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MALCOLM X AND SOME CONTEMPORARY IDEOLOGICAL ISSUES

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Comrades,

Brothers and Sisters.

Friends,

1990 is an appropriate year to have this symposium on Malcolm X as it is the 25th year since he **was** assassinated in February and reborn with the publication of his Autobiography in the fall of that same year. **His** book has never been out of print, it has sold more than any other book by an Afro-American, and perhaps more revealing it is stolen more often than any other book from American libraries. Malcolm struck a chord deep in the hearts of his people and they have not forgotten. Indeed, he has consistently been reborn in the hearts and minds of each generation of youth. The image of Malcolm is a fact, an objective reference that can be found in virtually every Black urban community, especially in New York neighborhoods where Black poor and working class people live.

Malcolm X is the symbol of America's ideological crisis, an ideological crisis of race, nationality, and class. The main focus of this paper on Malcolm X is to delineate a perspective on the current ideological crises, to reestablish the radical Black tradition at the center of rebuilding the Black liberation movement.

The current ideological crises of African American

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radicalism is not unrelated to the general ideological crises of the world today. For the sake of this discussion I am positing that there is a systemic ideological crises of Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, and Communism. In each case the crises is based primarily on the connection of the system of ideas to the actual social world, especially the practical implementation of those ideas. Ideological crises are based on the contradictions between what people believe and what they experience. Their freedom to believe is conditioned by the historical necessity in their lives, for In the end practice is the criterion of truth.

The big story is the 500 years **of** the big Eurocentric lie. Samir **Amin** in **his** recent book **EUROCENTRISM** puts it this way:

It is no coincidence that 1492 marks both the discovery of the New World and the beginning of the Renaissance. If the period of the Renaissance marks **a** qualitative break in the history of humanity, it is precisely because, from that time on, Europeans become conscious of the idea that the conquest of the world by their civilization is henceforth a possible objective. They therefore develop a sense **of** absolute superiority, even if the actual submission of other peoples to Europe has not yet taken place. Europeans draw up the first true maps of the planet...From this

moment on, and not before, Eurocentrism crystallizes. (pages 72-73)

The subsequent unfolding of the history of the capitalist conquest of the world showed that this conquest was not going to bring about a homogenization of the societies of the planet on the basis fo the European model. On the contrary, this conquest progressively created a growing polarization at the heart of the system, crystallizing the capitalist world into fully developed centers and peripheries incapable of closing the ever widening gap, making this contradiction within "actually existing" capitalism --a contradiction insurmountable within the framework of the capitalist system-- the major and most explosive contradiction of our time. (page 75)

In sum, Eurocentrism is "a theory of world history" and a "global political project." Its fundamental crisis has been rooted in the post World War I socialist revolutions, and the post World War II national democratic anti-colonial revolutions in Asia, African, and the Caribbean.

This general crisis of Eurocentrism, of western imperialism, shifted into high gear by the 1960's. On a world scale the

national democratic revolution turned into its opposite by replacing the decadent colonial regimes with the deformed neocolonial state. The hopes and dreams of the masses of workers and peasants were betrayed by their middle classes who used political power to reproduce exploitation and institute authoritarian rule via military domination. This shift was manipulated by the international agencies of finance capital and today through the third world debt crisis threatens to drive countries to the very brink of barbarism. Kwame Nkrumah called attention to this pattern in his many writings, especially *NeoColonialism: The last Stage of Imperialism and The Class Struggle in Africa*. Patrice Lumumba signaled the shift by paying with his life in the Congo.

In the United States, the African American people faced a similar transformation. The progressive democratic struggle of the civil rights movement was necessary but it in turn delivered Black people more squarely into the hypocritical arms of the US government and its capitalist system of political and economic inequalities. The objective dynamic was the final transformation of Black people from a rural born semiworking class into an urban born proletariat. Black people exchanged the fight against a de jure system of legalized racist terror for a de facto structure of racial domination. Again, as in the third world, the mediators of this shift have been a thin layer of African-American middle class collaborators who function within

the capitalist state and play key roles in the management of this system of racist domination.

This transformation was the material basis for a political and ideological upheaval **in** the Black community of unprecedented proportions. **As** the leading arena of Black life shifted to the northern cities where Black people had achieved greater access to democratic participation and inclusion into public institutions, in the south the middle classes provided the leadership for the mass upheaval of the civil rights movement to end the outmoded US apartheid system of racial segregation. They stressed an ideological orientation designed for their inclusion into the mainstream of US society. But the majority of the masses of Black people were outsiders to this drama of inclusion. Martin Luther King endeared himself to the masses of Black people as a masterful leader of cultural significance (especially as he mastered the religious style and rhetorical brilliance of ministerial oratory) but his dream of inclusion didn't fit the nightmare that Black people at the bottom were living, especially the urban workers, poorly paid, living in public housing compounds, brutalized through police brutality, and dehumanized through an insensitive welfare bureaucracy.

