

Malcolm X: Afro-American Revolutionary Nationalist
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Malcolm X was one of the two dominant Afro-American leaders during the decade of Black protest, the 1960's. His leadership stood as the major alternative to that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the more familiar and well-known of the two. Unlike Dr. King, too much of what Malcolm X stood for was unacceptable to the system. It would just as soon have Afro-Americans forget Malcolm X as it wanted everyone to forget Paul Robeson. Twenty years after his assassination and sixty years after his birth, Malcolm X has yet to receive the scholarly treatment and universal acknowledgement he deserves as the most legitimately proletarian leader the Afro-American community has ever produced.

Malcolm X was prominent for a very short period of time, possibly no more than five years. In that time, he was much more a public speaker and agitator than an intellectual bequeathing an extensive library of books. Much of his popularity resulted from his deft manipulation of the media, a media with notable exceptions, silent or critical of his legacy after his death. At the time of his death, Malcolm X was still refining his synthesis of the Afro-American liberation struggle and the international struggle of Third World peoples against racist Euro-American imperialism. His presentation of this synthesis was not as strong as it would ultimately have been had he lived. In order to effect this synthesis, it was necessary for Malcolm X to leave his disciplined organizational base in the Nation of Islam but his new-found Organization of Afro-American Unity had yet to mature as a highly disciplined organization by the time he was struck down. **It** was unable to defend and nurture his legacy after his

assassination. Unfortunately, a host of organizations and tendencies unwittingly aided and abetted the government directed obfuscation of Malcolm's legacy as they struggled to claim the mantle of Malcolm's leadership of the ghettoised Black masses.

The struggle for Malcolm's legacy continues. Its outcome is of crucial importance to the furtherance of the struggle for Black liberation. To understand Black leadership and the Black movement of the 1960's, both King and Malcolm X must be critically studied and analyzed. Malcolm X is as important as Martin Luther King. Without restoring Malcolm X to his rightful place it will be impossible to understand the motion of the 1960's and the lessons to be extracted from that decade.

We must study the full range of ideological and political points made by Malcolm in terms of their relevance to the situation of Black people today. But the life of Malcolm X was a complex one, full of change, dynamism, contradiction and development. He was a worker, a lumpen, an Imam, a political leader, an international diplomat, a propagandist and a political theorist. Each of these aspects of his identity raise basic questions which must be answered; how do we periodize Malcolm's life, his political development, his political thought, for instance. We must recognize that the thinking of Malcolm X is controversial. Malcolm X addressed ideological issues which even today are at the center of debates within the Black liberation movement. While Malcolm held up the nationalist flag in the debate with the integrationists, he advanced his arguments in such a way as to raise up the more fundamental issues of the class character of the various contending ideas for liberation in

the Black community as well as the political role and class content of various aspects of Afro-American culture. His legacy charges us not so much to choose between race and class as explanatory variables but to discover the relationship and interpenetration of these two most important aspects of Afro-American reality under given social conditions.

Moreover, the study of Malcolm X raises interesting methodological questions. How do we research a working class intellectual whose written legacy is limited? How do we determine that such a working class intellectual is a theorist? Where is Malcolm situated in the Afro-American intellectual tradition? What is Malcolm's place among 20th century revolutionary thinkers?

Many of these questions can be answered definitively only after a major research effort on the part of a collective body of scholars gathering all of the documentation of what actually took place and analyzing it from all academic disciplines. The competition of contending points of view under such circumstances can be clarified based on objective reality, on proof. This is our only acceptable approach to the historical Malcolm, documented evidence.

Malcolm X was a revolutionary Black nationalist, implacably struggling to destroy the racist, monopoly capitalist system which is the United States of America. He was an outsider trying to bring down the system not join it. His following was extensive, mass-based and disciplined. By the end of 1964, Malcolm X had secured international support for his movement and won official recognition from the Organization of African Unity.

The American government saw his leadership as dangerous and moved to expedite the destruction of his person and his legacy.¹

On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X fell at the hands of assassins in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom. But the struggle to redeem his legacy continues. The American ruling class has attempted to destroy as much of Malcolm's legacy as possible, repress what remains indestructible and distort the meaning of that part of his legacy which could neither be destroyed nor repressed.

