

DRAFT: NOT FOR PUBLICATION

**THE COMMUNITY DIALOGUES OF CHICAGO**  
=====

**Five Speeches  
By**

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Northeastern University  
Boston, Ma.**

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OCTOBER 5, 1991

THE CRISIS IN CIVIL RIGHTS

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## CRISIS IN CIVIL RIGHTS

### OPENING REMARKS

Abdul Alkalimat

We are gathered here to reflect on the political dimension of the times in which we live. As this is a meeting based in the Black community, and the program contains speakers who are from the Black experience, both as academic scholars and professional advocates of social change, as intellectual activists and activist intellectuals, we need spend little time establishing the case that these are troubled times, that we face a crisis in our collective lives. I simply want to state this as a fact, and suggest that we proceed with this point as a basic point of consensus.

After all, whatever ones ideological position, who would deny that a crisis exists upon hearing a roll call of the issues:

a. on the role of government intervention in solving social and economic problems: bail out of corporations but not unemployed workers, cut back on public housing and a rise in homelessness, racially imbalanced policies on capital punishment, and freedom of choice regarding abortion; and

b. on the issue of leadership: the nomination of Clarence Thomas to replace Thurgood Marshall on the Supreme Court, Black mayors of broke cities, Black presidential candidates, and Black police chiefs.

Indeed, to recite the list is to confirm that a crisis exists, and it is this crisis that we are here to discuss.

There are, however, two important points of debate that I suggest will come forward during the deliberations that we will have throughout this day:

First (1), What is the nature of the crisis we face today? To what extent is this simply a continuation of the same old crisis that we have been facing since the cruel barbarism of the slavery trade that forced our ancestors into chattel slavery, and, on the other hand to what extent is this current crisis something new that we have never faced before?

And, secondly (2) What can be done about our current condition? What are our options as a people in our various urban and rural communities? And, how do these options inform the viability of conservative versus radical ideological perspectives, and to what extent is it possible to go beyond merely considering struggles for reform to the serious consideration of the struggle for revolution?

In response to the first point, we have to make a distinction between judging the crisis in terms of the role of consciousness in the overall society and the Black community as opposed to making an evaluation based on the material content of the Black experience. We have in this society conceptual definitions and a logic for formal freedom as stated explicitly, though full of ambiguity, in the laws of the land: the US constitution, Acts of the Congress, the Executive Orders of the President, and the decisions and decrees of the courts of the land. These laws are what our society (that is what the rulers of this society) think about our society. They constitute its formal declaration of political identity.

The basic paradigm for formal freedom in the USA has been

based on freedom for the individual citizen, mediated by a jurisdictional division of labor between the federal government and the states. The USA is a federated union of states, and therefore some laws apply to the whole group (the federal government for the entire USA), and some apply to sub-groups (each of the 50 states can make its own laws in particular instances). In the past because of the geo-politics of slavery and its legacy in the former confederacy, states rights has been a quite oppressive political paradigm for Blacks because the racist ruling regimes of southern states have used their privileged hegemony against us. Therefore the radical Black tradition has usually focused on upholding the constitutionally defined individual rights since Black people were being singled out and oppressed as a group. This was the fight against de jure segregation and discrimination. This is the basis for Martin Luther King's assertion that he wanted to be judged "not by the color of my skin but by the content of my character."

However, formal declarations of freedom have not fundamentally changed the content of our experience, have not proved to be of decisive economic and social benefit for the majority of Black people who have continued to be held down and exploited as the wretched of this earth. Black people continue to be the victims of various de facto forms of barbarism, even more terrible because the apparent democratic legalism of US freedom amounts to no more than the hypocritical smile on the blood drenched lips of a wolf taking an oath to support the lambs of the earth.

Having said this, it is necessary to make clear that change has happened, and in fact in some ways one can forcefully argue that there has been progress and things have gotten better. In very general terms it is important to note that a major process of social transformation has occurred in each of the last three centuries. In the 18th century, the USA carried out a national liberation struggle to free itself from British colonialism. In the 19th century, the emancipation of slaves and the capitalist integration of the national economy required a civil war. And in the 20th century, social movements initiated the social welfare state and transformed politics through the inclusion of women and Blacks into the franchise.

But make no mistake about it, these advances in the formal features of democracy should not be confused with revolutions in the lives of average Black people whose lives may have changed in form but not in content. In fact the critical formal changes extended to Black (and even white working) people only took place after additional struggle: the Bill of Rights reflected a class struggle within the US and were added on four years after the Constitution was adopted; the 13th, 14th, and 15th constitutional amendments were added on after the Civil War; and, the New Deal reforms of Franklin D Roosevelt came after the class war of the so called great depression and the threat of fascism in World War II.

What is critical here is that a focus on the transformation of formal freedom is not the approach that best helps us understand the everyday quality of life experienced by the masses of Black people. We have to look at the material conditions of their lives and on that basis determine whether progress has taken place.

In general, after World War II, and especially after the

invention of the mechanical cotton picker, Black people were driven off the land into the cities, especially the urban north. Here they were arriving as the industrial demand for labor was peaking, so that the taste of economic advance and security was destined to last only a couple of generations, and then only for those that actually got in on it. This was the material basis of the civil rights movement: Blacks in the south fighting to catch up with northern conditions by overcoming de jure segregation, southern states rights, and attaining more formal freedoms; and in the north the Blacks were fighting de facto segregation to make more gains toward economic security and social advancement.

The 1960's was a time of economic gain and political gain, but it was a relatively short lived period, and a relatively unique period as well. Since the 1960's, in a political climate dominated by Republicans who often failed to see the need for hypocrisy on their views toward Blacks, (not kinder and gentler, but rather shameless and blood curdling) and we have seen a reversal on the scale of the nadir wipeout after the Hayes-Tilden betrayal of 1877 liquidated the great reconstruction phase of the emancipation experience.

Today, we have an economic crisis as unprecedented as the rise of industrialization in the production of textiles. Then we saw the profits from the slave trade fuel the mills that in turn consumed white children as forced labor in the mills and Blacks as forced labor in the cotton fields. But there is a new twist today as the technological and scientific revolution has fundamentally undercut the demand for Black labor and white labor so that a new degree of permanence has been added to poverty and suffering. The point is that an upsurge in the economy with increased production will not mean people going back to work, it will mean fewer people producing more goods. This is a fundamentally new crisis cause by the logical extension of electricity in the form of the computer chip, the new materials, and wide raging applications of new developments in chemistry and biology.

So we have a new kind of permanent poverty, a new structure of obsolescence. Only by juxtaposing this material crisis with our political crisis can we have a full picture of the times in which we live. In fact it is in this context that we can begin to make sense of our moral, and spiritual, and cultural crises as well. All of this will be explored in our discussion today: defining the crisis, detailing specific experiences, and outlining historical trends.

Now with this general sorting out of a diagnosis of the crisis we are logically prepared to discuss our prognosis and cure. In the 1950's and 60's we launched massive movements for social reform and in the 1980's and 90's electoral action was the remedy of choice, not for all but for most. Both failed, but not entirely.

The most basic level of struggle is the fight for reform. This is so because in virtually every case the fight for reform is a response to an attack, a self-evidently necessary form of self-defense. Not a day goes by when the fight for reform isn't taken up from within our community, and in some cases when the conditions allow for it a reform struggle can blossom into a major struggle, major either because of the number of people who get involved or

because the issues involved get connected to other issues and the struggle takes on a more general character. Both of these points of significance, quantitative and qualitative, defined the significance of the civil rights movement.

However, there are limits to reform, but not merely the limits of a dead end street where you obviously come to a full stop, but also the limits of a cliff that one might fall off of or a treadmill that one can get caught up in. The point to all these "limits" is that no real future progress is possible. What defines these limits is not the nominal concepts of freedom, but the material basis of freedom. Indeed, when material progress is threatened, and essentially this means when profit and gain for the ruling class slows down or ends, then the political culture is transformed into a repressive and less than democratic environment for the massive of people, a culture in which people are encouraged against the fight for reform and often penalized for doing so.

It is in this context that the masses of people have no choice but to rationally reflect on the necessity of revolutionary struggle, the fundamental transformation of the society, the politics of the government and the organization of the economy, to insure that the masses of people have the full benefits of a open democratic culture and democratic access to the wealth that they themselves produce in the economy.

Now to speak in this way seems an incredible act of defiance in the new world order spoken of by George Bush. Indeed, in this Orwellian era of disinformation and tv dominated culture, logic is limited to what makes the most sense in "their" scripts. Well, I am trying to say that the purpose of meeting as we are today is to formulate our own thoughts, to advance our own positions, and to think through our problems using logic which springs from our own experiences. We have a radical Black tradition which requires us to include the concept of revolution in our theory, and to evaluate our theoretical options on the basis of our material possibilities.

