

In Defense of Marxism

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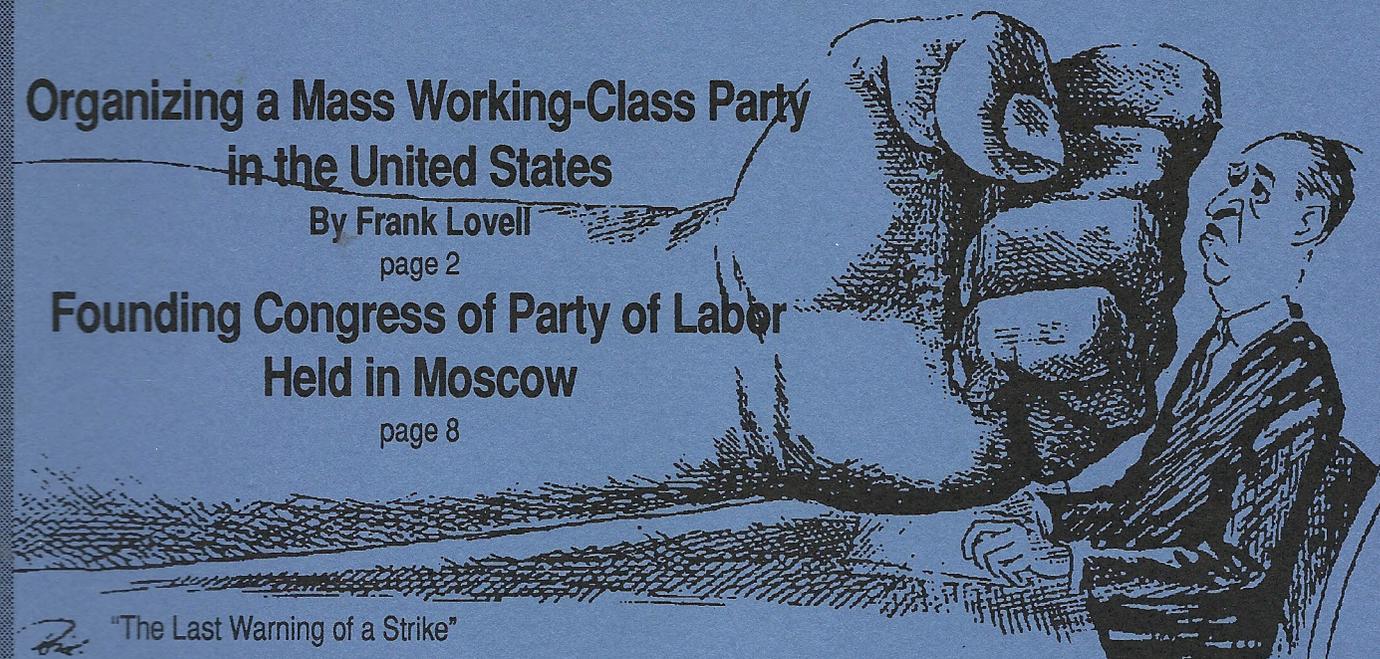
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A Movie That's a Political Experience

by Vera Wigglesworth

There's no doubt about it — in this long-awaited film *Malcolm X* comes alive, thanks to Denzel Washington's wonderful portrayal. He skillfully evolves from the fresh-faced naive Malcolm Little, to "Detroit Red," the hair-straightened, zoot-suited Harlem hustler, to Malcolm X the ex-prisoner, humbly grateful convert to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, who rose to dynamic builder of the Nation of Islam, and finally El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, the independent leader searching for a broader path to liberation.

