

Malcolm X and the Search for the Universality of Blackness

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This recent biography of Malcolm X provides us with a compelling intellectual history of the charismatic leader. Marable's critical reevaluation of Malcolm's biography traces his ideas back to a long history of social and religious movements within African American society.

Reviewed: Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, New York, NY, Viking Press, 2011, 594 pages, \$17.64.

This biography of Malcolm was more than a decade in the making. It was written by Manning Marable, who died on April 1, 2011, shortly before the publication of his reevaluation of Malcolm's life and politics. Marable was one of the foremost scholars of Black politics in the United States. Here Marable has crafted a compelling intellectual history of Malcolm in which he shows how Malcolm's thoughts grew out of social and religious movements that first emerged within the black community during the nineteenth century.

A Critical Reevaluation

Marable structures his reevaluation of Malcolm X's life, as a critical deconstruction of Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As told to Alex Haley*.¹ Marable's reevaluation required questioning the redemption story that forms the heart of *The Autobiography*. The story of the Autobiography, fashioned in partnership with the liberal republican Alex Haley and released after Malcolm's death, often falls into motifs of decline and then salvation, which date back to earlier slave narratives and stories of Christian redemption, examples ranging from Olaudah Equiano to Frederick Douglas.² When Malcolm agreed to work on the *Autobiography* in 1963 his objective was to present to the reader "the transformative power of the apostle Elijah Muhammad, who

¹ Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X, with the Assistance of Alex Haley*, New York, NY: Grove Press, 1965.

² See prominent examples of the genre such as Frederick Douglas, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (Boston, MA: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845) and Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (Dublin, Ireland: Dublin Chronicle Office, 1791).

had taken him from a life of criminality and drugs to one of sobriety and commitment” (p. 260). In contrast, Marable historicizes Malcolm’s intellectual development, showing not only the disjunctions but also the commonalities between Malcolm’s earlier beliefs and his later insights. Marable also firmly locates Malcolm’s ideas within the wider African American intellectual tradition.

Published in 1965, Marable suggests *The Autobiography*, which during the first ten years of its release sold six million copies worldwide, mistakenly painted the portrait of a man who sought to leave behind black nationalism for integration and liberal reform (pp. 466-467). Framing the last two years of Malcolm’s life in this manner created the space for Malcolm to be rehabilitated as a pillar of mainstream American politics, a man who successfully made the “conversion from militant black separatism to what might be described as multicultural universalism” (pp. 8-9). Haley, convinced that the Nation of Islam was a black hate group, originally intended to frame the project as a story about the waste of human talent brought about by life in America’s ghettos. Haley pitched the idea of *The Autobiography* to his editors as in line with the fashionable liberal assumptions of the period, which suggested that extremism within the African American community was the inevitable outgrowth of decades of slavery and discrimination (p. 161).

Marable approaches the deconstruction of *The Autobiography* by seeking out Malcolm’s politics, striving to make his political actions explicit. He writes that “Amongst African-American leaders throughout history, Malcolm was unquestionably the most consummately ‘political’ activist, a man who emphasized grassroots and participatory politics led by working-class and poor blacks.” However, in the rush to make Malcolm’s life a story of personal salvation and multicultural redemption Malcolm’s politics has been ignored. Marable admirably attempts to disentangle Malcolm’s complex political views and influences. Marable pays particular attention to the complicated politics and organization building that Malcolm embarks upon during the last two years of his life. For instance, Malcolm’s secular political organization, *The Organization for African American Unity* (OAAU), is entirely absent from the pages of *The Autobiography*. The OAAU’s political platform was never fully developed, embracing ideas ranging from support for Third World Nationalism to international human rights. In particular, Malcolm hoped to use the OAAU as an organizing platform through which a movement could be constructed to bring a member state to charge the United States as a human rights violator, because of its segregationist laws, within the General Assembly of the United Nations. Yet, Malcolm never fully grasped the extent to which nationalist governments in Africa and Asia, while sympathetic to the cause of African Americans, were constrained by the logic of the Cold War, and were also hesitant to reaffirm the rights of international institutions to intervene in their own domestic affairs. However, Marable argues convincingly that the fluidity and apparent contradictions embedded within Malcolm’s thought should not be interpreted as surprising, after all Malcolm at the time of his death was still developing politically and struggling, as he would throughout his public career, to react to the changing demands of the black community.