Let me sum it up my introductory remarks this way:

1. We are a people under attack in many ways, both on the economic and political level. We are in a life - death struggle for survival.

2. We have to analyze our situation and come to a clear understanding of the nature of this crisis, its political and economic dimensions.

3. Further, we have to discuss the full range of options that we have, to fight for reform, and we have to go further and dare to think about and pursue the more definitive option of revolution.

We are here to discuss the crisis of civil rights facing Black people. I welcome you to this day long conference and invite you to be a full participant.

Thank you.

## CRISIS IN CIVIL RIGHTS

### THE IDEOLOGICAL CRISIS IN CIVIL RIGHTS: THE STRUGGLE FOR THE MINDS OF BLACK FOLKS

Abdul Alkalimat

Any discussion of ideology in the late 20th century, especially in the USA, and even more especially since the recent developments in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, is forced to have a perspective covering at least 100 years if not 500 years. Note, I am not using ideology as the notion of false consciousness. In this context ideology means three things: (1) an analysis of the world as it is, (2) a position on the way the world ought to be, and (3) a related commitment of advocacy.

The century long framework I propose refers to the 1992 125th anniversary of Das Kapital written by Karl Marx. This would place the ideological focus on the capitalist system, specifically the inevitable class struggle based on the masses of working people fighting for their survival. Here the main ideological question is whether capitalism, as a system, is self correcting and able to change its nature.

It is in the context of this fundamental question that the more recent 75 year history of 20th century socialist practice (dating it from the 1917 revolution in the USSR) must be evaluated and a determination made about whether and in what ways it has been an advance over capitalism, both the developing capitalism which it replaced and the advanced capitalism that it has been competing with over the last 75 years.

Note that this approach is opposite to the one proposed by the racist white ruling class of the USA. They argue that Socialism has died, and therefore capitalism has triumphed. Conversely, I suggest that we continue to evaluate the fundamental nature of capitalism since it is not working for the majority of people (especially Black people), and in that context we evaluate the extent to which already attempted socialism has worked or not. The implicit assumption, then, is not that current socialist failures make us give up, but that we have to learn from our mistakes, and do better in the future.

We remember the slogan "Fight, fail; fight again, fail again; fight on to victory!" This approach is dictated by the experience of class exploitation, racism, and national oppression, an experience which prevents the masses of Black people from applauding capitalism, and gives us optimism to continue the fight for a just and peaceful system based on the needs of the many and not merely the profits of a few.

The 500 year perspective points to the 1992 anniversary of the 1492 explorations of Christopher Columbus. This would place the ideological focus on Eurocentrism, the entire legacy of Europe's five centuries of world domination, mainly capitalist but socialist as well. Here we have to reevaluate the results of these 500 years, from setting lies straight about "Europe as 'Gods' miracle" to facilitating the voices of the victims to be heard in the court of world opinion.

Even after the terrible barbarism of genocide and cultural liquidation that the Europeans carried out under the banner of

Christianity and civilization, the historical record is being reconstructed, and this very record is being used as a standard to demythologize "white" history and sum up the actual human costs of its alleged progress.

I am reminded of the incident when Ghandi was asked what he thought of Western civilization, and he said it seemed like a good idea and he hoped someday it would be tried out. This is the great ideological question in this context, whether Eurocentrism has the capacity to reform itself through self-criticism, and then to transform as but one of all of the worlds cultures and spheres of civilization.

What I have asked, by combining my two perspectives of one and five centuries, is whether the white racist ruling classes of European imperialism will commit suicide. Yes, you and I would be best served if that's what they did, but, alas, we shouldn't count on it. What we have is a vampire who might have to take low from time to time to avoid the light of mass struggle, but who is sure to rise again unless we end our misery with a silver bullet to its brain and a stake driven deep into its heart. The ideological issue is just that clear, just that necessary, and just that dangerous.

In the history of Black people in the USA, there has never been an era of ideological peace, we have been in a virtual state of permanent ideological crisis. The vampires brought us here to suck our blood and some form of blood sucking has been going on ever since. In other words, changes in the political system have never completely ended repression, and changes in the economic system have never ended exploitation, but, even with this negative continuity, we have yet to build a politically powerful consensus around a systemic ideological critique. This is our most fundamental ideological crisis, one involving the connection of ideas with practical struggle.

Having said this I want to clarify what we do have, a radical Black tradition of ideological debates reflecting the fight for a systemic critique of the political and economic forces that attack us. In fact, I would argue that the complex diversity of social classes, communities, and national consciousness probably precludes any rigid dogmatic consensus from ever developing. Therefore, the dynamic character of our radical Black tradition is a form of advanced democracy, a social process for producing consciousness, critical and self-correcting, in which everyone has an opportunity to articulate the key issues of the day within the broad parameters of our accumulated great debates.

From 1830 through the Civil War, Black activists and community leaders met in local, state, and national conventions to discuss their views on ending slavery and improving the lives of Black people. The Emancipation Debate of the National Negro Convention Movement clarified a variety of strategies and tactics: united front cooperation with whites, militant armed struggle, and other forms of collective self-determination including emigration, moral suasion, and electoral participation. Vincent Franklin, in his book Black Self-Determination: A Cultural History of the Faith of the Fathers notes that:

"The national Black conventions held in the 1830's generally

had three major objectives: first, the organizing of free Black opposition to the 'Black laws' being passed in several northern states; second, the examination of the best strategies for advancing the free Black population; and third, the discussion of the ways of bringing about an immediate end of slavery in the United States."

These were revolutionary debates because they were aimed at destroying a system of oppression, the slave system. In this context, capitalist forces were progressive as they too found cause in fighting the slave system so that capitalist development could take place more freely. However, this didn't apply to Blacks as Blacks were prevented from developing a class of independent capitalists, owning land and industrial firms (although a few did). A Black middle class was sired by the federal government through the Freedmans Bureau, and white liberals through their religious organizations, a process that provided them with ideological training in the Negro colleges and employment as social welfare professionals to manage the affairs of the Black community.

This led to the second great debate, The Self-Determination Debate. The two most prominent figures in this debate were W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T Washington. This was a debate between competing wings of the middle class. DuBois led northern based militant elites, who argued for open and active resistance to racism, in ideological and practical struggle for an expansion of democracy. The most well known form being the Niagara Movement, and later the NAACP. They argued that the future Black people should determined for themselves was in being able to take advantage of the resources and opportunities of the mainstream of society.

Washington, based in the south, was the main proselytizer for economic self-reliance, both as a southern movement of Black farmers based out of Tuskegee Institute and a national movement of urban entrepreneurs organized by the National Negro Business League. Washington argued that social and political democracy was not essential for Black progress, but that even within the segregated limits imposed on Blacks from without that it would be possible to develop a solid economic base within.

What has to be understood is that these were two wings of the Black middle class, and just as a bird uses two wings to fly, both of these tendencies were embraced, often by the same people, sometimes differentiating them as regional strategies, but always as eclectic opportunism, a Black form of American pragmatism. There is a self evident validity to both of them from the Black perspective on the level of reform and tactics, but each has its limits.

This debate gets undercut by class struggle. The great depression led to the mobilization of the US working class including the Black workers recently arrived from their agrarian sharecropping roots. This class struggle leads to and gets coopted by the social policies of the welfare state under the leadership of Franklin D Roosevelt. Black moved into the Democratic party and sang the song of a new political culture: "Jesus leads us, and Roosevelt feeds us."

All of this is heightened by World War II, and out of it

emerges the third great debate, the Black Liberation Debate. This debate takes place as the militant fight for democracy explodes in the south as a broad social movement. Martin Luther King picks up the banner of DuBois, reinvigorated by a newly mobilized southern constituency. He recaptures the American Dream as the right of the former slaves. Malcolm X turns the legacy of Marcus Garvey on its head by rooting his militant advocacy for Black liberation in the Black working class shaped by the migrations and the depression. Malcolm X rejected America as a nightmare, and linked Black liberation to the social revolutions raging in the post World War II third world.

The highest expression of competing class tendencies emerge in this debate, the civil rights line and the Black power line. The middle class warrior Martin Luther King epitomizes the best of the talented tenth that DuBois talked about, a middle class educated professional devoting his life to serving his people in the civil rights movement. The working class warrior Malcolm X synthesized proletarian class struggle from a Black perspective that was subsequently declared as the Black power position.