The setting for the jewel that is Washington's performance is all the rest of the movie, made possible by the dedication and determination of that vast team headed by director Spike Lee and his producers. We get to participate in Malcolm's life thanks to the loving attention to period detail, brilliant direction, and incredibly effective photography. From the costuming (Malcolm and his running partner of Roxbury days were zooted to the T!) and the music (the jazz club dance scene was more than rich entertainment — it was a celebration), we get from the 1940s and '50s phase of the movie a feel that this is *authentic*. (And for Black people born later it is another experience connecting us to the cultural life of our parents' and grandparents' era, affirming the continuity that has meant pride and defiance as well as roots and enjoyment.)

Our sense of participation continues through the scenes involving Malcolm's Nation of Islam days. We are caught up with him in the excitement of joining, then leading, a disciplined cadre of self-organized Black people who seemed to have answers to the victimization perpetrated by the white power structure. We are angered with Malcolm at the brutalization and unjustified arrest of a brother Muslim by the New York police and feel Malcolm's need to respond to the street charges that the Nation won't do anything — they only talk.

So with what glee we join Malcolm in facing down the cops in their own station, demanding to take into our care one of our

own! With Malcolm and the defense wing of the Nation (the Fruit of Islam) we lead a disciplined march to the hospital that gathers a crowd behind us. Vigorously underscored by composer Terence Blanchard's martial music, the thrill of pride and power we experience from this mass action is maintained right through to the end, where we disperse at our own pace and on signal from



our own leader — not at the cops' demand.

We can't help saying, "If only Malcolm were with us today!" And why is he not? The movie begins to answer that ultimate, political question. It presents the outlines of Malcolm's break with the Nation of Islam (NOI), showing how, as Malcolm's effectiveness and popularity grew during the period in which he built NOI branches throughout the country, he incurred the envy and enmity of his fellow ministers.

But we don't get to see how the CIA and FBI viewed Malcolm's rising popularity in the context of the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s. Government counterintelligence program (Cointelpro) documents released in the 1970s reveal an obsessive concern on the part of the FBI to prevent the rise in the 1960s of "a 'messiah' who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement." These documents point to the real forces behind Malcolm's assassination. The movie shows intelligence agents tailing Malcolm abroad and shows them bugging and taping Malcolm's conversations. However, had we been given a closer look in the film at the thinking behind Malcolm's last activities, the government's motive for eliminating him would have been more clear.

Malcolm's Last Year

Above all, Malcolm was a revolutionary, dedicated to the overthrow of the system fostering the racial oppression of African Americans. He defined this "system" differently over time as his views evolved, increasingly denouncing capitalism as the source of the problem.

The system in this country cannot produce freedom for an Afro-American. It is impossible for this system, this economic system, this political system, this social system, this system, period. [*Two Speeches by Malcolm X*, p. 25.]

Malcolm had been attracted to the Nation of Islam because it directly identified the racist structure and practices of this society as the cause of the condition of Black people. Formulating the problem as oppression by the white race as a whole, the NOI offered Black pride, self-organization, and defense as solutions. So from the earliest days of his political activity, Malcolm urged African Americans to stop looking to the twin parties of the capitalist rulers in this country to effect radical change, since,

The Democratic Party is responsible for the racism that exists in this country along with the Republican Party.... Any Negro who regi-

sters as a Democrat or a Republican is a traitor to his own people. [*By Any Means Necessary*, p. 164 and 23.]

Malcolm never deviated from the path that this first step of independence from the capitalist class had set him on. He went on within the NOI, then outside of it, to forcefully advocate and build ways for Black people to organize for their own interests and defense. He called himself, and was, a true Black nationalist.

He was consistent about it. Determined to liberate Black people, he began to reach out to other forces in the world for help. He explained why:

...the point and thing that I would like to impress upon every Afro-American leader is that there is no kind of action in this country ever going to bear fruit unless that action is tied to the overall international struggle.

You waste your time when you talk to this man, just you and him. So when you talk to him, let him know your brother is behind you, and you've got some more brothers behind that brother. That's the only way to talk to him, that's the only language he knows. [*Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 153-154.]

