

# THE CHRONICLE

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"If we can succeed, it will be an era and an accomplishment that will be equivalent to understanding in the 1930's how molecules and atoms work."

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"Malcolm has come to symbolize the frustration, rage, and impatience of a new generation of African Americans who feel locked out of the system."

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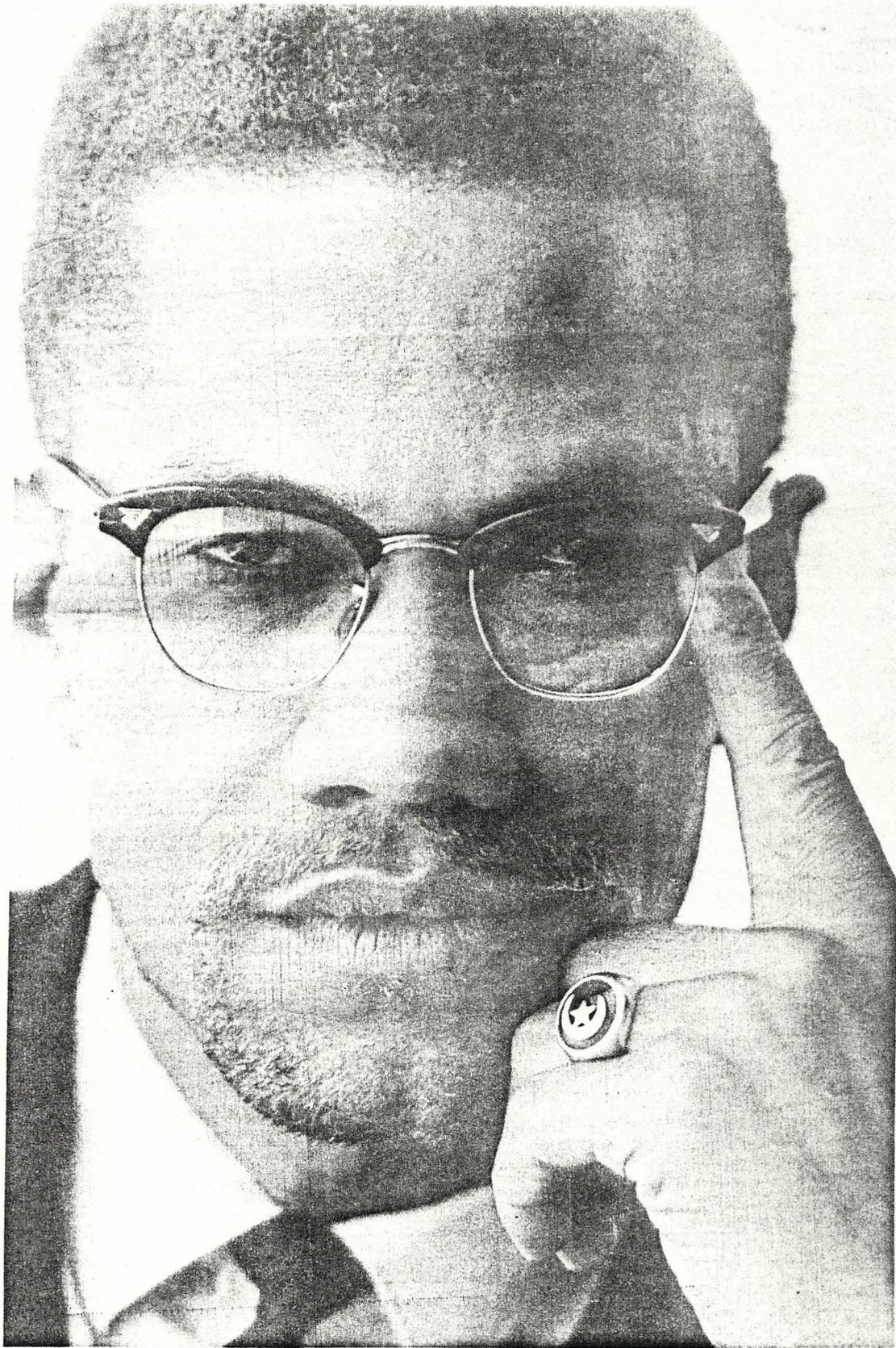
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JOHN LAUNOIS, BLACK STAR

Politics and Commerce in the Rebirth of Malcolm X: A8

By Ellen K. Coughlin

**X**. That's all it takes these days to summon the image of the slain black nationalist leader Malcolm X. He's that hot.