The Black Liberation position of the Black working class was never realized as the leading tendency in the Black community, being limited to the expression of spontaneous urban insurrections, and relatively short lived though very important organizations like the Black Panther Party. The leading line continued to be the civil rights position that led to the inclusion of Black leadership within the mainstream. For the middle class this meant affirmative action for the professionals, and for the working class it meant inclusion into the ranks of trade union leadership. Overall it meant the Voting Rights Act of 1965, formal political inclusion originally promised in 1868 by the 14th amendment to the US Constitution.

Therefore, following the assassination of key Black leaders, on the one hand Martin Luther King and Medgar Evers, and on the other hand Malcolm X and Fred Hampton, all figures who (in one way or another) were identified with Black radicalism in their respective contexts, the consensus position of Black middle class leadership to work within the system became the dominant line in the 1970's and 1980's. Black electoral participation was held out as the way forward after the victory for the Black middle class civil rights forces of the 1960's.

However, material reality is stubborn and wont be wished away. There was a great deal of energy put into electoral politics but the conditions facing the majority of Black people, poor working class people mainly, not only did not get better but in fact tended to get much worse. This period gave rise to the so called underclass, homelessness, and the decline of public education and health care. On the one a political hype in consciousness, while on the other hand material economic and social degeneracy.

Now it is possible to discuss the rise and reactionary character of the new Black conservatism. These are middle class people who benefitted from the civil rights movement, but who are now shutting the door behind themselves as a mean spirited self serving callous act of historical betrayal. Sometimes they claim identity with the masses of people, but usually only when they wish

to take advantage of the representational quota's reserved for Black leadership as in the case of Clarence Thomas,. Usually they are blatantly clear about who they are as in the following quote from The Content of Our Character by Shelby Steele:

"I am a fortyish, middle class, Black American male with a teaching position at a large state university in California. I have owned my own home for more than ten years, as well as the two cars that are the minimal requirement for life in California. And I will confess to a moderate strain of yuppie hedonism. Year after year my two daughters are the sole representatives of their race in their classrooms, a fact they sometimes have difficulty remembering. We are the only Black family in our suburban neighborhood, and even this claim to specialness is diminished by the fact that my wife is white. I think we are called an "integrated" family, though no one has ever used the term with me. For me to be among large numbers of blacks requires conscientiousness and a long car ride, and in truth, I have not been very conscientious lately. Though I was raised in an all-Black community just south of Chicago, I only occasionally feel nostalgia for such places. Trips to the barbershop now and then usually satisfy this need, though recently, in the interest of convenience, I've taken to letting my wife cut my hair."

I think Mr. Steele states his condition with great clarity. He is in possession of one version of Black middle class success coming as a result of the civil rights movement, but he and his class-mates turn a cold shoulder to the masses of Black people who for the last 100 years have had to rely on direct government intervention in economic and social life and, expanding the welfare state to improve their condition.

What is new is that this small elite has adopted conservatism at precisely the time when the technological revolution has fundamentally marginalized unskilled labor, and therefore the only hope the majority of Black people have is through government intervention. Its as if we're being asked to advance ourselves by selling used manual typewriters in the age of computers and word processing software. It just can't be done, not even in the Black community itself!

Ideologically, the Black conservative position goes along with uncritical support for the inclusion of Black middle class leaders into and being virtually indistinguishable from the mainstream. This is unprecedented. Certainly this is true of government functionaries like Colin Powell and Clarence Pendleton. However, in the electoral period of the 1970's and 1980's, another unprecedented development is the extent to which national Black middle class leaders have top security clearance within the federal government hierarchy, including Hooks of the NAACP and perennial presidential candidate Jesse Jackson.

What we have, then, is an ideological crisis based on the systematic opportunism and collaboration of the middle class Black leadership who have sold out to being a loyal opposition within the mainstream. We are forced to look to the people themselves to provide their own leadership, but it is hard to break the habit of the last century of looking to the Black middle class to provide valid ideological alternatives.

I would like to suggest that even in this Orwellian "new world order" we can find pockets of resistance and ideological regroupment. We can find a rebirth of our radical Black tradition even now. One such arena of exciting ideological debate is in the educational field of Black studies. There are at least five foci of ideological debate: Black liberation theology, Black feminist theology, Black literary criticism, Afrocentricity, and Black social analysis.

Generally my assessment is that our main progress is being in the formulating and popularizing of key questions. It is not our answers at this time but our questions that represent the current state of potential ideological consensus. The Afrocentric position is driving the question of African origins, both the origin of all homo sapien sapiens as well as the origin of the worlds first civilization. Eurocentrism is being challenged at its core. This position is also advancing world consciousness by raising questions about the continuity of Africa's impact through history, including the notion of a diasporian framework of analysis and action.

Each of the other areas is raising the fundamental question of attacking privilege or domination by raising the issue of particularity, and by so doing reformulate universality: the issue of gender, of literature and linguistics, of Christianity and Islam, and the issue of class. In sum, the questions that are being raised have unhinged the paradigm of the mainstream. The ideologists of the "new world order" ignore these question to their own peril. But, as of yet we have the questions and not the answers.

One major example is the issue of multiculturalism. We have attacked the racist exclusionary canon, and the entire institution of education from preschool through the university is in turmoil. But, we have yet to consolidate our information and fight for an intellectual paradigm that maintains the necessary tension between the integrity of our particular story and the historical mandate for a global perspective. Unfortunately we are at the level of multiculturalism as a quilt made up of add-ons. The challenge is to make a new theoretical synthesis. This is the academic version of the systemic ideological critique I mentioned earlier.

The foremost Black liberation theologian James Cone is very clear on this point. In his book For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church Cone states:

"Building on the strengths of Black leaders of the past, we must also look beyond them ....We need a vision of freedom that includes the whole of the inhabited earth and not just Black North America, a vision enabling us to analyze the causes of world poverty and sickness, monopoly capitalism and antidemocratic socialism, opium in Christianity and other religions among the oppressed, racism and sexism, and the irresolute will to eliminate these evils. We must analyze these complex and deeply rooted evils in such a manner that the Black struggle and faith can be seen expressing solidarity with the struggles and faiths of others who are fighting for the liberation of the wretched of the earth."

These academic arenas of ideological debate are spilling over into the mass media because of their critical policy implications, especially in the areas of education and foreign affairs.

Furthermore, most of the positions that are being publicized in the mainstream media are not the most militant or the most revolutionary ones. Further the debate is being polemicized and trivialized as well. What can't be denied is that this debate is brewing in the community, and raising the consciousness of those who are most economically insecure.

Symbolically the focal point of this new ideological motion is the rebirth of Malcolm X. Yes, it is true that he is an icon, an undeniably revolutionary point of reference for the Black masses now and in the future. Further, it is unlikely that any move in the popular media will be able to change this as long as the "field Negroes" he spoke to and for still exist.

The debate over Clarence Thomas is about how to get inside of the mainstream, who should we support and why. This reflects the rightward drift in the so called reform leadership of the Black middle class. The debate over Malcolm X reflects the continuing revolutionary impulse of the Black masses to resurrect the radical Black tradition and give birth to a new era of militant struggle.

The crisis will be with us for some time.

The ideological struggle will continue for some time.

We don't really have a choice to stop the crisis at this time, but we do have a necessary choice to make over which side we take in the ideological struggle swirling around us. Perhaps, then, and sooner than we think, we might be able to stop the crisis and make the history we all want to live.

I hope this conference will help all of us.

LONG LIVE THE SPIRIT OF MALCOLM X!  
RESIST! REBUILD!

**IDEOLOGY, BLACK MIDDLE CLASS LEADERSHIP, AND PROSPECTS FOR  
REBUILDING THE BLACK LIBERATION MOVEMENT ON A NEW FOUNDATION**

Abdul Alkalimat

Brothers and Sisters,  
Comrades and Friends,

It is a challenge to rise again to speak, as I do so to engage the questions people have raised during our first community dialogue as well as on a recent radio call in show. The main issue is the relevance of the concept class to the Black experience. The general point of contention has been whether there were class differences that were of fundamental importance. One position holds that all Black people are the same, more or less, because of their domination by racist white power. A different position holds that class differences are crucial, especially in this dynamic period of social transformation.

This is a critical discussion because it is here that all theoretical and philosophical reflections can be found in their most concentrated form. It is in a discussion of class and the class struggle that (save for the obscurantism of academic pedantry) the masses of people can test the validity of ideas (analysis and policy) to their practical experience. It is in this debate that we can pull the covers off hidden interests and begin to clarify what role people are playing in terms of social contradictions, who stands where on the issues, and with whom one shares common interests. This is particularly the case in this period of economic crisis.