From the Nation of Islam, Malcolm had learned pride in Africa as homeland, and brotherhood of peoples of color. After the break with the Nation, this led him during his travels abroad to engage in discussions with African revolutionaries as well as Muslim leaders. He came back from Mecca with not only a broader view of those who shared his religion (that included white people, as the movie showed), but a clearer view of the forces in the world fighting the same fight he was.

He stood in solidarity with the revolutions in Africa, Cuba, and Vietnam.

I think young people here can find a powerful example in the young *Simbas* in the Congo and the young fighters in South Vietnam. [*By Any Means Necessary*, p. 165.]

Rather than looking to Democrats or institutions in this society to achieve an end to oppression, he looked to an alliance with others of the oppressed around the world. He became a true internationalist.

His experiences abroad helped him to see the full scope of his battle. In the last year of his life Malcolm openly denounced capitalism and was considering an alternative.

It is impossible for capitalism to survive, primarily because the system of capitalism needs some blood to suck...now it has become more cowardly like the vulture and can only suck the blood of the helpless...It's only a matter of time in my opinion before it will collapse completely. [*Ibid.*, p. 165-166.]

Almost every one of the countries that has gotten independence has devised some kind of socialistic system, and this is no accident...you and I here in America should look over there and find out what are the people who have gotten their freedom adopting to provide themselves with better housing and better education and better food and bet-

ter clothing. None of them are adopting the capitalistic system because they realize they can't. You can't operate a capitalistic system unless you are vulturistic.... [*Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 120-121.]

The film never tries to suggest, as some others have, that Malcolm X renounced his nationalism, and that's right. He remained a Black nationalist to the end of his days—and his consistent nationalism led him to internationalism, anti-capitalism and pro-socialism. During his last months, Malcolm complained that his evolving views were being ignored, "my old so-called 'Black Muslim' image kept blocking me"; and "they won't let me turn the corner!" As one Malcolm scholar succinctly put it, he was:

a revolutionary internationalist on the way to becoming a liberator of his people. That is why the American ruling class, the press, and the Negro leadership did what they could to prevent him from "turning the corner." That is also probably why he was struck down. [George Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X*, pp. 28, 39]

The Iconization of Malcolm X

Today, Malcolm X is a safe icon, "embraced by such disparate figures as [Supreme Court] Justice Clarence Thomas and self-proclaimed revolutionary [Amiri] Baraka," according to *Newsweek* (August 26, 1991, p. 53). The process by which this happened is an old story, perfectly described by Lenin in his 1917 work, *State and Revolution*:

During the lifetime of great revolutionaries, the oppressed classes have visited relentless persecution on them and received their teaching with the most savage hostility, the most furious hatred, the most ruthless campaign of lies and slanders. After their death, attempts are made to turn them into harmless icons, canonize them and surround their names with a certain halo for the "consolidation" of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping them, while at the same time emasculating and vulgarising the real essence of their revolutionary theories and blunting their revolutionary edge.

How true this was for Malcolm X. While the press and other spokespersons for the rulers of this country may carry out this iconization deliberately, artists like Spike Lee can contribute unconsciously to the process. For example, in one of the final scripts Spike Lee wanted Nelson Mandela to do a cameo appearance at the end of the movie "quoting" Malcolm that "We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary."

As Spike tells it, "Mandela has his reservations, though. He didn't want to say the line 'by any means necessary' at the end of the film....When that point comes, we'll cut from Mandela and go back to Malcolm X, and we'll use actual footage. Mandela's try-

ing to accomplish what Malcolm is saying, peacefully. But after going there [South Africa], I believe the only way that s--- in South Africa is ever going to change is through something that simply ain't no tea-and-crumpets negotiations. [*The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X*, p. 105.]

That's the truth! No doubt, by putting Mandela at the end, the director wanted to point to the main Black liberation struggle of today. But what would Malcolm, a consistent advocate of armed Black self-defense, say about the "means" of the 1991 "peace accord" signed by Mandela's ANC that required the ANC to turn over names, addresses, and phone numbers of ANC leaders to the police and disarm Black revolutionaries but not the South African police and army?