This presentation is a brief survey of the significance of Malcolm X then and now and stands as a small contribution to the major effort necessary to restore Malcolm X to his proper place in the pantheon of revolutionaries. More than ever in the 1980's the Afro-American people need his insights and the image of his example.

Malcolm X: Revolutionary Black Nationalist

Malcolm X stood squarely in the revolutionary tradition of Henry Highland Garnet and Bisop Henry McNeil Turner.² His stance was objectively revolutionary as were these precursors of his because Malcolm's rhetoric was iconoclastic in attacking the mythology of the American Dream, the major intellectual prop of Civil Rights' reformism. He pushed the debate of means and ends beyond the parameters established by the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Especially after his break with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X became quite sensitive to the relationship of reform struggles to revolutionary development. His "Ballot or the Bullet" speech by pinpointing the alternative futures of the struggle took that struggle for the

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ballot beyond reformism. In this sense, Malcolm X is the intellectual father of independent Black politics.

By restoring the tradition of revolutionary Black nationalism to the Civil Rights protests of the early 1960's, Malcolm X rescued the Civil Rights Movement from the reformist cul de sac within which it was rapidly being entrapped. His insistence on the inherent right of self-defense, "by any means necessary", was not a novel pronouncement in the history of the Afro-American liberation struggle. Rather it resurrected the antebellum protest tradition associated with the likes of David Walker and Rev. Henry Highland Garnett, both of whom called upon the slaves to rebel and destroy their slavemasters. Malcolm's militancy on the question of violence touched the same emotive chord in the psyche of the Black masses today that the sentiments of Walker and Garnett struck in the bosom of Nat Turner, the slave preacher whose rebellion in Virginia in 1831 traumatized the slavocracy.

While the articulation of the question of revolutionary violence by Malcolm X legitimized sentiments long rooted in the urban Black masses, he increasingly appealed to the Black student activists and intelligentsia being radicalized by their experiences in struggle. By the end of 1963, more and more southern civil rights workers were losing faith in non-violent direct action as a way of life. Most civil rights cadres had not made the unequivocal philosophical acceptance of non-violence as King had done. They saw it merely as a tactic increasingly unable to achieve even the most modest of goals. Demoralization and

cynicism spread rapidly among these cadres since alternatives to non-violence were not easily discussed on their merits, being considered heresy by the orthodox leadership.

Robert Williams of Monroe, North Carolina was read out of the NAACP for advocating self defense against racist night riders in his community. The "Deacons for Self Defense" caused a stir within CORE when they began to provide armed escorts for non-violent demonstrations in Plaquemine County, Louisiana. SNCC cadres in the Mississippi Delta were all but driven insane attempting to uphold the non-violent imperative in the face of the savage beatings they endured during the voter registration campaigns. By 1965, it was the revolutionary nationalist thought of Malcolm X not the King philosophy of non-violence which resonated sympathetically with the experiences of civil rights workers in the deep South.⁴

By opening up the debate again on the question of revolutionary violence and reestablishing its place in the traditional arsenal of Afro-American resistance and struggle, Malcolm X paved the way for the appearance in the United States of Fanon's Wretched of the Earth which by 1965-66 had wrestled the intellectual and moral highground from King's Ghandian non-violence among radicalized movement intelligentsia.⁵

Malcolm X: Theorist of the Politics of Culture

The political ideology of Malcolm X placed the highest value on the achievement of Black unity. To him, Black unity would be the primary means by which Black people would achieve liberation. However, Malcolm X felt that racial unity required in part a reconstructed image of Afro-American culture. To understand

Malcolm's reconstruction requires an explicit treatment of the impact of class on Afro-American culture and an essentially political conception of the Afro-American's cultural heritage. Through the analysis of the house nigger-field nigger dialectic, Malcolm not only exposed the social, historical and cultural origins in slavery of the contemporary debate between integration and nationalism but its class character as well. This political role that Malcolm assigned to Afro-American culture is not viable unless the class character of the main cultural trends in the Black community is identified. For Malcolm then, the significance of any cultural trend in the Black community was a function of its impact on the struggle for Black liberation.