The Long History

In order to historicize Malcolm, Marable begins by demonstrating that Malcolm's intellectual worldview was derived from ideas and debates that had a long history within African American society. Malcolm began his intellectual development as one of the children of Garvey, adopting his call for black capitalism. In addition, Malcolm inherited from his parents who were Garveyites a pride in the black race as a united and chosen people.³ Religiously, when Malcolm converted to Islam in 1948, becoming a member of the Nation of Islam, he was following in the footsteps of a line of black intellectuals dating back to the nineteenth century, thinkers such as Edward Wilmot Blyden who had articulated the relationship between peoples of African descent and Islam. In 1888, Blyden wrote *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*,⁴ in which he developed the idea that all people of African descent were culturally united. Blyden then argued that unlike Christianity, which was essentially a European religion, West African Islam had been internalized by African societies and its practices Africanized. Therefore, Islam was a natural part of the identity of African peoples.

By the 1940s, The Nation of Islam was simply the latest manifestation in a long line of relatively small, but significant Islamic congregations, which had taken root within African American communities. Many of these organizations combined aspects of orthodox Islam with the practices of the Black Church, particularly the Baptist and Pentecostal denominations.⁵ As Malcolm progressed as a leader, he came into contact with other influences. Amongst them the Trotskyists of Detroit, which included socialist leaders such as James and Grace Lee Boggs. The Boggs, following in the footsteps of C. L. R. James, worked to relate Marxist theory to the specific concerns of the African American community. The hope was that focusing on the defeat of racism in the United States could serve as an avenue by which to revitalize class struggle, bringing about revolution (p. 263-264). Malcolm also gradually began to feel the pull of orthodox Islam with its message of universalism, and the Third World nationalism espoused by leaders such as Nasser in Egypt. In Marable's capable hands, Malcolm's message and his personal evolution become a tale of how a man who lacked a formal education or secure intellectual grounding negotiated the contradictions and possibilities in the middle of which he suddenly found himself thrust. Marable also does an excellent job of demonstrating the enormous effort and amounts of sacrifice that went into the everyday work that Malcolm performed. At times, Marable goes into embarrassing detail, revealing facts that Haley's account ignored, such as Malcolm's estrangement from his wife. The itinerant evangelist had no time for a home life and barely knew his own children.

³ "Inspired by [Booker T.] Washington's conservative ideas, Garvey did not object to racial segregation laws or separate schools, but astutely he paired these ideas with a fiery polemical attack on white racism and white colonial rule. Unlike the NAACP, which appealed to a rising middle class, Garvey recruited the black poor, the working class, and rural workers." (Marable p. 17).

⁴ Edward Wilmot Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (London, UK: W. B. Whittingham & Co., 1888).

⁵ Marable p. 80-83.; Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African-American Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA : Blackwell, 2006).

Marable observes that Malcolm's power and appeal came from his ability to be intellectually open, experimenting and expressing the currents that he found himself caught up in. James Baldwin would write of Malcolm and his relationship to the Black masses that:

Deep down in their hearts the black masses don't believe in white people anymore. They don't believe in Malcolm, either, except when he articulates their disbelief in white people (p. 167).

Malcolm's popularity during the late 1950s and early 1960s, his ability to draw large crowds and the media's fascination with him did not come from the originality of his thought, but rather from his ability to reflect the passions, frustrations, hopes and anger of his community. The black community located in the Northern slums, the result of the vast quantities of African Americans who moved out of the South before the Second World War, was Malcolm's audience and his greatest source of influence.