Ironically, the "answer" is earlier in the film script:

REPORTER: "What about the guns, Malcolm?"

MALCOLM: "Has the white man changed since I went away? Have you put up your guns? The day you stop being violent against my people will be the day I tell folks to put away their guns." (*Ibid.*, p. 296)

It was this uncompromising clarity that made it necessary for the state to eliminate Malcolm.

Politics Impact a Political Film

The story behind the making of the film makes it understandable why Malcolm's last year and the political implications of his assassination are not given full treatment in it. The limitation of perspective that prevented the telling of the whole story has its roots in the lack of a mass independent Black movement today, not in any intention of the film's participants.

For example, there was no lack of dedication to telling Malcolm's story, which was based on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (and which, unfortunately, did not adequately reflect his later views). Interviews and a recently published book on the making of the movie reveals the sense of an almost sacred mission felt by the entire production team. From Spike Lee and Denzel Washington on down, their view was that this was the movie of their lifetimes because of what Malcolm meant to them and to Black people.

In *By Any Means Necessary: the Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X*, Spike Lee recounts how from the beginning there was a continuous struggle to make a film that would do justice to Malcolm. A Warner Brothers project before Lee was aboard, the film had been budgeted at two-and-a-half hours for \$18 million, from which the company never budged. Telling Warner at the start that "this is a movie of three hours for around \$33 or \$34 million, minimum," Lee, in an unprecedented move, turned to Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, and

others for donations, when the bond company refused to cover the "excess" and Warner laid off the editors. (These were donations, not loans or investments — Warner Brothers retained its full stake. Warner exploited the Black petty bourgeoisie to reap the profits from this picture.)

Lee compared the battle he had to wage for the length and budget of *Malcolm X* to the relative ease with which white filmmakers, even of controversial films like *JFK*, are granted their requirements. "Look at *Bonfire of the Vanities*. How much money did they spend on that screen gem? Over \$50 mil? What did it do? Bomb!" (p. 31)

On this campaign for the directorship: "...one reason why I felt it was imperative that an African American do this film...it required a lot of research...The research I'm talking about is talking to the people who knew Malcolm intimately, who knew his life....No way would most of these people open up to someone who was not Black...no way you were going to get any sort of cooperation from current and former members of the Nation of Islam with a white director." (pp. 32-33.)

Is Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* a Hollywood movie? In a certain sense, no. Not being fully supported by the Hollywood establishment, its character and mission was saved by independent financing. It became a movie of self-determination. But in the last analysis, yes, this is a Hollywood picture of today when a film corporation can seek to make profits from a Malcolm X story, when a talented Black director can, with a vigorous public campaign, win the right to make and have distributed a film of quality. A movie of today that can obtain last minute funds from the small Black middle class. The victory of the civil rights movement made this movie possible.

The fact that Black liberation is still of the future both made independent financing necessary and caused the ultimate message of Malcolm X to be muted. For it is unlikely that any of the picture's underwriters would have been as willing to finance out of their own pockets and openly anti-capitalist and pro-socialist portrayal of the last six months of Malcolm's political evolution. This is simply where we are in the class struggle. The movie exactly mirrors the best of the prevailing understanding of Malcolm. The contradictions of the movie are the contradictions of late capitalist America.

A Moment of Dramatic Weakness?

The showing we went to was sold out. The packed audience was totally absorbed in the story unfolding on the screen. Yet at the end, there was only scattered applause. We got to experience Malcolm's life, but we didn't get to experience all of it.

For example, in leaving out the political discussions in the OAAU (Organization for

Afro-American Unity, an organization Malcolm started in order to organize Blacks on a broader, non-religious basis), the movie missed an opportunity to show the potential of the new organization and the fear with which the government viewed it. There could have been conveyed the sense of urgency Malcolm had in shaping the OAAU, there could have been shown Malcolm struggling for clarity, trying to lead his followers but not moving too far ahead of them, not having enough time.