On city streets and in suburban shopping malls, the somber face of the man who once preached that white people were a race of devils gazes out from T-shirts, book jackets, and 1993 calendars. His ubiquitous last initial adorns baseball caps and movie posters. Rap musicians invoke his militant message.

When Malcolm's life story reaches the screen next month in the Spike Lee film *Malcolm X*, his enshrinement as a pop icon will be complete. Martin Luther King may have a national holiday, but Malcolm X has the nation's attention.

Scholars of black history and politics have a host of theories about the current fascination with Malcolm X, though no single explanation seems to suffice. "Malcolmania," as one has called the phenomenon, is a complicated mix of crass commercialism and serious politics—part fashion statement, part cultural expression.

On one hand, experts say, the renaissance of Malcolm X is a barometer of the racial climate of the 1990's; on the other, it often represents a misreading of the history of the 1960's.

It is an event, moreover, tinged with an irony that many scholars appear to savor. Robert A. Hill, an associate professor of history at the University of California at Los Angeles, likens Malcolm to the "trickster" figure popular in black folk culture.

"The man who was its greatest nightmare," he says, "has tricked American society by re-emerging into the culture more dynamic than he ever was in life."

#### A Lifetime of Transformation

In a way, Malcolm X himself saw to it that the rebirth of his legacy would not be easily fathomed. Over his lifetime, he transformed himself so dramatically, so



MALCOLM X IN 1961

EVE ARNOLD, MAGNUM PHOTOS

# X

## Behind the re-emergence of the slain black nationalist leader is a complex mix of crass commercialism and serious politics

many times, that his story permits any number of interpretive spins.

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in Omaha in 1925. He spent his teens as a hustler and burglar in Harlem and Boston, until he was arrested at the age of 21.

During his six and a half years in prison, he converted to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. Following his parole in 1952, he became a minister of the Nation of Islam and one of its most effective proselytizers, preaching black pride and self-sufficiency and raging against white racism.

In 1964, Malcolm broke with Elijah Muhammad. No less radical on matters of black civil rights, Malcolm nevertheless began to distance himself from the separatist tendencies of the Nation of Islam and to soften his attitude toward whites.

He was assassinated in February 1965 at the Audubon Ballroom in New York. Three Black Muslims were convicted of the killing, but to this day many people remain convinced that the Federal Bureau

of Investigation, which had him under surveillance, was behind the crime.

Malcolm X was a powerful speaker with a magnetic presence. Blacks found encouragement in his insistence on the worth of their race and in his advocacy of black control of black communities; his message was an inspiration behind the Black Power movement that emerged after his death. But many whites felt threatened by the virulence of his rhetoric; he repeatedly argued, for one thing, that blacks had a right to defend themselves against racist acts "by any means necessary."

#### Myths and Reality

Scholars say Malcolm X's re-emergence in the public consciousness is complicated by a tug-of-war over which image of the man will prevail.

The mythic Malcolm of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written by Alex Haley from extensive conversations with the subject, retains a powerful resonance after

nearly 30 years, despite the book's having been challenged on some factual points. Most recently, Bruce Perry's *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Station Hill Press, 1991), offered a revisionist portrait of a victim of an oppressive childhood—an interpretation that angered some people who felt it took a reductionist approach to his life and distorted his political contributions.

