it's wrong for America to draft us and make us violent abroad in defense of her. And if it is right for America to draft us, and teach us how to be violent in defense of her, then it is right for you and me to do whatever is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country.<sup>13</sup>

It is certainly not identical to Dr. King's message in 1967 and 1968, but it is astonishingly close in assessing the relationship between state violence and Negro retribution. Here is King, one year before his death, in "A Time To Break Silence":

As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they ask – and rightly so – what about Vietnam? They ask if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government.<sup>14</sup>

The difference between Malcolm and King was ultimately slight, at least by one unit of measure. Malcolm argued for the right of blacks to "Take up arms, and oppose the sea of troubles" they faced.<sup>15</sup> He, in fact, used this passage from Hamlet at the end of his

<sup>11</sup>See Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 209.

<sup>12</sup>Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union*, 109.

<sup>13</sup>Malcolm, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 8.

<sup>14</sup><http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>.

<sup>15</sup>Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union*, 180.

debate at Oxford a few short months before his death to make a twofold argument. White literature, faith, liberalism, retained an inherent right of whites to throw off the shackles of their oppressors. Malcolm wanted that right for blacks. More importantly, Malcolm understood that in the natural course of events, that right would be exercised if America did not change her ways. This was the judgment portion of Cone's assessment of prophetic theology.

King understood this as well. The American House would undoubtedly "Catch on Fire," absent a radical departure from its policies at home and abroad. If there was a distinction between the two prophetic visions, it may well have had to do with Malcolm's desire for the long-awaited confrontation between the slave children and Pharaoh, while King lamented this increasingly inevitable outcome. King's pacifism never compelled him to suggest passive resistance was preferable to injustice; nonviolence was a means to justice, but it wasn't justice in and of itself. Likewise, Malcolm's defense of self-defense wasn't a euphoric valuation of violence; it too was a means to achieving ultimate justice, but it was hardly a way of life. It most certainly was not representative of Malcolm's vision of the good life.

And yet, much of biblical prophesy prioritizes a form of justice that cleanses in its justice, and by cleansing, I am referring to the suggestion and indeed, history of flooding, fire, divine disaster, if you will, clearing the way for renewal. The hand of God can be stayed, but only by repentance. The prophet can only be of value where the oppressor has the capacity for change. And, one must conclude both Malcolm and Martin were in the end, deeply skeptical about the prospects that America would give up her arms, give up her material wealth and inequality, and give up her love of white supremacy.

### Conclusion: death in the Captain's cabin

At the Conference on Prophetic Politics held in New York's Center for Jewish History in the fall of 2017, I was struck by the visible discomfort I witnessed during Susannah Heschel's talk on the relationship between her father, Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King. One person, a man to my right in the audience, could barely contain himself. Every few sentences from Dr. Heschel produced sighs of agitation, fidgets of contempt, grunts of displeasure. It was quite striking. He was clearly out of sorts about the message of absolute divine justice – one he felt Susannah was wrong about. And I knew, that Dr. Heschel had furthered Rabbi Heschel's message well, insofar as it continued to make the comfortable uncomfortable. Malcolm understood that America could not buy justice on the cheap. One cannot ask for love and unity absent fundamental change in oneself and others – including change in the structures of our institutions and our leaders. Love without fairness is not love; it is acquiescence.

There have been very few prophetic literary giants in the American canon, but Herman Melville is one of them. He was also one of the great and understudied theorists of American democracy. In *Moby Dick*, he presents many moral conundrums, not the least of which is race. But, I want to go to the first mate Starbuck and his paralytic relationship with Captain Ahab, because it raises the question of how can we as humans, bring about the prophetic change warranted by God? Starbuck is the sole voice of reason aboard the Pequod, a vessel named for an extinct Native American tribe. (Melville knew of platforms and symbols. We sail on death – even now.) The chapter I am referring



to is “The Musket.” It is a good one to employ in thinking of Malcolm X, a man who never used a gun in public life, and was never associated personally with violence. And yet, one of the most circulated photos of him is with a rifle, looking out his window in a defensive posture.<sup>16</sup> Somehow, like Shakespeare’s Cassius, we “misconstrue everything” – never more, when contemplating the gun in America and its role in subjugation.