Ultimately, the movie failed to explain the political motive for Malcolm's assassination. This was as much a dramatic weakness as a political one — the sense of increasing dread and tension which the movie effectively built up toward the assassination scene would have been even more heightened by a script underscore, that emphasized the political evolution that occurred during Malcolm's final months. Thus the political weakness of the movie contributed to the dramatic weakness of the ending.

In 1991's *JFK*, Oliver Stone explained the Kennedy assassination with a purported intention by the president to pull out of Vietnam. While this reviewer does not agree with that particular thesis, Stone's attempt nonetheless points to the necessity for a subject like a political assassination to be explained politically.

With Malcolm there was no need to "invent" (or ignore) a reason for the assassination. He was a threat to the government on two counts: in his increasingly radical anti-capitalist and pro-socialist views and his move towards initiating a broad-based united-front organization for all African Americans (the OAAU) that would have internationalized the struggle. Washington's secret police organizations understand well the galvanizing impact on other sectors of society when one self-acting movement goes into motion. Certainly we've seen how the antiwar and women's movements took off after the civil rights movement.

What Does Malcolm X Mean Today?

Millions will have seen *Malcolm X* by the time it finishes its run, in search of answers to the questions: Who was Malcolm X? What does his story mean?

They will universally find a Malcolm that is a searcher for truth. They will find it in the music of Malcolm's theme, a slow, deliberate, haunting refrain that starts on a low note, rises, sinks but moves forward. Composer Blanchard: "When I think of Malcolm X I think of a solitary person in search of a truth all alone.... And he is honest in his search.... So I constantly hear singular instruments portraying that kind of emotion." (Lee, *The Making of Malcolm X*, p. 146.) The theme still seeks and struggles in the two jazz versions that reflect Malcolm's earlier days; it transforms itself like Malcolm into power

and purpose in its martial form during the march from the police station.

Some will see Malcolm as a role model for an "up-from-drugs-and-crime" example. Self-improvement certainly was an important part of his story. But that was only the beginning and basis of Malcolm's political evolution as an uncompromising fighter for liberation.

Others may yet conclude that he was a charismatic Black leader who fell victim to organizational infighting. But if his end were reduced to that, one wonders whether there would be the broadening interest in his story today. The assassination defined Malcolm X: a man cut down before fulfilling his mission, whatever that may have been. People sense there is more to be told; that's one reason why they come to see the film.

They are drawn by curiosity, but more to Malcolm's potential as fighter and independent leader. The film's excellent opening showing the American flag burning into an "X" and the video of the Rodney King beating makes a political point that is much more widely understood than it would have been in 1964. With disaffection for the Democratic and Republican parties grown deeper than ever before, Malcolm's influence would have been far greater today.

Had the movie ended with the following statement made by Malcolm made a month before his death, his message and relevance would be more clear:

I believe that there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those who do the oppressing. I believe that there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice, and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation. I believe that there will be that kind of clash, but I don't think it will be based upon the color of the skin... [Jan. 19, 1965, TV interview, Pierre Berton show, Toronto, quoted in George Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X: Evolution of a Revolutionary*, 1967, p. 38.]

We can celebrate *Malcolm X* as a wonderful depiction of the greatest African American revolutionary in the twentieth century. So especially convincing is Denzel Washington's performance, that when the last scene with Denzel is followed by documentary footage of the real Malcolm, the transition is seamless — you can't tell the difference except the difference of Technicolor versus black-and-white. With determination and commitment to a story that deeply affected them, too, the makers of this film have enabled us to experience some of what Malcolm meant to history.

It remains for revolutionary fighters to take this new, broader opportunity to explain Malcolm's final course and how it speaks to the task of independent self-organization still before us. We can do so with the confidence that one day a new society will provide the resources to tell the whole story of Malcolm X as well as this movie has told the part. □

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