What must be grasped is that our analysis most often encounters the ideological forms of the crisis and therefore we must struggle to overcome the contradiction of illusion versus reality. Nowhere is this more to the heart of the matter than when we seek to analyze the Black middle class. The great sociologist E. Franklin Frazier reminds us of this in naming the two

parts of his text *Black Bourgeoisie* – the first is called "The World of Reality" (a study of the social division labor and historical forms of wealth accumulation), and the second half "The World of Make Believe" (a study of ideology).

My intention in this brief paper is to address three points with special focus on the Black middle class:

1. Methodology
2. Historical experience
3. Progressive options

At the risk of simplification this is the skeleton of an argument, so I welcome the opportunity for further clarification. Overall, it is my goal to add my voice to those who want to rebuild the Black liberation movement. I say this because I believe it is necessary and it is possible. This paper is designed to put some definite ideas forward about why it is necessary and how it is possible.

#### 1. PHILOSOPHY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE:

A key phrase in the basic framework for a materialist analysis of society is that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." This is a fundamental point that sets materialism aside from idealism, and as such is profoundly democratic in its implications.

"Social life is essential practical. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice." (7th thesis on Feuerbach) This is a philosophical point of view that cuts through the mumbo jumbo of the self appointed priests and cult leaders who argue that they have privileged access to knowledge, because this knowledge has been retained as secrets and is only accessible to them, hence their position of privilege in society.

Actually, what we experience is just as Marx put it. Everyone living and working in a society engages other people and the environment through their direct experience, and therefore

have allot to think about. As long as ideas flow from and/or can be tested on experience then whoever has access to that experience (directly or indirectly) can speak to the correctness and relevance of the ideas.

Furthermore, social progress is always based on the extent to which materialism is the philosophical orientation of the workers, scientists, and political leaders of a society. On the other hand, philosophical idealism is usually associated with a society which is not dynamic and maybe facing a period of decline in which the ruling privileged classes and their elites structure deference through ritual and submission to authority – the contradictory duality of the priest and the soldier.

Perhaps the most important part of the methodology is this: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world differently, the point is, to change it." (the 8th Thesis on Feuerbach) This completes the dialectic, from practical experience to theoretical knowledge, and then from knowledge to a historical force for social change. (practice to theory, theory to practice, the endless cycle of existence at this stage of our development.) However, one note of caution. The actual dialectic is not mechanical in that historical moments in which change is possible does not mean that change is inevitable, at least not in the short run. There fore, the action of conscious forces who utilize a materialist epistemology are a necessary critical factor in charting a course away from barbarism toward socialist transformation.

In sum, the broad forces of history are always the masses of people who spontaneously concentrate their ideas into mass action. And up to the stage of advanced capitalism this was adequate. But as we approach the 21st century the technological factors and the complexity of society require organized conscious forces if the action is to be decisive. Only broad mass movements with the capacity to combat and defeat the dominance of ruling class ideology, will replace the philosophical idealism underlying mass consciousness with historical materialism. Obviously this is the ideological dimension of the struggle,

something that has to be carried out now under capitalism in crisis and will have to be continued for generation to come under socialism. This is the historical function of a cultural revolution, and every society will have to have many.

## 2. HISTORICAL DIALECTICS OF BLACK MIDDLE CLASS LEADERSHIP:

Let us now turn to the issue of the Black middle class. I would like to declare myself both a beneficiary and victim of this class. But it is not a personalized argument I'd like to make.

My sense is that class is a historical category – not so much as a constantly varying status category or market position (occupational prestige, educational attainment or income) – the consistent principle of class organization is a common relationship to ownership of the means of production and ideological formulations that translate or reflect this economic position into culture, consciousness, and politics. The Black middle class strata is a combination of decreasing numbers of self employed farmers and business people, and increasing numbers of the new professionals (usually working for a state agency. My intention is to argue that the Black middle class has made a great historical contribution to the Black struggle and they have maintained and developed the radical Black ideological tradition within their historical context but that history has passed them by as the strategic source for criticism and vision.

During slavery the Black middle class was a primarily northern urban based group of merchants and professionals. They were insecure and unstable, facing constant danger from the threat of being forced into slavery. There was a total consensus that slavery should be ended, although their leadership reflected a diversity of overlapping methodologies to do it: Frederick Douglass represented the approach of mass education and persuasion of those in power, while Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth chose the illegal direct action of the underground railroad, while still others chose armed struggle like the slave revolts, the John Brown raid, or joining the Union Army.

For the next century a transformation took place that produced a dialectical tension within the Black middle class. We know this as the great self determination debate personified by the exchanges between Marcus Garvey, Booker T Washington, W E B DuBois. These three men represented different material conditions, different sectors of the Black middle class; Booker T Washington was the expression of the Black middle class as an incipient capitalist class within a segregated community. Within the South, based on the politics of fascism during the sharecropping days, the middle class dominated Black social institutions and frequently enjoyed some level of relative material comfort. However, economically they could not amass sufficient wealth to industrialize and provide the basis for community (or national) development. DuBois was representative of those Blacks outside of the south, those in direct lineage from the abolitionists, those who were militantly in favor of realizing the promise of entering the mainstream of American life. Garvey represented the colonized nations of the African Diaspora, and linked the Washington position to an international panafrican movement.

Ideological divisions were sharp and deep in this debate. If we understand the logic of each position in relation to its respective material base, then each becomes a rational position. However, the dialectic of racism and democracy has more often than not forced people into one camp or the other, and from that position attack all other positions. To the extent that a subsistence agrarian economy was sufficient, or that economic self-reliance was a viable option, the Booker T Washington forces made a strong point. But World War II and its related technological and demographical changes cut the base out from this position. To the extent that the racist politics of an ascending US imperialism were repressive people would get backed into the Washington camp. On the other hand, conservatism would be replaced with a more radical posture when mass support was needed for survival or career advancement.

By the 1950's the leading role of the struggle was in the

hands of the DuBois forces, but all major social institutions in the segregated Black community were more fundamentally associated with the Washington tradition, especially the Black church. The significance of Martin Luther King is that from deep within the Black church, the National Baptist Convention, he emerged as a national leader in the DuBois tradition, the last great example of "the talented tenth." He sided with the forward thinking forces of the East Coast against the traditional authoritarian conservative dominance of J H Jackson based here in Chicago. King is the great synthesis of the Black middle class, their best and their last. And I might add that this great political connection was engineered by Jesse Jackson, wooing Clay Evans (then a rising star in Baptist leadership) into the King camp.

Another synthesis of the Washington and DuBois traditions, nationalism and the democratic struggles, was Malcolm X, only he emerged from the depths of the working class and the prisons. The dialectic of leadership was not longer in the hands of the middle class, because now a Black proletarian voice was being heard. Malcolm X has greater strategic value than King because he intensified the Black liberation debate from within the radical Black tradition as cultivated by the militant Black working class. Reformers are not particularly attracted to Malcolm X, but he does draw all of the militants, radicals, and revolutionaries.

This is the main link the Black liberation debate of the 1960's has to the new generation of youth in the 1990's. Malcolm X spoke from outside of legitimate society: what he demanded the society wouldn't give, and was resentful of having to hear it from as Malcolm called himself "a field Negro." And most Black middle-class leaders wouldn't take up the issues either. Now, with the masses of Black workers and youth thrown out of work, threatened with homelessness, AIDS and the drug culture of chemical and military urban guerrilla warfare, the society cant.

### 3. PROGRESSIVE OPTIONS

In stating once again the historical periodization of the radical Black tradition my intention has been to provide a map

for the basic ideological positions that get interpreted through the current social context. One of the great ideological pitfalls for our movement has been sectarianism and dogmatism. Too many times groups have walled themselves off and/or worshiped books. The critical juncture for Black middle class radicals has always been taking up the people's cause in open forum for discussion and debate. Each debate has taken place within specific historical conditions and has had goals relative to those conditions. Our current debate has to learn from those that preceded us but today is a new situation and we have to do some serious and creative thinking on our own, the responsibility is ours.

In the 27 years since they assassinated Malcolm X the polarization in the social and economic life of the country has been reflected in the political and ideological spheres. The post 1960's US has been dominated by a right wing that has grown and become more aggressive. Beginning with the Nixon administration Black conservatives have been nurtured, and at times elevated to the status of ideological star such as in the cases of Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steel, or Clarence Thomas. Their most fundamental point of consensus is opposition to government intervention in solving social problems, although that is the fundamental tactic that has worked in the last 200 years.

These conservatives are outside of the radical Black tradition, and therefore are the worst case not the best case. They accept the social darwinist principle of the survival of the fittest as defined by class position. Since we are arguing a position to support the working class there is no unity possible with these arguments of the new Black conservatives.

