

MALCOLM'S



LEGACY

**This article is published by the
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contribution to the discussion of
Malcolm's legacy. It was written by
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Malcolm X, born May 19, 1925 Malcolm Little, was assassinated February 21, 1965 and buried El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He is the most remarkable figure in the African-American nationalist tradition and one of the more important figures in the entire struggle for democracy and Black liberation. In many respects his legacy defines modern day revolutionary African American nationalism. For tens of millions throughout the world the name Malcolm X is identified with the cause of African American liberation, anti-imperialist solidarity and socialism. His life and legacy are connected to the fight against oppression, exploitation, colonialism and racism.

Malcolm was fiercely honest. His genius rested in that he grasped the truth that the revolutionary potential inherent in the fight for Black liberation could only be realized as a result of the solidarity of all oppressed and exploited humanity. Solidarity was for him mutual aid between forces fighting a common enemy. This recognition placed him on a higher political plane than the liberal and petit-bourgeois nationalism of both Marcus Garvey and his early teacher and mentor Elijah Muhammad. The revolutionary essence of his nationalism also differentiated him from the cultural nationalism that held sway in the U.S. after his assassination, exemplified by the poet Amiri Baraka and scholar Ron Karenga. Most cultural nationalists have, however, misappropriated his legacy and emptied it of its revolutionary kernel. While for Malcolm nationalism was the ideology and mechanism for revolutionary struggle, for cultural nationalism, it is a justification for retreat from struggle.

His mind became his most powerful weapon and that which the enemies of Black freedom feared most. He carefully developed the tools of logic and rhetoric in order to penetrate and demolish the lie of white supremacy. Although he was a master logician and rhetorician, he felt history, as a science, was best able to, as he put it, reward all research. Malcolm, however, was most interested in the histories of

revolutionary struggles and the lives of revolutionaries. He drew lessons from the American revolution, often quoting Patrick Henry who in defiance of British colonialism said "Give me liberty or give me death." Yet, in the end it was the Russian, Chinese and Cuban revolutions and the anti-colonial revolutions in Africa and Asia that attracted him. He admired the purity and selflessness of leaders like Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah and Amilcar Cabral. He attempted to understand the methodologies of guerrilla warfare as a means of self defense and liberation of an oppressed people.

Malcolm was, however, not an arm chair revolutionary. His monumental courage derived from his knowledge that within the struggles of the masses of African Americans rested the solution to racial oppression. Thus he insisted time and again that the struggle must proceed by "Any means necessary." He deeply cherished and taught others to appreciate freedom as the highest political principle. Freedom, justice and equality, he held, superseded all other principles and should not be compromised. As a national representative and spokesman of the Nation of Islam he associated the principles of freedom and equality with land and territory and therefore called for five states in the South to be set aside as a Black nation. He would later come to recognize that in the U.S. context freedom and equality were truly realizable only upon the foundations of a revolutionary change of the economic system brought about by an alliance of exploited classes and peoples. He thus acknowledged the need for the ballot and the bullet, reform and revolution, all in pursuit of freedom and equality.

Malcolm knew first hand from childhood the violence of racism. His father, a Baptist minister and staunch follower of the nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, was lynched by the Ku Klux Klan. He saw his mother struggle to provide food, clothing and shelter for he and his brothers and sisters. She eventually was overcome by the awesome burdens of poverty and racism. After that Malcolm pretty much raised himself. His earliest personal struggle against racist oppression was in the schools of Mason, Michigan. He rejected the racist indoctrination of American education. Rather than be subjected to this he left school to find his way in the world.

Finding his way to Boston he took on the name and persona Detroit Red. The streets, the clubs, hustlers, prostitutes and drug dealers, musicians and dancers became his teachers. Malcolm became one of them. He learned their strengths and weakness. But more he began to glimpse something of their unrealized potential and humanity. Mal-

colm, seeing no way out of the oppression of ghetto life, became in every respect a street brother, totally committed to the fast life and crime. In his early twenties he was convicted of stealing and sentenced to ten years in prison. While in prison, his older brother, a follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, wrote telling Malcolm of the teachings of the "Messenger of Allah," which claimed that Islam was the "natural religion of the Black man." Malcolm taught himself to read and practically memorized the dictionary in an effort to understand the teachings of the Nation of Islam. He converted to Islam in prison. After being released from prison he joined the Detroit Mosque and in 1954 became the chief minister of the Harlem Mosque.