Malcolm X stepped into this context and became the personified ideological response of the northern Black working class in revolt. This is my main focus, how Malcolm presents a perspective on the contemporary ideological crisis facing African

American radicalism. It is my contention that there are at least three ways that Malcolm X continues to provide ideological guidance, and in general guides us toward the general and universal project of human emancipation of all forms of human exploitation:

1. Malcolm X's life is a veritable everyman tale for the masses of Black youth today. He is not of the talented tenth, but he is a dramatic example of all the bad and good most Black youths experience today. He demonstrates that transformation and liberation is a practical option for Black inner city youth.

2. Malcolm X is a window to a Black radical tradition that can serve as the foundation for the rebirth of a new movement.

3. Malcolm X is a profound ideological thinker who demonstrated methods of thought that ought to be utilized as the basis for training a new cadre of revolutionary intellectuals.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X AS IDEOLOGICAL PARADIGM

Malcolm X, with the collaboration of Alex Haley, wrote a classic autobiography in the great tradition of the 19th century slave narratives of Gustavus Vassa and Frederick Douglas, and the 20th century texts by Booker T Washington, WEB DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, Ida B Wells, Zora Neal Hurston, and Maya Angelou. In American letters this book is as great as the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, and in world literature

it must rank with the narratives of St Augustine's Confessions and Che Guevarra's Reminiscences. This is a great adventure story that grabs the imagination, opens up the soul of a people through the authentic language of a pilgrim. This text has been adopted by Black people as their own, as their 20th century classic.

There were four stages to Malcolm's life: 1. a small town boy from a broken family trying to get ahead; 2. a big city hoodlum dealing in drugs and robbery; proselytizing Black nationalist minister in the nation of Islam; and 4. leading spokesperson for a radical Black tradition. The first stage represented a positive attempt to succeed with the American dream, while the second stage responded to negative racist reaction and acted out success in an equally American but illegal career mode. The last two stages embraced radical Black mentors, organizational participation, personal study and travel, and the historical context of the high tide of Black struggles in the 1960's.

Malcolm was born May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska to Rev Earl and Louise Little. He was a Georgia born Baptist preacher and organizer for Marcus Garvey's UNIA, and she was a Grenadian born outspoken activist in the UNIA as well. He had 9 brothers and sisters. When Malcolm was 6 his father was brutally murdered by white racists, and **six** years later his mother succumbed to the pressures of the welfare system while trying to raise her

children and was committed to a mental hospital where she stayed from 1937 to 1963. Malcolm was a Black youth alienated from his family through racist violence and thrown into the street.

After spending three years in a foster home/detention home process and still not escaping institutional racism and individual prejudices, he moved to Boston with his eldest paternal half-sister Ella. In Boston, he rejected what he perceived to be the hypocritical and initiative life style of the Black status seekers and took to the street. First in Boston and then in New York Malcolm explored the full range of illegal alternatives, everything we know of as dominating our community today -- drugs, prostitution, robbery. He formed a gang in Boston and ended **up** in prison in 1946: in **his** 21st year he was a school drop out, a drug addict, as loser.

It was while incarcerated that Malcolm came to understand how he had been isolated and rendered powerless other than as a source of vulgar anked violence. In this depth he experienced one of the great reversals of the 20th century, the rehabilitation and conversion of a hardened criminal. He met Bimbi, a prison intellectual, and was introduced to Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. These two men guided him to self emancipation, reading and writing his way to intellectual growth, and to a reversal of habits to reenforce a new life style and moral code. He went into prison a degenerate criminal and after seven years was a model of commitment,

dedication, and discipline when he was released in 1952. He was now a whole cleansed man, moving in the path of his father. Malcolm was becoming a Black nationalist organizer attempting to save Black people from the destruction of a white racist society.

For the next 12 years Malcolm became the amin spark for the nation of Islam to grow from 400 to 40,000 members, with Temples organized in virtually every major city in the United States. Malcolm went to Detroit first, where his brothers were Ministers in the Nation of Islam, and then he went on to Chicago where he lived and studied with Elijah Muhammad. He was assigned to lead the Temple in New York and then became the national representative of the organization. Inside **Elijah** Muhammad ruled supreme, but outside the Black community increasingly came to know the Nation through Malcolm's voice.