Blackness re-imagined

Marable's next task in deconstructing the myth of Malcolm is to debunk the story of Malcolm's metamorphosis from the listless life of a junkie and petty criminal, followed by a period of racial supremacy, in order to finally emerge as a champion of liberal multiculturalism. Marable persuasively argues that this interpretation does a disservice to both Malcolm and Martin Luther King, Jr., who Marable characterizes as a liberal integrationist. Marable writes that "King saw himself, like Frederick Douglas, first and foremost as an American, who pursued the civil rights and civic privileges enjoyed by other Americans." By contrast, Malcolm "perceived himself first and foremost as a black man, a person of African descent who happened to be a United States citizen." The universalism that became a prevalent theme in Malcolm's thought in 1964 and 1965, the last two years of Malcolm's life remained tied to blackness, but a blackness re-imagined in such a way that it came to include "the ideological imperative of self-determination, the concept that all people have a natural right to decide for themselves their own destiny" (p. 482).

Malcolm often struggled to find a universalist vocabulary that differed from the individualism which he thought was inherent in the position of liberals such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Bayard Rustin. The integrationist vision that men like Rustin subscribed to envisioned a world in which black men could ignore the color line and find success as individuals, capable of reaching their full potential unhindered by racism. However, as Malcolm stated in his famous speech in Detroit, "*A Message to the Grassroots*," the goal of the mainstream civil rights leaders was to form a "negro revolution," while what was required was a "black revolution," a revolution for the masses.

All the revolutions that's going on in Asia and Africa today are based on what? Black nationalism. A revolutionary is a black nationalist. He wants a nation. I was reading some beautiful words by Reverend Cleage, pointing out why he couldn't get together with someone else here in the city because all of them were afraid of being identified with black nationalism. If you're afraid of black

*nationalism, you're afraid of revolution. And if you love revolution, you love black nationalism.*⁶

Already in 1963 Malcolm was attempting to tie the struggle of African Americans for equal rights to the struggle against colonialism and the rise of the Non-Aligned Movement. He also argued that the black revolution would be based on the redistribution of land, the creation of an independent state for African Americans. Malcolm was revisiting the dream of Black Zionism dating back to the 19th century of an African American homeland, but metaphorically he was arguing that the revolution would not be just for “a desegregated public toilet; you can sit down next to white folks on the toilet,” but it would require the actual redistribution of wealth and resources towards the masses. During this period, a key argument of Malcolm’s was that Black Americans were part of a wider community of blacks who made up the majority of the world’s population spread across Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

Also Marable emphasizes the contingencies involved in Malcolm’s decision to leave the Nation of Islam arguing that unlike in the account presented in *The Autobiography*, there was not a clear moment of intellectual epiphany in which Malcolm decided to leave. Instead, Marable describes how a series of miscalculations led to Malcolm’s eventual departure from the Nation. On December 1st, 1963, Malcolm X, just days after John F. Kennedy’s assassination on November 22nd, said that Kennedy’s murder was simply the “chickens coming home to roost,” the consequence of America’s actions in Vietnam. He added, “Being an old farm boy myself, chickens coming home to roost never did make me sad; they’ve always made me glad” (p. 272-273). Malcolm spoke in direct contradiction of an order from Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, to remain quiet on the subject of Kennedy’s murder. Consequentially, Malcolm was silenced and months later kicked out of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm’s expulsion grew out of his growing disagreement with Elijah Muhammad as to how involved in politics the Nation of Islam and Malcolm himself should be.

Even as the combination of Elijah Muhammad as supreme leader, prophet of the Nation, and of Malcolm as his greatest evangelist, led to the incredible growth of the Nation of Islam, tensions about the organization’s direction and the role it should play in the struggles for political and economic rights, taking place throughout the wider African American community continued to grow, throughout the 1950s.

Malcolm was charged with recruiting members to the Nation in 1953. In 1952-53, the Nation of Islam was reported to have less than a thousand members (p. 107). While between 1953 and 1956 the Nation grew from twelve hundred to six thousand members, and then from 1956 until 1961, it expanded to perhaps seventy-five thousand members (p. 123). The Nation of Islam recruited the black masses from prisons, unemployment lines, ghettos, and by the late 1950s increasingly from the black middle class. The appeal of the Nation was black pride. The images of increased violence that blacks were confronted with in the South as Whites began to engage in “massive resistance” to

⁶ Malcolm X, “Message to the Grassroots,” in George Breitman, ed. *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1966) 3-17; Marable p 264-265.

desegregation in 1955 drove membership, as many sought an organization that gave blacks a feeling that they were not helpless (p. 123).