However, I would like to spend my remaining time outlining one of the main focal points of theoretical debate among middle-class intellectuals in Black studies. This has been the greatest concentration of ideological reflection by the Black middle class. My argument is that since one of our greatest needs is the rebirth of the great Black liberation debate then it is important to discuss the extent to which the correct theoretical debates in Black studies can contribute.

This is the third wave of Black studies scholars. The founders were usually militant activists. This group took a high casualty rate. The second wave became bureaucrats who set goals in terms of institutional security and advancement. This third wave has a unique focus on theory and criticism being currently nurtured through five main international discussions and networks being built.

A. AFROCENTRICITY: This is the most popular Black studies concept, and as a school of thought it is gaining credibility in academic curricular discussions from the elementary level through doctoral programs. The basic argument is that Eurocentrism has lied and alienated Black people, and therefore the record must be set straight. Furthermore educational change for Black people requires an "African centered" curriculum that begins with ancient Egypt and discusses the connections of Black people over the last several thousand years.

The first aspect of this equates Afrocentricity with the phrase "a Black perspective." This is the basis for the popular success of the concept.

On the other hand the orientation to Egypt is more problematic, not as a field of investigation because there is a profound importance to the three basic questions being raised about race and culture: the origin of society and civilization, the issue of historical continuity, and the issue of historical change. The problem is one of idealism versus materialism, the terms on which we study Egypt and the lessons we seek to learn from this ancient past toward better being able to deal with the historical circumstances in which we live. As of yet we have not had class struggle placed at the heart of the new Egyptology emerging out of the Afrocentricity perspective, but we have had suggestions that race conflict explains why Egypt fell. Furthermore, the historical periodization of Egypt is explained in terms of dynastic succession without understanding the political economy of water and the formation of a strong state. Finally, we have yet to clarify why the internal life of Egypt opened the

door for invasion and conquest. A materialist perspective always examines the external condition for change and the internal basis of change.

In brief the remaining theoretical foci includes the following:

1. Black liberation theology: This theoretical activity includes a rereading of the Bible based on the historical struggles of Black people for liberation. And on this basis it advances new ethical principles that mandates resistance, God helps those who fight back.

2. Black feminist thought: This is a major development by which Black women are rethinking their historical experiences and contributions to the overall struggle. This has required the painful but necessary ideological struggle to deal with the fight against racism in feminist circles and the fight against sexism in Black contexts. One of the most exciting new developments in recent times has been the national ad campaign in which a network of Black women responded to the vicious assault against Black women that took place during the Clarence Thomas hearing, sort of sexual harassment in the mass media. Appropriately this was done by a group called African American Women in Defense of themselves.

3. Literary Criticism: The motion of the 1960's was to create a literature of and for the masses in revolt. Since then the literary critics have sought to identify and reconstruct a Black literary tradition based on paradigmatic texts. This has focused on redefining the literary canon. Here the danger is the mistake of taking up the great literary texts out of their context, especially out of their relationship to the great debates.

These 4 aspects of Black Studies theory are major fronts of intellectual struggle. Each represents a fight for access to and control of institutional resources in higher education. Furthermore these theoretical concerns are at the heart of the debate over the multicultural curriculum of inclusion for elementary and secondary education.

At this juncture the tradition is glaringly incomplete -

the issue of socialism as a theoretical focus on classes and the class struggle. For most of the 20th century this focus has been based on a logical analysis and events in other parts of the world. However, at this time class polarization is redefining social relations making it necessary to activate this perspective so that our theory fits historical developments. The class contradictions are defining the politics of struggle – more and more people are fighting to survive and hold on to what they have. If Black studies intellectuals remain unconnected to this emerging class struggle they are likely to remain engaged merely in a discourse of enlightenment for middle class elites. However, with a hook up great progress can be made.

In this brief paper on ideological perspectives I have focused on 3 points:

1. Materialist approach to analysis
2. Dialectics of the radical Black traditions – Three Great Debates
3. Crisis of Ideological debate in Black studies and the challenge of class defection.

In sum, yes I still believe that the strategic leadership of the Black middle class is over as a class – increasingly when it acts for itself it will be against us. However, with the rebirth and development of radical Black theory, especially socialism, the door is open for them to acquire new politics based on class defection.

**HOW CAN MALCOLM X HELP US SOLVE THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION?**

\_\_\_\_ Studying Malcolm X through his autobiography \_\_\_\_

Abdul Alkalimat

Prepared as Keynote address for conference  
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# HOW CAN MALCOLM X HELP US SOLVE THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION?

## (Outline)

### 1. Introduction

- a. what are we discussing today and why?
- b. key link is what can be learned from Malcolm X (from his time) that is relevant to the crisis in education (for our time)
- c. this is a two step process:
  - 1. Step one is the Malcolm revival
  - 2. Step two is rebuilding a movement for Black liberation

### 2. Education Crisis: We are stuck at best with yesterdays schools for tomorrows society in todays crisis

- a. yesterdays schools
  - 1. education reflects economics, culture, politics
  - 2. rethinking the DuBois-Washington debate
  - 3. achievements of public schools
- b. tomorrows society
  - 1. the economic revolution is underway
  - 2. will society remain the same?
- c. todays crisis
  - 1. commitment to education
  - 2. control of education
  - 3. content of education

### 3. Malcolm X

- a. who was Malcolm?
  - 1. Malcolm Little
  - 2. Detroit Red
  - 3. Malcolm X
  - 4. Omowale
- b. lessons
  - 1. think for yourself
  - 2. Learn from History
  - 3. build unity
  - 4. fight back
- c. dangers
  - 1. reformism
  - 2. false leaders

### 4. Conclusions: Rebuilding

- a. study
- b. organize
- c. communicate
- d. struggle

## HOW CAN MALCOLM X HELP US SOLVE THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION?

Good morning.

It is significant that we meet at this time, in this place, to discuss this topic.

This time. This time is called by most people Black History month based on the program established by Dr. Carter G Woodson in 1926, but since 1971 some of us have been working to up date the occasion by renaming it Black Liberation Month, so I take this opportunity to greet you here at this meeting to focus on the essence of Black History which is the fight for Black Liberation.

This place. This place is dear to us as a living tribute to the late great Harold Washington, and as such it is appropriate for us to have our conference here. This library center should become the center for community dialogues. Harold would have approved of this as a fitting memorial to his memory.

This topic. Our focus is clear and to the point. We are here to discuss one of the great problems we face, the crisis of Black education, and the basis on which we can solve this problem, learning the lessons of the Black liberation movement and especially lessons to be learned from Malcolm X.

Again, it is significant that we meet at this time, in this place, to discuss this topic.

## 1. WHAT IS THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION?

My general answer is that we are stuck with yesterdays schools for tomorrows society in todays crisis. Let me repeat that: WE ARE STUCK WITH YESTERDAYS SCHOOLS, FOR TOMORROWS SOCIETY, IN TODAYS CRISIS.

It seems obvious but it is essential to point out, that education always serves the economic life of a society, and is expressed through its culture. So, the structure and function of education has to be understood within the historic development of economic and cultural relations. The traditions and experience of education in Africa were fundamentally disrupted by the European invasion and Atlantic slave trade. This led to the racist domination of the slave system, where education for Black people was limited since there were no schools, there were laws and customs against teaching slaves to read, and the organization of work utilized little complex technology so little or no education was necessary for slaves to be economically productive as unskilled labor. After all, how much did one need to learn to plant, chop, or pick cotton.

The first educational programs for Black people in the USA were in the northern states, set up in the 17th century, with the earliest schools founded in the 18th century. However, it was the mid-19th century Emancipation that led to the wide spread development of schools for Black people. This involved schools set up by the Freedmans Bureau (government), the American Missionary Society (white liberals), and Black people themselves. For example, when Black soldiers got their severance pay after

the Civil War was over, there are many cases in which they turned their checks over to assist in the building of schools for the new communities of free Black people.

The overall fight for Black schools is a great story and contains the recurring historical truth that when Black people have fought for and won democratic gains for themselves, other excluded groups make gains, and there is a progressive transformation of the overall social relations in society. When we fight, everybody with similar problems wins.

DuBois indicates in his great book Black Reconstruction that there were two obstacles to a free public school system in the wake of slavery: the property owners were against it and the white laborers didn't demand public education. DuBois wrote:

It was only the other part of the laboring class, the Black folk, who connected knowledge with power; who believed that education was the stepping-stone to wealth and respect, and that wealth without education was crippled. Perhaps the very fact that so many of them had seen the wealthy slave slaveholders at close range, and knew the extent of ignorance and inefficiency among them, led to that extraordinary mass demand on the part of the Black laboring class for education. And it was this demand that was the effective force for the establishment of the public school in the South on a permanent basis, for all people and all classes. (page 641)

These public schools were initially set up to serve two basic functions: first, to provide leadership for the organization of the emancipated Black community, and second, to enable Black people to begin the long march into greater economic productivity and independence, more skill and more control. The first need was met by the colleges serving to develop Black middle class elites and the latter by the more basic schools for the masses.