Malcolm was silenced December 3, 1963 and he formally announced his independence from the Nation of Islam on March 8, 1964. There have been many points of view expressed about this rupture. Malcolm reports most clearly that the student and the leader each failed in each other's terms. Muhammad failed by violating his moral code by fathering children with two young secretaries out of wedlock, and Malcolm failed by violating Mahammads order to remain silent on the assassination of Kennedy the US president. Another major point of view is that the underlying tension had to do with a power struggle in the organization in anticipation of the old leaders death. There was

tension between the old conservative ministers and members from before the 1960's and those who joined in era of a more militant activist movement, etnsion between the National headquaters bureaucracy and the dynamic expanding east coast under Malcolms leadership, and between the extended family of the old leader and the emergence of a new family dynasty around Malcolm. This point has yet to be fully researched.

After leaving the Nation of Islam, for the next year Malcolm spent nearly 6 months abroad, and the rest of the criss crossing the country for speaking engagements tv interviews and orgabnizational meetings. He led the formation of the Muslim Mosque INC. anda the Organization of Afro-American Unity. In this last year malcolm emerged as an international representative of the Black liberation movement in the US, and a leading symbol of militant anti-imperialism for the entire African world, and for progressive third world peoples, organizations, and goernments as well. Malcolm turned every progressive forum into a classroom, an arena of ideological combat and political mobilization. Every enemy of his enemy became a potential friend, and this extended to anll anti-imperialists and socialists, including white people. However, after several attempts, Malcolm X was assasinated. This too remains a mystery in fact, though it is all too clear who benifited from this evil deed.

What can we learn from this life? First, he expereinced

and overcame all of the major social obstacles that are supposed to stop us, the ones the sociologists explain are the reasons why Blacks remain at the bottom. Second, he emerged as a significant force on the American and world political scene from within the radical tradition of Black people demonstrating a latent power of an independent Black historical reality. And, third, out of this particular Black reality Malcolm emerged to at least begin charting a path leading to a universal project for human emancipation, what he would call world brotherhood and justice.

MALCOLM X AND RADICAL BLACK TRADITION

As just indicated Malcolm expressed a tradition of Black radicalism. This is an important point as it corrects the genius theory that robs Black people of the collective historical nature of their ideology. Malcolm was a great person, not only for his unique individual traits, but more so for his role as ^{conduit} conduit for a tradition of genius in the context of a great radical mass mobilization.

Malcolm X represented the convergence of four aspects of our radical African American tradition. First, Black religion: Malcolm embodied a radical ^{ethic} morality, honest militant rhetoric and a vision of the good life based on spiritual freedom and social justice. This has always ^{promoted} empowered Black people to know that they were ^{intrinsically} morally superior to their oppressors no matter what. Second, Black nationalism: He was committed to the consolidation

of community resources, mobilization of the masses of oppressed and exploited Black people ("the bottom of the pile Negroes" as he used to call them) in the interest of self-determination.

Third: Panafricanism: Malcolm understood that the struggle was an international struggle in which Black people participated as part of the world wide linkage of African peoples that extends to all corners of the globe. This linkage is bonded by culture from within and imposed by racism from outside. Malcolm reestablished Africa as the fundamental historical foundation for Black identity in the consciousness of the Black masses. In a world sense his only peer would be Bob Marley, the great reggae poet philosopher. And **finally**, socialism: Malcolm was not a Marxist by text reference, but he was anti-capitalist and open to dialogue and debate ~~within and~~ about the socialist experiments, especially in the third world. He embraced radical thinking wherever he found it.

Malcolm was grounded in this tradition in the first years of his life. He faced a profound American dialectic. He spent the first 15 years of his life in small midwestern town with small Black populations, Omaha, Milwaukee, Lansing, and East Lansing. But he has ^{strong} parent rooted in Black religion, nationalism, and panafricanism. ~~But~~, through racism and violence he lost ^{his African faith} faith in America and his family was destroyed. Malcolm turned things around and approached American from its alter-ego, criminal violence.

In the second year of his life he negated the radical Black tradition and embraced America. After moving to Boston and then to New York, both large cosmopolitan northeastern cities, Malcolm took on new names: homeboy, red, Detroit red, and finally in prison he was nicknamed satan. ASfter attempting to reconstruct a family with his haf-sister Ella, he took to the streets and formed a gang, the negative family substitute of a street based criminal life style. He had observed the taboo of racial separation as Malcolm Little, but as Detroit Red he embraced white women as a status symbol demonstrating his ability to have what america said he couldn't, in fact doubly so since the white women he choose was married to a white man.