Even before it was finished, Spike Lee's movie came under attack, with great fanfare, from the poet and playwright Amiri Baraka, for giving too much weight to Malcolm's years as a hustler. Scholars are particularly anxious to see which Malcolm emerges in the final cut, because they know the movie is likely to have an enormous impact.

"Who has interpretive authority over this man's life?" asks Michael Eric Dyson, who teaches Afro-American studies at Brown University. "Spike Lee is going to have that for a while."

Rap musicians have lighted on Malcolm the black-nationalist firebrand; the title of Sister Souljah's "The Hate That Hate Produced" is straight from Malcolm X. The image evoked by the T-shirts and baseball caps suggests some of that militancy, but is probably, as one scholar observed, an "inchoate" statement, at best.

To one degree or another, most of those images come into play in the current interest in Malcolm's life and ideas.

There is no question that, in large part, the Malcolm X phenomenon is American commerce at full throttle, fueled by a rush of new products onto the market to take advantage of the publicity generated by Spike Lee's movie.

Many scholars insist, nevertheless, that beneath the commercialization something more serious is going on.

Malcolm X, they say, has always held a fascination for black intellectuals—not necessarily academics, but those more likely to be working as grass-roots organiz-

*Continued on Page A14*

# Malcolm X: a Barometer of Today's Racial Climate

Continued From Page A8  
ers. He burst onto the pop-culture scene when rap musicians, particularly the group Public Enemy, began to broadcast his message.

Mr. Hill of UCLA, who is also editor in chief of the Marcus Garvey papers, suggests that rappers may have picked up on Malcolm from the burgeoning black prison population, among whom the Nation of Islam is particularly strong and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has long been a best seller.

## Malcolm as 'Secular Saint'

"Rap music is the vehicle and the conveyor of what was transpiring behind prison walls," he says.

Whatever the ultimate source, the rappers' invocation of Malcolm struck a chord in the black youth culture, scholars say.

"Malcolm has come to symbolize the frustration, rage, and impatience of a new generation of African Americans who feel locked out

**"You wouldn't have black studies without Malcolm; you wouldn't have the transformation from 'Negro' to 'black' to 'African American.'"**

of the system," says Manning Marable, a professor of history and political science at the University of Colorado, who is at work on a biography of Malcolm X for Macmillan Publishing Company. "They don't see in the real political world anyone who speaks with the same fury and grace. They've chosen Malcolm as a secular saint."

He and others argue, however, that Malcolm's appeal is not limited to young blacks. The civil-rights revolution led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., is not finished, they say; it may have helped some people, but it left others behind.

"For the black underclass, which has few liberal illusions about the nature of the American dream, Malcolm X symbolizes their protest," Mr. Marable says. "It's not a youth dynamic here; it's a class dynamic."

## Black Nationalism Revived

Scholars who study black politics say the rekindled interest in Malcolm X marks a concurrent resurgence of black nationalism in America today—a movement that is found not so much in any systematic program as in cultural expressions such as the growing interest in Africa, and in political sentiments concerning the need for blacks to take control of their own destiny. Such ideas find ready support in Malcolm X.

The current fascination with the man is not without its dangers, some scholars fear, in that people sometimes see in him things that are not there. Some say Malcolm X is often remembered as a more influential political leader in his day than he really was.

"Some of the most significant events that have shaped the last 25 years of black American political

history happened after he died," says Adolph L. Reed, Jr., a professor of political science and history at Northwestern University.

"Malcolm X was important," he says, "because he counterpunched against the orthodoxies of the moment."

Feminist scholars, similarly, voice concern at the promotion of Malcolm X today as an expressly masculine image, and as a role model for young black men.

In his lifetime, Malcolm X espoused a version of black nationalism that was strongly male-oriented, scholars note, and his rhetoric was full of images of the "strong black man." In that sense, says Patricia Hill Collins, associate professor of African-American studies at the University of Cincinnati, "it's historically accurate to think of Malcolm X as a masculine image."

