

Analysis

The politics of Malcolm X

by Tony Tracy

Recently, there has been an attempt to popularize Malcolm X through publicity surrounding the upcoming Spike Lee movie about his life. Throughout this publicity, the legacy of Malcolm X has been claimed by many, ranging from Louis Farrakhan (the present leader of the Nation of Islam) to Jesse Jackson. His image and sayings adorn t-shirts, baseball caps and buttons. In fact, Malcolm X, 27 years after his death, is presently experiencing a popularity that he never enjoyed while he was alive. Even Republican Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas has expressed admiration for Malcolm X, and Bill Clinton was seen during the election campaign sporting a cap emblazoned with a large "X", the logo for Spike Lee's upcoming film. The question remains, however: what are the real politics of Malcolm X?

Early Life

Born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, he was the son of two activists in Marcus Garvey's black nationalist UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) movement. His father, also a Baptist minister, was the leading member of UNIA branches in Philadelphia, Omaha, Milwaukee, Indiana Harbor, and rural Michigan. His mother was a reporter for the UNIA newspaper, *The Negro World*. Even before Malcolm's death, his parents were subjected to harassment by the Ku Klux Klan, including raids on their home. His father was killed by racists when Malcolm was only six years old, while his mother suffered a mental breakdown in 1934, caused in part by the dehumanizing treatment of the Michigan Welfare Department. Malcolm then lived in various state institutions, later moving to Boston, and from there New York City. He became involved in various petty criminal activities, and, in 1946 was sentenced to jail for burglary. While in jail, he converted to the Nation of Islam (headed, at that time, by Elijah Muhammad), changed his name to Malcolm X, and became a leading member of the Black Muslims within a few months of his release from prison.

A Disciple of Elijah Muhammad

The Nation of Islam had its roots in the demise of Marcus Garvey's movement, and many of Garvey's followers joined the Black Muslims when UNIA collapsed in the late 1920's. Like Garvey, Elijah Muhammad argued for racial pride and purity, as well as the establishment of a separate black state. In 1960, he directed Malcolm to conduct secret talks with the Ku Klux Klan about the possibility of carving a black nation out of South Carolina, mirroring Garvey's meeting in 1922 with the second in command of the Klan in Atlanta, Georgia. While Malcolm was clearly uncomfortable with negotiations with white racist lynchings, he felt that he could not break ranks with

the Nation of Islam and thus concealed his doubts. Malcolm, at this time, only amplified the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, and prefaced most of his speeches with the phrase "Elijah Muhammad teaches...". As the oldest of his six daughters, Attallah Shabazz, later said, "if you quote him prior to 1962, you have to ask yourself if you're quoting Malcolm or the Nation [of Islam], because everything he said prior to 1962 came under the censorship of the [Nation's] Council." However, Malcolm, from 1962 on, began to move away from his complete reliance on the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. While Muhammad shunned politics, Malcolm was becoming more political and used his speeches as a platform for an indictment of the system. His break with Muhammad came in December, 1963, when, in answering a question about Kennedy's assassination, said "the chickens have come home to roost... being an old farm boy myself, chickens coming home to roost never did make me sad, they've always made me glad." This statement, attributing Kennedy's assassination to the hate and violence that the racist American society produced, caused Muhammad to give Malcolm a three month suspension from the Nation of Islam, and it soon became clear to Malcolm that this was not simply a suspension, but an expulsion.

The Final Year: Revolutionary Internationalism

Malcolm formally announced his departure from the Nation of Islam on March 8, 1964, and began a process of change in his political ideas. When asked about his views on political action, Malcolm answered, "I believe in political action, yes. Any kind of political action. I believe in action, period. Whatever kind of action is necessary. When you hear me say 'by

any means necessary,' I mean exactly that. I believe in anything that is necessary to correct unjust conditions - political, economic, social, physical, anything that's necessary." Malcolm announced the formation of two organizations: the first, the Muslim Mosque, Inc., a religious organization and the second, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), a secular organization. He began to argue that the Black struggle in America was part of an international struggle which he connected to the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. In fact, Malcolm began to argue in favour of socialism:

their political philosophy is socialism.

He began to take views on broader economic questions, saying: "It is impossible for capitalism to survive, primarily because the system of capitalism needs some blood to suck. Capitalism used to be like an eagle, but now it's more like a vulture... As the nations of the world free themselves, then capitalism has less victims, less to suck, and it becomes weaker and weaker. It's only a matter of time in my opinion before it will collapse completely." He began to define the struggle for Black liberation as an international struggle

against oppression, as compared to a racial conflict: "We are living in an era of revolution, and the revolt of the American Negro is part of the rebellion against the oppression and colonialism which has characterized this era... It is incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a racial conflict of Black against white, or as purely an American problem. Rather, we are today seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiters." Malcolm began to break with his former black separatism and black nationalism philosophy:

"I used to define black nationalism as the idea that the black man should control

the economy of his community, the politics of his community, and so forth. But, when I was in Africa in May, in Ghana, I was speaking with the Algerian ambassador who is extremely militant and is a revolutionary in the true sense of the word (and has his credentials as such for having carried on a successful revolution against oppression in his country). When I told him that my political, social and economic philosophy was black nationalism, he asked me very frankly, well, where did that leave him? Because he was white. He was an African, but he was an Algerian.

"All of the countries that are emerging today from the shackles of colonialism are turning towards socialism. I don't think it's an accident. Most of the countries that were colonial powers were capitalist countries, and the last bulwark of capitalism today is America. It's impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not to believe in racism. You can't have capitalism without racism. And if you find one and you happen to get that person into a conversation and they have a philosophy that makes you sure they don't have this racism in their outlook, usually

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rian, and to all appearances he was a white man. And he said if I define my objectives as the victory of black nationalism, where does that leave him? Where does that leave revolutionaries in Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, Mauritania? So he showed me where I was alienating people who were true revolutionaries, dedicated to overturning the system of exploitation that exists on this earth by any means necessary.

So, I had to do a lot of thinking and reappraising of my definition of black nationalism. Can we sum up the solution to the problems confronting our people as black nationalism? And if you notice, I haven't been using the expression for several months. But I still would be hard pressed to give a specific definition of the over-all philosophy which I think is necessary for the liberation of the black people in this country."

On February, 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York by three black men who were members of the Nation of Islam. While it is impossible to predict the exact direction of Malcolm's politics had he lived, it is clear that he had moved in a direction of revolutionary internationalism. While he was not a socialist, it is true to say that he was developing rapidly in that direction. His understanding of the dynamic of race and the class struggle became such that he became an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, and his call to struggle "by any means necessary" represented an enormous advance in the dominant ideas of the time within either the Black Muslims or within the civil rights movement. It is tragic that his premature death meant the end of the organization which he wanted to build, however, from Malcolm X came the idea of independent political action to fight oppression and the notion of self-defence, which are inspirations to many Blacks and revolutionaries today.



The Political Science Department announces additional courses to be offered for the winter term of 1993 starting on January 4, 1993.

P.J. Fitzpatrick	POLS 3132	1B	Politics & Government of Atlantic Canada	MWF	9:30A.M.	T304
P.J. Fitzpatrick	POLS 3101	1B	Government of the United States	MWF	8:30A.M.	T309
P.J. Fitzpatrick	POLS 3242	1B	Canadian-American Relations	MWF	11:30A.M.	C204
S.I. Pobihushchy	POLS 3201	E	Canadian Electoral Systems and Voting Behaviour	M	7:00-10:00P.M.	
E. Ryan	POLS 3391	1B	Theory and Practice of Public Administration	T	7:00-10:00P.M.	