Of course, the Afro-American conception of Africa is a centerpiece of the cultural renaissance Malcolm desired. Nevertheless, the role of Africa in the thinking of Malcolm is essentially political. The advocacy of a cultural identification with Africa is not advanced as an end in itself. It is a means by which Afro-Americans can reclaim their psyches and their self respect in order to fightback against racism and exploitation in the Western hemisphere.

Malcolm X: Pan African Internationalist

Black Power became the orientation of the latter half of the 60's decade because Malcolm X struggled uncompromisingly to restore the Afro-American nationalist tradition in the first half of that tumultuous decade. Nevertheless, in his own way Malcolm X was struggling to popularize a Pan African internationalism in the last months before his murder. Without the revolutionary

nationalism and Pan African internationalism of Malcolm X, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee's White Paper on Black Power, its White Paper on the Vietnam War and its subsequent activism in opposition to that war and U.S. imperialism generally would not have occurred when they did. James Foreman, former Executive Secretary of SNCC had the following to say of Malcolm's influence on his organization's growing internationalism:

I read Malcolm X Speaks carefully. His criticism of the term civil rights, and his advocacy of human rights in its place, led me to formulate a resolution that was adopted at the June 1967 staff meeting of SNCC.

This resolution declared that SNCC considered itself to be a human rights organization working for the liberation not only of black people in the United States but of all oppressed peoples, especially those in Africa, Asia and Latin America.⁶

After the demise of SNCC, this internationalism was carried on by the Black Panther Party, a party whose leadership openly avowed their debt to Malcolm X.

Malcolm X foresaw that the struggle for Black Liberation had an international dimension, that it was a particular form of the general struggle for human rights. King by 1966 had arrived at a similar position but still was unable to accept what Malcolm X had accepted as given; that the struggle for human rights is a revolutionary struggle within which violence could be a liberating instrument.

Malcolm X: Still Relevant in the 80's

As with so many prophets, much of what Malcolm X said was misunderstood or repudiated by his own people in his own time.

The straightforwardness of his speech titillated his white listeners and frightened his Negro bourgeois audience. But that same kind of speech lifted the spirits

of the tired black masses who had no one else "to tell it like it was ". . . .Although in their hearts some of the Negro masses understood Malcolm and the nature of his message, their minds could not fully grasp the nature of his concepts. Malcolm was at one and the same time talking to some of them, talking over the heads of most of them, and scaring the pants off the rest.⁷

In assessing Malcolm X's impact in the 60's, C.E. Wilson identified three milestones. First, Malcolm re-established the Black nationalist tradition within the integrationist motion of the Civil Rights Movement. Wilson asserts that this development forced a space for the Black urbanized working masses to articulate and act on their agenda. Second, Malcolm offered a moral imperative in the Black liberation struggle which stood as an alternative to that advanced by Martin Luther King. Last, Malcolm stood as a role model for the development of activist cadres.⁸

Malcolm's relevance is much clearer to those among the Black masses who come in contact with his thought now in the middle of the 80's than it ever was during the 60's. One can no longer suffice off Malcolm's charisma but must now come to grips with the content of his intellectual output. The racist ravages of two decades have etched the relevance of his analysis deep into the social consciousness of contemporary Afro-Americans. His works carry more force than **ever** before. They are on the lips of Blacks In Harlem, where every protest meeting sees speaker after speaker pay homage to the truth of his thought.

The central task of the 1980's for Afro-Americans is to rebuild the Movement for Black Liberation. Malcolm X is central to this effort as his thought represents one of the critical sources for redefining and reformulating the concept Black

Power. While he helped give birth to the era of Black Power, Malcolm X **was** not around to rescue it from the reformism the Black petty bourgeoisie imposed upon it; Black capitalism and Black electoral politics within the Democratic Party.