In Harlem, the intellectual and cultural Mecca of Black life, Malcolm came in contact with the scope and complexities of Black thought. He learned from, debated and struggled with the competing platforms of revolutionary and cultural nationalism, electoral politics, socialism and communism. African and Asian students, painters, artists and books, became his constant companions and began to shape his mind and develop his unique genius. He became a true intellectual, able to hold his own with the best that white bourgeois universities could produce. He had no mercy upon the intellectual and academic proponents of racism and colonialism or their theories. He was, at last, a revolutionary intellectual.

The cultural, political and intellectual currents existing in Harlem interacted within him with the teachings of the Nation of Islam. Inevitably he outgrew the limits of the Nation of Islam's doctrines, yet he never denied their positive impact upon Black people's sense of self-pride, self-love and African identity which constitute the most important contribution of Elijah Muhammad to Black America's struggle. Moreover, the Nation of Islam spoke to the social class that Malcolm knew best — the most impoverished and destitute sections of African American working people. Elijah Muhammad's teachings of racial pride helped the most oppressed to get their lives together, and gave them an organized structure through which to do it.

The fact that the Nation of Islam only saw the racial dimension of Black oppression, ultimately, came in conflict with Malcolm's deepening political consciousness. His trips to Ghana, Egypt and Saudi Arabia convinced him that racial and class oppression were inseparable. The class of billionaire bankers and industrialists, he concluded, gained multi-billions in profits from colonialism and racism. He saw that racism and capitalism were inseparable twins. Malcolm came to understand that whites too were victims, though not in the same ways,

of this system. He also met Ahmed Ben Bella and other leaders of the Algerian revolution who looked white, yet nonetheless were revolutionaries. He was compelled to consider the possibility and necessity of multiracial revolutionary unity. In Mecca, Saudi Arabia he saw Muslims of all races and understood that Islam was not solely the Black man's religion. His conversion to more orthodox Islam occurred simultaneously with his move away from the doctrine of racial separatism. These experiences and his fierce commitment to truth led him to acknowledge a categorical distinction between whites and white racism, between ordinary whites, most of whom are influenced by racism, and the capitalists who are its main beneficiaries. In this regard in a speech in 1964 he declared, "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 ...". He went on, "It is incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a racial conflict of Black against white, or as a purely American problem. Rather we are today seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter. The Negro revolution is not a racial revolt." In saying this, he hastened to add that racial unity could not be based upon the long preached and empty doctrine of "brotherhood" which preserved white supremacy. It could occur only as whites assumed their supreme revolutionary responsibility and their class obligation to fight the racism of the white capitalists.

His break in 1964 with the Nation of Islam and his establishment of the Muslim Mosques Inc. and the Organization of African American Unity began the formation of a new direction for him. It was also at this time that Malcolm and Martin Luther King, Jr. began to move closer to each other. Their unity, if given the opportunity to fully develop, would have led to a deeper unity of the African American community and the strengthening of the all-sided fight for peace, freedom and justice. It was also at this time that Malcolm met Paul Robeson at the funeral of the great playwright Lorraine Hansberry.

It was at the very moment that Malcolm had reached new heights of revolutionary consciousness that his life and development were ended. Historian John Henrik Clarke maintains that he was assassinated by the invisible international cartel of power and finance that killed Patrice Lumumba.

"Power in defense of freedom," Malcolm proclaimed, "is greater than power in behalf of tyranny and oppression, because power, real power, comes from conviction, which produces action, uncompromis-

ing action. It also produces insurrection against oppression. This is the only way you end oppression - with power."

This legacy of Malcolm X must be studied and developed. A critical review of the totality of his contribution cannot fail to take note of the evolution of his views. Malcolm at the end of his life was a much different person politically and ideologically than he was at the beginning.

Today's young activists need not go through the same political rite of passage. Understanding the background of Malcolm's legacy, his growing understanding of the need for multi-racial unity and the pivotal role of working people to achieve basic change, the inheritors of Malcolm's tradition have the advantage of beginning where he ended.

The revolutionary side of Malcolm's legacy turned toward seeing the need for mass democratic struggle as a precondition for achieving a basic economic and social overhaul of the system that breeds oppression. Can today's young activists do less?



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