From the mid 1800's to the mid 1900's the Black population was transformed from being a rural southern agriculturally based people to an urban northern industrially based people. The more this transition took place the more there was a need for schooling. In 1870 over 90% of Blacks were in the rural south and about 10% of Blacks aged 5 to 20 were in school. In 1930, Blacks were about 60% still in the rural south but up to nearly 60% of those 5 to 20 years were in school. By 1980, about 85% of the Black population lived in cities and of Black people from the ages of 5 to 17 well over 90% were enrolled in school, and at this level Black people had achieved near parity with whites. The average education for Blacks in 1940 was about 6th grade, and in 1980 it was high school graduation.

The driving force for this increase in school attendance has been the demand for industrial labor and the requirements for survival in a modern urban setting. This opened the road to political action, and the desire by some Blacks for full participation in all aspects of the society including power and control. The main ideological expression of this transformation in education was expressed in the debate between Booker T Washington and WEB DuBois. This was captured in an insightful poem by that Detroit poet Dudley Randall:

BOOKER T. AND W.E.B.

"It seems to me," said Booker T.,  
"It shows a mighty lot of cheek  
To study chemistry and Greek  
When Mister Charlie needs a hand  
To hoe the cotton on his land,  
And when Miss Ann looks for a cook,  
Why stick your nose inside a book?"

"I don't agree," said W E B  
"If I should have the drive to seek

Knowledge of chemistry or Greek,  
I'll do it. Charles and Miss can look  
Another place for hand or cook.  
Some men rejoice in skill of hand,  
And some in cultivating land,  
But there are others who maintain  
The right to cultivate the brain."

"It seems to me, said Booker T.,  
"That all you folks have missed the boat  
Who shout about the right to vote,  
And spend vain days and sleepless nights  
In uproar over civil rights.  
Just keep your mouths shut, do not grouse,  
But work, and save, and buy a house."

"I don't agree," said W E B  
"For what can property avail  
If dignity and justice fail?  
Unless you help to make the laws,  
They'll steal your house with trumped-up clause.  
A rope's as tight, a fire as hot,  
No matter how much cash you've got.  
Speak soft, and try your little plan,  
But as for me, I'll be a man."

"It seems to me," said Booker T.--

"I don't agree,"  
Said W E B

This debate is over the nature of industrialization and the relationship between education and political power. As long the economic survival of Black people was in semi-skilled jobs on farms and in factories, with little hope of destroying the racist apartheid of segregation then Booker T had a point and places like Tuskegee and Snow Hill were great examples of Black self determination led by a Black middle class. On the other hand, DuBois expressed the scientific and technological dynamism of an advanced industrial economy. DuBois was a militant middle class reformer dedicated to defending the interests of the entire Black community.

Now in a real way, even though Booker T and WEB disa-

greed, they were both examples of the talented tenth DuBois wanted the Black middle class to become, a leadership class dedicated to serving the Black community. The Black teacher in the past has been this kind of a person, someone who served Black people by assisting them to become successful in getting jobs and leading decent family lives. The public school has been a great institution, a place where former sharecroppers from the fields of Mississippi were transformed into industrial workers producing steel, automobiles, running the railroads, and developing a whole set of institutions uniquely adapted to their urban environment.

In fact, the school was modeled after the very factory and bureaucracy that the workers were being trained and educated to work in, and its achievements parallel the productivity of high quality products that set standards for the world. Further, it is essential to point out that these schools were really a combination of opportunity and coercion - the forced assimilation of immigrants into an English language "Anglo-conformity." The desired result was better workers who would submit to exploitation and make profits for the industrial capitalists in order to improve the quality of their own lives.

But this great experience in yesterdays schools is now faced with the challenge of tomorrows society, and for some people tomorrows society is virtually here already. The vast majority of the US labor force used to be in agriculture and now about 5% produces more food than any other society in world history. This revolutionary transformation of the labor force extends to industry, and is making a similar impact: for example,

large factories in steel and auto which employed thousands are now employing hundreds, general labor and semi-skilled jobs are being replaced by computers, robots and a smaller work force with a higher percentage of skilled workers. The mechanical cotton picker kicked Blacks out of the cotton patch, and now the robot is throwing us out of the factory onto the streets.

The new society based on the high tech information revolution, has no use for the mass based community institutions of public education that were set up to serve the industrial economy. What ruling class interest will be served by having literate motivated workers if many of them will suffer unemployment, homelessness, a lack of insurance, limited health care, as well as face the attacks of AIDS, drugs, and a shut down of most mental health facilities. The opposite is true. The workers of the declining industrial economy are of little value in the kind of high tech society that these captains of industry want to build, and therefore there is little interest in making sure that there is a solution to the education crisis that we face today.

The crisis that we face today is for the very survival of Black people and all other oppressed nationalities in the 20th century. For the first time since vital statistics have been kept in the US the average life span of the Black male is declining, Black infant mortality ranks with third world countries, and inner city ghettos are becoming "forbidden zones." Unfortunately it is all too often that even Black people write people off and assume genocide against those in the "forbidden zone" can't be stopped.

The Chinese use two characters (symbols) to represent crisis, one means danger and the other means opportunity. This captures our current situation caught between the old and the new, the end of something and the beginning of something else. This is a crisis of the 3 C's: commitment, control, content.

1. COMMITMENT to education;
2. CONTROL of schools and school systems;
3. CONTENT of education

Now when I speak of commitment I am not switching gears to make a rhetorical appeal in search of declarations of intent. People are not committed because of what they say, but rather because of what they do. My sense is that commitment has to be measured in terms of how we allocate scarce resources, especially time and money. We've only got so much, and what we do with what we've got tells the whole story.

Many of the reformers place the blame on the victim. Some would exhort the teachers to give the students homework and the parents to curtail television as the time commitment we need. Some would find deficits in Black culture and community life styles and therefore suggest lowering or changing our expectations because these Blacks might be doing all that they can reasonably be expected to do. This discussion means that the critical commitment is on the part of the people themselves. How committed are Black people to education. History clearly reveals that Black people have been quite committed to education for the past century because it made good sense. What were people after: literacy, basic math, and other things to qualify them for better

jobs and for the prestige within the community because people respected academic achievement.

But, today, when there is a declining investment in education and the connection between going to school and getting a job is become even more tenuous than its been, people are not exactly crazy when they lose some of their enthusiasm for going to school. On the other hand Black people are still eager for education when they are convinced that it places them on track for a job and decent quality of life. In other words what I am saying is that the crisis has more to do with the failing of this society, especially the government, than it has to do with the shortcomings of Black people themselves.

There can be no errors here unless one completely misunderstand the point. The state is responsible for the education of the population as the most important public investment in the public interest. To do so means that social progress is probable, to fail to do so means that social degeneration is certain.

Let me share just two revealing facts for the entire society, first commitment, and then results: the average length of the school year in the US is 180 days, in German it is 235, and in Japan it is 243 days (fully a 1/3 greater time commitment than the US). On achievement, everybody has to face up to these facts: on an international science test given in 17 countries in the mid 1980's produced these results: the 10 year olds were led by Japan, South Korea, and Finland with the US 8th; the 14 year olds were led by Japan, Hungary, and the Netherlands with the US 15th; and of the 13 countries tested for 17 year olds the US was

in last place on Biology, 11th on Chemistry, and 9th on Physics. These data are clear, commitment leads to results. The US lags behind, because the government lacks the commitment to educate the people, and this means whites as well as Blacks and Latinos.

When we turn to the issue of commitment as funding, we are struck by the clear and unmistakable pattern of class division. Johnaton Kozol, in his recent book *Savage Inequality*, clearly points to the need to change the basic formula for funding - now it is based on real estate taxes so rich suburbs have rich schools. Once again we face the political issue of redistribution of wealth.

This leads to the issue of CONTROL, the question "Do we have Black Power?" There are two levels of control, administrative control in terms of local policy and the political control at the state and national levels. The fact is that at the local level, while there is still allot of progress to be made, about 25% of Black elected officials are in education, and most large cities with majority Black school populations have a Black school superintendent. So in terms of positions of decision making, yes, Black people have a great deal of "hands on say so." When Black youth go to school they usually go to a Black majority school and there are plenty of Black people in high positions -- teachers, principals, and superintendents. Here in Chicago there is an interesting test case of local control through the new elected Local School Councils. Note that this new development did not occur as a response to a mass based community control of schools movement like we had in the 1960's, but as an initiative

of forces that favor the privatization of state government.