Interestingly, the three contributions cited by Wilson could be crucial to the rebuilding process of the 11980's. Malcolm X represents not just the Black Nationalist tradition in Afro-American history. This tradition has two aspects, reactionary Black Nationalism and Revolutionary Black Nationalism. Each aspect has its basis in different classes in the Afro-American community. The nationalism of the Black petty bourgeoisie today is reactionary and accomodationist. The revolutionary nationalism of Malcolm X originates in the mood of the working masses to resist and struggle against their oppression. In the BLM rebuilding process, Malcolm's revolutionary nationalist though is important because it challenges the ideological hegemony of the Black petty bourgeoisie and leads directly to a serious consideration of Marxism-Leninism.

Malcolm X: Liberation Theologian

Today the Black petty pourgeoisie advances an image of a Christian-pacifist King which obscures the foundations of Black Liberation Theology laid by King, especially in his last two years. Ironically, Malcolm X albeit as a Muslim minister, stands⁹ foursquare in the resistance tradition of the Black Church. Perchance it will be through the moral imperative of Malcolm's witness even more than a co-opted King that Black Liberation Theology will **become** a part of a reconstructed Black Liberation

Movement.

Summary

Malcolm X has stood the test of time as a thinker and critic of the Black Intellectual tradition. It is through Malcolm that the Black Liberation Movement was taught many of the principles undergirding revolutionary movements throughout the Third World. We have previously made reference to the important transition that Malcolm represented between King's Gandhian non-violence and the redemptive violence of Fanon. Malcolm X is just as directly linked to the salient thought of an Amílcar Cabral or even a Mao Tse Tung. In his thought and in his living example, Malcolm "told no lies and claimed no easy victories". He was a thinker with a scientific outlook who neither retreated from calling 'a spade a spade' nor avoided the necessity of giving precedent to "the struggle against our own weaknesses". Most important, through Malcolm more and more ordinary Black people are able to transcend the particularity of their oppression and begin to visualize their day to day struggle as a local, particular, aspect of the more general International struggle for Human Rights, a revolutionary movement which is essentially a struggle for power.

Footnotes

1-J. Edgar Hoover initiated the FBI program of destruction of the OAAU in a memo to the New York and Philadelphia field offices dated July 2, 1964. In it he said in part:

There is indication that Little[Malcolm X] has aligned himself with subversive groups and this matter must be immediately investigated and, if feasible, a counterintelligence program will be initiated to publically discredit Little.

Memo from Director, FBI to SAC New York, Philadelphia "Organization of Afro-American Unity Internal Security-Miscellaneous"(100-442235) July 2, 1964, p.2

Earlier "dirty tricks had been initiated against Malcolm X and the Muslim Mosque, Inc. by the FBI as indicated in the outline of a plan contained in a memo from the SAC, to Hoover dated April 10, 1964 Detroit in which a phony letter was drafted over Malcolm's signature and sent to Muhammad's followers in Detroit so as to cause "disruption and deeper disputes between Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm Little of Muslim Mosque, Inc."

2-Henry Highland Garnet, Black ante-bellum abolitionist who in a speech at the Convention of Colored People in Buffalo, N.Y. in 1843 called on the slaves to rise up and rebel violently against their masters.

Henry McNeil Turner, Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church(AME) and the leading "back to Africa" exponent of the late 19th. century, revealed the seamy side of the symbolism of the American flag by castigating its association with "lynch law"

and the unbridled imperialist adventurism of the period(1890's) against peoples of color.

3-Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet" in George Breitman(ed), Malcolm X Speaks(New York:Grove Press, 1965)pp23-44.

4-"Shortly before his death, Malcolm had said it was the ballot or the bullet. The necessity of advancing from the ballot to the bullet had become clear to me by then; I knew that the ballot would never solve the basic problems of poor people-black people, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos. For me, as for others,, this period marked the approach of an end to any belief in-or willingness to engage in-large, non-violent demonstrations" James Foreman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries(New York: MacMillan, 1972)p440.

5-Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth(New York:Grove Press,1965)

6-op.cit. Foreman, p.480

7-C.E. Wilson, "leadership: Triumph in Leadership Tragedy" in John Henrik Clarke(ed.), Malcolm X: The Man and His Times(New York:MacMillan, 1969)pp.29,37.

8-ibid.

9-Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism(Garden City, N.Y.:Doubleday,1972)p.256.