After converting to Islam in prison Malcolm began a journey from self emancipation to community organization based on the ~~reappropriation~~ ^{reclamation} of the radical Black tradition as lived by his father except in the de-Christianized form of the Nation of Islam. His names at this stage were first Malcolm X and then Malcolm Shabazz. It is critical that this was a reunion with his family as well, m since most of his brothers and sisters were part of the Nation of Islam as well. He became whole as a person, as a family member, as an organizational leader (and follower), and as a force in his community feared by his enemy. But there was a growing tension between the ideological dvelopment of the movement and the necessity of unity, versus athe more limited possibility within the Nation of Islam with its sectarian line on

ideology, strategy and tactics.

After he left the Nation of Islam, Malcolm expanded his contacts and explored the possibilities of revolutionary politics. When Malcolm went to Nigeria he was renamed Omawole (the one who has returned home), after his trip to Mecca he took the honorific title of El hajj Malik El Shabazz, and to the militant in the black liberation movement he became simply brother Malcolm. It was at this stage that he had taken the tradition as far as it went. He was in dialogue with his revolutionary peers, he was part of the international dialogue -- he rapped with Che and Fidel, the revolutionaries from Africa and most third world socialist experiments. In this sense, Malcolm's ultimate ideological legacy is that he places us within our radical tradition, at its cutting edge, focused on Black people and their historical necessity, and, as well, focused on the universal emancipation project for humanity based on world brotherhood.

SOME METHODOLOGICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

To grasp the cutting edge of Malcolm's ideological legacy one must go deeper than what he said, to the methodological basis on which his thought developed. Our task is not to replicate what Malcolm X said 25 years ago, but to use how he thought to guide the replication of a new type revolutionary intellectual-activist to give leadership to our fight for liberation and social transformation.

There are several key aspects of his method that must be pointed out, and it is essential that one recognize the inherent universality of these points:

1. CRITICAL AND INDEPENDENT THOUGHT: He stressed that young people, each new generation of radical activists had to forge their own perspective, had to distrust authority and forge a rigorous democratic intellectual style. He said:

One of the first things I think young people, especially nowadays, should learn is how to see for yourself and listen for yourself and think for yourself. Then you can come to an intelligent decision for yourself. If you form the habit of going by what you hear others say about someone, instead of searching that thing out for yourself and seeing for yourself, you will be walking east when you think you are going west. This generation, especially of our people, has a burden, more so than at any other time in history. The most

important thing that we can learn to do today is to think for ourselves.

Its good to keep wide-open ears and listen to what everybody else has to say, but when you come to make a decision, you have to weigh all of what you have heard on its own, and place it where it belongs, and come to a decision for yourself. You'll never regret it. But if you form the habit of taking what someone else says about a thing without checking it out for yourself, you'll find that other people will have you hating your friends and loving your enemies. This is one of the thingsd that our people are beginning to learn today that is very important to think out a situation for yourself. If you dont do it you'll always be maneuvered into a situation where you are never fighting your actual enemies, where you will find yourself fighting your own self. (Talks to Young People}

2. HISTORICAL STUDY: Malcolm X dared to challenge the historical record as the source of truth. His approach was to read everything, from a Eurocentric as well as Afro-centric prespective, and all of the revolutionary material he could get his hands on. His position was clear:

Of all out studeies history is best qualified to reward our research. And when you see that you've got problems, all you have to do is examine thehistoric method used all over the world by others who have problems similar to yours.

Once you see how they got theirs straight, then you know how you can get yours straight.

3. LANGUAGE STUDY: Malcolm mastered several languages and wanted to grasp more. He mastered the vernacular rap style to Black ghetto hipster, and expanded his vocabulary with his legendary prison reading of the dictionary. In the Nation of Islam he mastered the discipline of formal language communication in written and spoken forms. He saw language as an access point to the world and the basis for a true internationalism. He stated:

I love languages. I wish I were an accomplished linguist. I don't know anything more frustrating than to be around people talking something you can't understand. Especially when they are people who look just like you. In Africa, I heard original mother tongues, such as Hausa, and Swahili being spoken, and there I was standing like some little boy, waiting for someone to tell me what had been said; I never will forget how ignorant I felt.

4. VERIFICATION OF FACTS: Malcolm lived by the dictum seek truth from facts. This forced his ideological presuppositions to be held in check by the course of historical experience. In the Black community a trend of ideological leadership specializes in the art of rhetorical illusion based on philosophical idealism. Malcolm was aggressive in opting for a terrain of ideological and political struggle based on the clarity of ideas and the evidence presented in making arguments.