Now, just as this has happened the Republican conservatives have redefined education from a national to a local commitment (along with most other governmental services) and therefore just as there is a deep fiscal crisis in the cities, local governments are being held accountable for more and more of the education budget. Finally there is the issue of privatization. This is proposed as the alternative to the local fiscal crisis of the cities, let private businesses begin to run the schools. We all know that there are all kinds of private businesses, from McDonalds and Walt Disney to IBM and Encyclopedia Britanica. Privatization for the inner city poor will likely be designed to increase the consumption of hamburgers and cartoons, while for the rich suburbanites it will be a direct route into productive jobs as part of the high tech information economy.

This leads us to the third C, the CONTENT of education. Here we have the greatest current debate raging throughout the country, the Afrocentric challenge to the dominant ideology of Eurocentrism. This has been a racist "theory of world history" and a "global political project " of European domination. The issue here is correcting 500 years of lies and deception.

Afrocentrism makes its challenge on three critical questions:

1. What is the origin of civilization?
2. What are the continuities and retentions from Ancient Africa to the present?
3. What are the dissimilarities between African peoples,

other third world peoples, and European peoples?

The current scientific information, from the scant material objects of archeological field research to the bio-chemical investigation of DNA genetic codes, the origin of humanity and civilization is linked to Africa. This has yet to trickle down into the curriculum. Research is also pointing to more African retentions than previously thought, including the syncretic religion of Santeria and Voodoo from the Caribbean. Check it out, in some cases there is more direct retention of Africa in this regard in the Latino community than the Black descendants of slavery in the USA. Anyway, the historical origin of these language communities is really where the slave ship stopped and who got off where. Most other aspects of African based peoples are really quite similar.

These two points (about origin and continuity) are essential in correcting the racist lie that Black people have not contributed to world civilization. On the basis of current research we can begin to construct a new multicultural curriculum of inclusion.

It is the third point that is still troubling, because even when one argues effectively that the particular features of unique cultures have to be understood and respected, one has to also affirm the universality of human beings. We need to build a core set of skills and master the basic body of knowledge that everyone needs to have and be competent in. We have to remember that a narrow Black orientation can have limitations.

An example of this is the foolish notion of the African

personality put forward by Leopold Senghor of Senegal. He wrote that the African was the lady of the races and was a specialist in music, poetry, dance, and emotional life in general; whereas white people were cold, calculating, mechanical and were dominant in the realm of reason. Black people are fun loving people who like to play, while white people are rational thinkers who enjoy being successful at work. I don't think we want to end up with this kind of a "racial" fantasy. The facts are more likely that all human beings have the basic biological capacity for both emotion and reason, but certain historical forms of economic and cultural organization force people to develop one more than the other. We must fight to transform our society in such a way that the full and total capacities of all people are allowed to develop. Cultural differences are likely to remain for centuries, within each a person should be able to fully grasp the computer and the conga drum, poetry and physics, art and algebra.

Here we have to face the reality that there will be a drive toward the national standardization of achievement tests. This is already a reality with the SAT, ACT, GRE and other exams. But consider that as we fight for Black selfdetermination, and our right to proclaim that A stands for Africa, the society will be requiring our youth to take exams in which A will stand for algebra.

Now I started by noting that we are faced with the crisis of having yesterdays schools face the challenge of tomorrows society in todays crisis. A system of education based on urban industrialization is inadequate for a high tech economy where the

production of knowledge is the greatest source of value. This contradiction is exacerbated by the current crisis that covers all aspects of society, but especially education. The crisis involves a weak commitment to education, powerlessness, and a need to construct a curriculum that includes a place for everyone's cultural experience while employing universal scientific and technological knowledge.

There is another dimension to education. Here I am referring to political education, the extent to which one is able to analyze society in terms of power and privilege, both the overall character of society as well as all of the diverse issues that make up day to day politics. Basically one's political education gives one a predisposition to act in one's own interest or conversely against one's interest.

The public schools have always been designed to promote a political education of patriotism and service to the captains of industry. The focus has been on practical skills and a national myth that legitimates the mainly white Anglo Saxon Protestant ruling class.

The political education of Black people was radicalized through grassroots militant struggle in the 1960s. Malcolm X was the main political ideologue. His influence led to the Black power slogan in 1966, the transformation of SNCC, and the birth of the Black Panther Party. Overall more than anyone else Malcolm X initiated a paradigm shift – from civil rights to Black liberation, Black studies, Black art, Black liberation theology, Black is beautiful. Each of these slogans reflects struggle to redefine

and realign - its a power struggle. Malcolm's voice was at the center of great controversy.

### Radical Black Tradition

The question remains, was he a demon or a genius? There were many in the mainstream who would argue that he was a harbinger of hate and racial violence, but this was usually the reaction of whites or middle class Blacks who were not used to hearing the honest and articulate voice of the Black masses who had suffered the brunt of all of the racist violence unique to the history of the USA. It truly was shocking to hear the echoes of slavery and the lynch mob in an articulate and fearless urban working class Black leader. Malcolm forced America and the world to see itself from the eyes of the Black victim

Malcolm was a genius nurtured in the lessons of the radical Black tradition. This tradition has been produced anew by each generation on an ad hoc basis as each had to face and fight racism and poverty. But also, this radical Black tradition has been symbolically reproduced as the continuity of cultural legacy in opposition to oppression. Traditions like this are greater than the leaders who maintain them. This is what is meant by the statement that you can kill a freedom fighter but not the fight for freedom. Malcolm was murdered and now he is being born again the minds of a new generation of Black youth.

There are five aspects to the radical Black tradition:

1. Black religion: belief in a spiritual god force, a moral first principle that gives energy to the people to resist ("God

helps those who fight back"). This includes the Voodoo priest who started the Haitian revolution, Nat Turner, and contemporary Black liberation theologians like James Cone, Cornel West, and Vincent Harding.

2. PanAfricanism: belief that all Black people are linked to Africa and the great origin of all human civilization, and are obligated to fight to liberate and unite Africa. This includes great leaders like Chaka Zulu, Bishop Henry Turner, and contemporary leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore, and Amilcar Cabral.

3. Nationalism: belief in the unity and development of the Black community, especially its social institutions. This includes most of the leadership of the Black community, especially the Black church and business community.

4. Feminism: belief in the defense and development of Black women as leaders of the Black community. This includes Queen Nzinga, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and contemporary figures like Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Rudy Doris Robinson.

5. Socialism: belief in social justice and economic equality based on the positive role of government and self help. This includes the radicals like Paul Robeson, CLR James, Claudia Jones, and Abner Berry.

The dynamic of this tradition defies dogmatism, as doctrinaire positions like that held by Malcolm when he was in the Nation of Islam are sectarian and isolationist. The dynamic has always gained energy when the masses of people have been engaged

in a great debate in which they have attempted to gain from applying all of these aspects of the tradition to their situation to solve their problems.

There have been three great debates: 1. The Emancipation Debate (Frederick Douglass, Martin Delaney, and others in the National Negro Convention Movement); 2. The Self-Determination Debate (WEB DuBois, Booker T Washington, and Marcus Mosiah Garvey); and 3. The Black Liberation Debate (Martin Luther King and Malcolm X). By becoming a standard bearer in one of the Great Debates of the Radical Black Tradition Malcolm X will be regarded as a genius of all time for the Black community. He will never be forgotten.

#### Black Youth in the 1990s

The current situation for the Black community, especially Black youth, is so dire and the "dream" such a "nightmare" that there is a great necessity for the Radical Black Tradition. This is the significance of the Malcolm revival, a reawakening of the Great Debate for freedom. We are witnessing the beginning of a process in the early 1990s, and we have yet to find out the nature of the new Debate that is emerging. Will it be a continuation of the 1960s, or will it be something new. The same debate is over rap (is it new?) and other aspects of the life forms being created by the new generation of youth. Will the youth learn from Malcolm and grasp the lessons of the last three Debates? Will whites in the USA respect the Debates and incorporate them into the mainstream of political discourse? Will everyone

learn from Malcolm?

One thing is certain. Malcolm has been reborn in the minds of the Black youth and that's a fact. We "dis" them at the risk of our own peril.