Paradoxically, the Nation promised to turn its members into a clenched fist, poised to act in response to provocation, even as it denied that blacks should participate in the civil rights struggle, seek equal rights, or desegregation. Instead, the Nation proposed that blacks should strive to strengthen their own separate communities, migrating symbolically, even if they could not migrate in practice, to their own nation. In 1962, Malcolm in a speech at Cornell University argued that African Americans who supported integration were mistaken, because:

...they have confidence in the white man...they believe that there is still hope in the American dream. But what to them is an American dream is to us an American nightmare, and we don't think that it is possible for the American white man in sincerity to take the action necessary to correct the unjust conditions that 20 million black people are made to suffer, morning, noon and night. (p. 203)

Other members of civil rights struggles frequently criticized the Nation for recognizing the disease of racism, but refusing to offer a cure or a program of action. But what made the Nation of Islam attractive was that it offered discipline. The charisma of Malcolm sprang from the image of discipline and personal control that he exuded. Louis Farrakhan, Malcolm's successor within the Nation said of him:

Nobody could handle Malcolm. He had a brilliant mind. He was disciplined...I never saw Malcolm smoke. I never heard Malcolm curse. I never saw Malcolm wink at a woman. I never saw Malcolm eat in between meals. He ate one meal a day. He got up at 5 o'clock in the morning to say his prayers. I never saw Malcolm late for an appointment. Malcolm was like a clock. (p. 121)

The Nation was also an organization that executed extreme and swift violence against its own members for small infractions such as smoking.

Police brutality

It was the display of power, which the organization and structure of the Nation of Islam made possible, which eventually made Malcolm and the Nation a force within the civil rights struggle, even if unintentionally. Malcolm's avenue into the civil rights conflict was police brutality. On April 26, 1957 three black men intervened in an incident where the police were violently attempting to arrest a man on the corner of Lenox Avenue and 125th Street. One of the men who attempted to intervene was severely beaten by the police. He happened to be a member of Malcolm's Temple No. 7 located in central Harlem. The belief that he should defend a member of his flock mobilized Malcolm, who took a crowd with him to the police station in Harlem. Engaged in a standoff, Malcolm placed a group of his Temple members in a formation, and instead of allowing the demonstration to escalate, dismissed them with but a wave of his hand, demonstrating to the police the discipline of his followers, and their willingness to unquestioningly follow his orders.

Elijah Muhammad, a deeply conservative man who had spent time in jail during the Second World War, was furious with Malcolm for getting involved in police brutality cases and demanded that his star disciple as well as his flock remain apolitical. Malcolm would attempt to follow Elijah's commands, but as the profile of the Nation of Islam steadily increased during the late 1950s and early 1960s, members of the Nation increasingly found themselves embroiled with the police. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and New York Police Department's Bureau of Special Services, an intelligence unit associated with the police department, were both increasingly keeping a close tab on the Nation's activities.

The most significant incident of conflict with the police occurred in Los Angeles on April 27th, 1962, when two Black Muslims were observed taking a bag out of the backseat of a car by police officers and approached with suspicion. A melee broke out and the Mosque No. 27 in Los Angeles was raided. Seven Muslims were shot and Ronald Stokes an officer in the NOI was killed. Malcolm was ordered not to retaliate. But increasingly for Malcolm the withdrawal from worldly politics was becoming hard to justify, even as he preached that the Nation of Islam was a clenched fist cocked and ready to throw a punch. This image was what drew the masses to the Nation. However, as the 1960s progressed, the Nation increasingly appeared to be interested primarily in acting on its own behalf. The Chicago headquarters had amassed a huge collection of businesses including a multimillion dollar fish import business, and Elijah was increasingly embroiled in sex scandals.

As Malcolm mixed the struggle against racism with the class struggle, he found himself alienated from the Nation of Islam, and forced to search for a new political identity. He died in 1965, shot by members of the Nation, perhaps with the collaboration of elements within the law enforcement community, still struggling to define a universalist political identity that nevertheless acknowledged and celebrated the distinctiveness of the black community.

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