Of course, by the time we get to “The Musket” in *Moby Dick*, things have pretty well gone to Hell. It is really too late – Ahab, the wicked king, has won the hearts of the crew by promises for gold in search of some obscure object of whiteness, one that blinds everyone on board to their own self-interest, what Alexis de Tocqueville called “self-interest properly understood.” Ahab and the crew are hell-bent on capturing the white whale Moby Dick, and Starbuck has known all along that the quest was folly. He is the only one to initially stand up to Ahab. He protests the ludicrous search for the whale, and is the only one to do so. He says the following to Ahab earlier in the voyage:

I am game for his crooked jaw, and for the jaws of Death too, Captain Ahab, if it fairly comes in the way of business we follow; but I came here to hunt whales, not my commanders’ vengeance. How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab? it will not fetch the much in our Nantucket market.<sup>17</sup>

But this argument doesn’t work. Mainly because Starbuck is too quick in backing down. But later in the novel, Starbuck has his chance. He has access to Ahab’s musket – one that was pointed at him previously. What to do? Ahab is asleep. He has the opportunity to wound, perhaps kill Ahab and rescue the crew. We know from the first page essentially that Ishmael is the only one to survive the voyage, so clearly the numbers would dictate some justification for saving many held in thrall to a deranged leader.

Of course, it does – it is why the following passage in “The Musket” is getting greater attention these days, and for good reason. Here it is:

But shall this crazed old man be tamely suffered to drag a whole ship’s company down to doom with him? – Yes, it would make him the wilful murderer of thirty men and more, if this ship come to any deadly harm; and come to deadly harm, my soul swears this ship will, if Ahab have his way. If, then, he were this instant – put aside, that crime would not be his.

Starbuck ultimately decides to “place the loaded musket against the door” and depart the cabin, leaving Ahab alone and in a restless asleep. Starbuck would rather die than become a murderer, even as death robs him of his wife and beloved son. He is also willing to consign the crew to death in order to remain blameless. How does Melville want us to feel about this? Is this the fate of wayward democracy?

One cannot help but imagine Malcolm and Martin in that cabin, like Starbuck, each with access to that musket. The simplistic speculation is that King would let Ahab live, leaving the musket by the door as Starbuck did. And, we naturally presume Malcolm would gladly blast Ahab to eternity, saving himself and the crew. But I want to trouble this a bit and return to what prophetic politics has to provide for these times aboard our own Pequod.

<sup>16</sup>Abernethy, *The Iconography of Malcolm X*, 69–70.

<sup>17</sup>This and other passages are found in the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Moby Dick*. Melville, *Moby Dick*.

Perhaps Melville doesn't want us to wrangle, Hamlet-like, over whether it is right or wrong to blast the Ahabs of this world. The Musket chapter is but a construct, within the larger construct of the story of *Moby Dick*, after all. But we do not live within a construct; we live in a world of savage consequences for failing to act against tyranny – for failing to stand up, as best we can, where we are, with what we have, against all forms of injustice. No, the confrontation with Ahab demands greater scrutiny. And Melville tells us. We assume the mystery of “The Musket” is how we would act if we were in Starbuck's shoes. But Melville has a more chilling line later in the novel. It is from the chapter “The Doubloon”:

There's something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here, – three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab.

“All are Ahab.” This is the grotesque outcome of not confronting our own inner evil – which often takes the form of elevating our egos and comfort above and beyond the dictates of justice. Even those counted among the oppressed can become part of the machinery of oppression. Indeed, it is a fundamental warning deeply embedded in the Black Prophetic Tradition. For his part, perhaps Melville wants us to peek into the cabin and see ourselves as Ahabs, twisting and turning in our sleep. The real terror is becoming the thing we loathe, a captive of our own madness – primarily out of a fear of confronting the darkness of our own souls. It is that personal confrontation that gave Dr. King and Malcolm X the moral authority to raise their voices against a society of profound corruption, hate, and violence. The prophetic voice needn't be perfect, but it must be more motivated by a hatred for injustice than a love of ease. Failing to recognize this places us on the path of Ahab, the path of the Bull Connors, the Trumps, the path of vainglory, and remoteness to human decency.

And then, as prophecy instructs us, be we prepared our not:

The fire must come.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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