My summation is that the legacy of Malcolm and his role in the Black liberation debate leads us to the 4th Great Debate that is likely to dominate our discourse as we enter the 21st Century — the Social Revolution Debate. This debate is based on the objective fact that an economic revolution is taking place. This places us in jeopardy and has forced a fight for survival. And it is this very fight for survival that leads us to this 4th great debate on social revolution: can we reorganize the new economy and social institutions to provide a safe secure quality of life for everyone and how can we do this. This is the focus.

Malcolm led us to this next stage in the radical Black tradition in the last months of his life — he urged us to think for ourselves, to fight back intellectually and physically, and to unite all of the "field Negroes," those at the bottom of the pile. But as we take up this debate we have to go beyond Malcolm X, we have to stand on the shoulders of his thought and dare to see farther. Finally we face our own political crisis of action.

I speak as an optimist. I believe that the spirit of Malcolm is being reborn in the hearts and minds of tens of thousands of young Black warriors. Our education crisis can be attacked effectively only through a new form of mass political education. On the one hand a great debate has to emerge in all aspects of our community and society, a debate linked to the fight for survival

that focuses on social revolution. Of course this will include some aspects of the self determination and Black liberation debates but this is a new time and we have to be open to new ideas. On the other hand this political education will also be linked to the fight for power based on community mobilization for direct democracy in the neighborhoods. The new society can only be rebuilt by us, so we have to take over. This can only be clarified if we carry out our great debate for social revolution.

Yes, this is strong talk in 1992, but we have no choice. The current politics in this country consists of a presidential race of an emerging right wing neo fascist wing of the Republican party forcing Bush to further expose his own right wing politics, and in the Democratic campaign a liberal image of political opportunism is dodging the class nature of the crisis and is too weak to even suggest reforms. We are the only opposition to the forces who made this crisis. So I leave you with a challenge: Do you have the courage, moral character, and intellectual discipline to help launch out next great debate? Again, I'm an optimist for if we dare to struggle we will surely win. But remember our commitment must be to win *"By Any Means Necessary."*

## 2. WHO IS MALCOLM X?

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 Douglass, 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; 3. a proselytizing Black nationalist minister in the nation of Islam; and 4. a 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 imitative life style of the Black middle class 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, and 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, a 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 naked 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 reinforce 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 main 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 "outside" children by his young secretaries, and Malcolm failed by violating Muhammad's 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, tension between the National headquarters bureaucracy and the dynamic expanding east coast under Malcolm's leadership, and between the extended family of the old leader and the emergence of a new family dynasty around Malcolm.

After leaving the Nation of Islam, for the next year Malcolm spent nearly 6 months abroad, and the rest of the time criss crossing the country, for speaking engagements, tv interviews, and organizational meetings. He led the formation of the Muslim Mosque INC. and 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 governments 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 all anti-imperialists and socialists, including white people. However, after several attempts, Malcolm X was assassinated. This too remains a mystery in fact, though it is all too clear who benefited from this evil deed.

This brief like covering nearly 40 years has become mythic in its implications, and full of lessons for the masses of Black

people. This is in contrast to Martin Luther King – King was “to the manner born,” the third generation preacher in the same large middle class church in Atlanta, and a PhD; Malcolm was the son of an itinerant preacher who never had a permanent position, and had to survive juvenile delinquency, criminality and street life. Both ended up as major Black leaders but traveled different routes to get there.

Malcolm passed through four phases, each clearly marked by changes in name and place, and each can be marked by different institutional experiences in the family, community, and government. Overall there was a dialectical process of affirmation followed by negation, with each transformation expanding experiences and fueling ideological change. A positive Black youth was negated and turned into a criminal, who in turn was negated and turned into a religious zealot. This was finally being negated in Malcolm’s last year as he had been transformed from his narrow fanaticism to a revolutionary thinker with great mass appeal. It is useful however, to ground these dialectics in the concrete details of his life, because only in that way is Malcolm revealed as a generalized role model for Black youth today:

Stage 1: As Malcolm Little, he spent the first 15 years of his life in small midwestern towns with small Black populations; Omaha, Milwaukee, Lansing, and East Lansing. Born into a strong Black family, and rooted in the community institutions of the church and the UNIA, his family was destroyed and the government failed him (his fathers murderers went free, his mother lost her children, and Malcolm was discouraged in school).

Stage 2: After moving to Boston and then New York, both large cosmopolitan northeastern cities, Malcolm took on new names; Homeboy, Red, Detroit Red, and finally in prison he was nicknamed Satan. His initial relationship with Ella attempted to reconstruct his family of origin, he created a gang, the negative family substitute of a criminal life style. [He had observed the racial taboos as Malcolm Little, but as Detroit Red he embraced white women as a status symbol demonstrating his ability to violate racial taboos, doubly so since his white woman was also married.] The community institutions of this stage were the dance halls, the bars and night spots, whore houses, and hotel life. The government here is not the public school or detention home, but the police, courts and prisons.

Stage 3: After converting to Islam in prison, Malcolm first became Malcolm X and then Malik Shabazz. He became a national figure frequently traveling to every part of the country and receiving generous coverage in the mass media. He reestablished relationships with his family members as they had become muslims before him, assisting him in his prison conversion. In the community he was a member of the Nation of Islam, and the agencies of record were the police and the surveillance of the FBI who officially opened a file on Malcolm in 1953.

Stage 4: After he left the Nation of Islam, again, Malcolm was given new names; in Nigeria he was named 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 militants in the Black liberation movement he became simply Brother Malcolm. He

was a world traveler, with his own family, with his own community organizations, and his own file being kept by the CIA.

Clearly, any interpretation of Malcolm's life would have to take these objective changes into account and explain the continuity and change that he experienced. Over the past 25 years there have been at least four main schools of thought regarding the meaning of Malcolm X that should be mentioned here.

1. Malcolm as hero: this position was best put by Ossie Davis in his eulogy at Malcolm's funeral. He called us to

" . . . know why we must honor him: Malcolm was our manhood, our living Black manhood! This was his meaning to his people. And, in honoring him, we honor the best in ourselves . . . And we shall know him then for what he was and is - a prince - our own Black shining prince! - who didn't hesitate to die, because he loved us so."

This is the most generalized belief in the Black community, Malcolm as icon, as an assumption, a permanent historical reference. In its general character this position has power, but therein is its weakness as he has become a hero to so many with conflicting beliefs and actions—as hero he has been coopted by those with villainous intentions.

2. Malcolm as mainstream: this position was initially the use of the mainstream to isolate Malcolm as a negative outsider, to vilify him as a "hate monger," and a petty criminal. On the other hand there were some who likened his life to Horatio Alger,

reflecting an upward mobile American myth of success. This has spawned a literature in which the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* has been mainstreamed through comparisons with autobiographical texts by Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, Henry Adams, Lincoln Stephens, and others. However, the important point here is that Malcolm remained the opponent of the USA, outside of its consensus, and therefore the logical structure of his story (the conversions, the lifelong learning, the high achievement etc.) does not make him or his people part of the mainstream in the USA, but competing and necessarily threatening outsiders but within.

3. Malcolm as Nationalist: this is the position that would like to hold Malcolm to a tradition of defending a narrow version of Black nationalist dogma, therefore this position is likely to remember Malcolm as a student of Elijah Muhammad. This is close to the position of Oba T'Shaka, Shawna Maglangbayou, Albert Cleage, and many others in the Black community. (More on this later.)

4. Malcolm as Revolutionary: this is the position of Marxists of various stripes that hold out the mechanical notion that Malcolm was on a trajectory that would have landed him in the Marxist camp. The main proponent of this line has been George Breitman of the Socialist Workers Party, the principal editor of the speeches and writing of Malcolm X. There is also the work by Frank Kofsky, Eugene Wolfenstein, and others. The main revolutionary critic of this school who does not reduce Malcolm to a proxy party member is James Boggs; someone who places him in Black revolutionary tradition, in the context of a revolutionary

decade, but as someone to transcend rather than to emulate. This is a critical contribution, one worth remembering.

These four schools of thought reflect the crisis of theory in Black studies generally and certainly impacts our grasp of all of the issues involved in exploring the meaning of Malcolm X. We have the following claims:

1. Black studies is the record of great individual contributions; (Malcolm as hero).

2. Black studies is American studies;  
(Malcolm as mainstream).

3. Black studies as Afro-centricity;  
(Malcolm as Nationalist).

4. Black studies is study of class struggle and Black liberation; (Malcolm as revolutionary).

The study of Malcolm X may not answer the question of which is correct, or even allow us to eliminate and/or rank these alternative approaches. However, what is possible is that a deeper understanding of Malcolm's life and activity, especially as it reflects the 1950s and 1960s, the most explosive and far researching decades of struggle yet in the history of Black people in the USA, will focus our attention on the fundamental issues and that is an essential step forward.