Ms. Collins argues, however, that people today are not looking critically enough at what Malcolm didn't say. Issues of gender, she says, are completely ignored in his black-nationalist rhetoric, suggesting that the experience of racism was the same for black men and women—an oversight typical of his day, she acknowledges.

"But we're transporting Malcolm X uncritically into our own time," Ms. Collins says.

Moreover, she says, after he left the Nation of Islam, Malcolm was beginning to turn his attention to issues new to him, such as global human rights, that had important implications for women. "In his early writing, there are some troublesome statements," Ms. Collins says. "But in the last year of his life, I see some hopeful signs."

## Legacy Is Cultural

Because of their relative places in American history, comparisons between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King are irresistible: two charismatic black leaders, operating in the same arena at the same time, each serving as a counterpoint to the other; King the integrationist, Malcolm the separatist.

In yet another comparison with King, some scholars say, lies part of Malcolm's appeal to blacks: Malcolm's memory has not yet been co-opted by white society.

"One of the things that contributes to the contemporary interest in Malcolm X is that his historical legacy is still under the control of the black community," says Clayborne Carson, editor of the Martin Luther King papers at Stanford University. "There's a sense among many blacks that that's not the case with King."

Despite obvious differences between the two, however, many scholars point to more-subtle similarities, and others argue that, at the end of their lives, the two men were beginning to move toward one another in outlook. The complementary nature of their respective legacies, says James H. Cone, a professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary, helps to pinpoint Malcolm's historical significance and his appeal today.

"King's legacy is obvious," says Mr. Cone, the author of *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Orbis

Books, 1991). "You see it in politics, in the presence of black public officials, in the total transformation of the South.

"But people don't see Malcolm's legacy as clearly. It's a cultural legacy: He transformed the way in which black people understand themselves. You wouldn't have black studies without Malcolm; you wouldn't have the transformation from 'Negro' to 'black' to 'African American.'"

A lot of scholars hope that one of the legacies of the "Malcolmania" of the 1990's will be an increase in serious research on the man.

Malcolm X has been the subject of very little academic study, part-

ly, scholars say, because he was for a time a risky topic, and partly because researchers cannot count on gaining access to documentary evidence about Malcolm and his milieu or to sources who knew him.

## Call for a Central Archive

"The black militant community has a somewhat hostile, or at least skeptical, relationship to Euro-American scholarship," says Mr. Carson of Stanford, who last year published *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (Carroll & Graf Publishers). "And people in that community don't typically donate their papers to libraries."

Other than Malcolm X's speeches, which have been published, and some correspondence, scholars do not know of any significant cache

of his personal papers. They are tantalized by the possible existence of reports and letters he may have written to Elijah Muhammad while he was in the Nation of Islam, but no one seems to have pursued them seriously.

Mr. Marable of Colorado says that, when he chose Malcolm X as the subject for a biography a few years ago, he had no idea how difficult it would be to reconstruct his political thought. He says he dreams of establishing a central repository and research center devoted to Malcolm X and black social protest.

"It would be wonderful thing," he says, "if Spike Lee were to contribute 1 per cent of the gross from his film toward a Malcolm X historical library."

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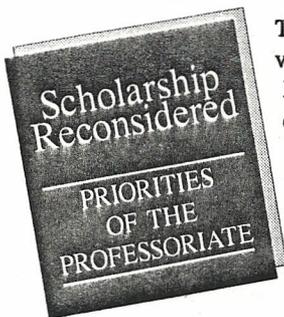
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## SCHOLARSHIP RECONSIDERED

Priorities of the Professoriate

Ernest L. Boyer



This new Carnegie report examines the "teaching versus research" debate in higher education, with historical overview and statistical data. A broader definition of scholarship and new ways of evaluating the professoriate are proposed. There is an urgent need, the report concludes, to recognize the full range of faculty talent, strengthen the diversity of America's colleges and universities, and relate more effectively higher learning to social problems.

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