

## Malcolm X beyond labels

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Malcolm X is an increasingly prominent figure in the American imagination. Interest groups of all types fight over his legacy. Predictably, they all too often fit this legacy into a soundbite format. The nation's vocabulary for dealing with race relations is so narrow that Malcolm X is portrayed in two ways that had little to do with him: he becomes either a rabid, racist militant, or a convert in the end to the nonviolent ideals associated with Martin Luther King, Jr. Malcolm X saw more clearly through the fabric of American beliefs than those who would label him; his complex, profoundly transgressive philosophy does not lend itself to quick summation.

The rapid changes Malcolm X underwent towards the end of his life complicate the task of understanding him. The *Autobiography*, while a valuable text for following his direction, presents certain problems, in part because it was written with the assistance of a professional writer, Alex Haley, who naturally influenced its final form. By its structure, and through Haley's Epilogue, the *Autobiography* emphasizes the changes in Malcolm's racial policies, as if they were the main substance of his developing thought. What emerges at the end is a peaceful, integration-minded Malcolm X - certainly a more palatable, less threatening figure to a largely white reading audience than the militant follower of Elijah Muhammad who dominates the middle section.

The image is false, though, as Malcolm's speeches from the period illustrate. He obviously had complete and final editorial control over the content and form of his speeches. The things he said during the last year of his life convey a picture different in focus and content from the one offered by the *Autobiography*. It is true that on January 19, 1965, two

weeks before he died, Malcolm said, "I don't care what a person looks like or where they come from. My mind is open. . ."--and it is a crucial point that Malcolm no longer espoused racism. But an overview of the final speeches shows that this was not the focus of his thought at the time. Instead, there was an increased awareness of international possibilities, a critique of the capitalist system, along with an indictment of the "white man's" justice and government as bitter as before. Although he'd realized that whites were not inherently evil, he was as angry as ever at them in general. On January 7, he had claimed only the "John Brown school of liberals" were worth his time. On the 24th, he sent a message to the American Nazi Party stating that any attempts by the Nazis or the Klan to disrupt black voting would "be met with maximum physical retaliation from those of us who are not handcuffed by the disarming philosophy of nonviolence." That month he also told a nonviolent questioner, "I don't think 1965 will be a very nonviolent year. Your year was '64."

His opposition to nonviolence and his anger were obviously as strong as ever. What is new in these speeches, then, is not the absence of racism so much as the broader international perspective it allowed. The new racial thought is a sort of necessary corollary. It was not the point, though, not the end product of his thought. This fact was clear to Eldridge Cleaver, then a black prison inmate in a perfect position to understand Malcolm X, who always claimed to be talking to poor, powerless black people. Cleaver spoke of black racism as a burden, almost a tactical hindrance to the real objective of helping black people. Writing of Malcolm's letter to the mosque about his blonde, blue-eyed Muslim friends, Cleaver said, "there were those of us who were glad to be liberated from a doctrine of hate and racial supremacy. The onus of teaching [racism]. . . , which is the white man's burden, is pretty hard to bear." This is not to suggest that Cleaver and Malcolm X were not genuinely opposed to black racism but that they understood in addition that the Nation of Islam's racism was an obstacle

in the path to a larger goal.

The goal, according to Malcolm's last statements, seemed to have more to do with international economic change than with whether whites and blacks could all hold hands. Malcolm said in an interview of January 18, 1965 that an Algerian ambassador, who was light-skinned enough to be called "white" in America, "showed me where [black racism] was alienating people who were true revolutionaries dedicated to overturning the system of exploitation that exists on this earth by any means necessary." In other words, categorically vilifying non-blacks needlessly makes enemies of those among them interested in liberation. To Malcolm X, it was a necessary, logical step on the way to a larger revolution. These final speeches, especially as read by an imprisoned black man, show Malcolm to be anything but an accommodationist by the end of his life.

James Baldwin has written that

Malcolm was not a racist. . . his intelligence was more complex than that; furthermore, if he had been a racist, not many in this racist country would have considered him dangerous. He would have sounded familiar and even comforting. . . What made him unfamiliar and dangerous was not his hatred for white people but his love for blacks.

Baldwin identified precisely the aspect of Malcolm's philosophy that made him such a vital figure to black Americans, and what still makes his thought so alien to modern America; mainstream society concentrated (and concentrates) on Malcolm's feelings about whites, but his feelings were not primarily about them.

Such a realization helps explain Malcolm's statements at the end of his life. Although he had a global perspective, he was still intimately concerned with the section of the world's population he knew best: America's black people. It is to this group that his final statements were aimed. It was their uplift, their dignity, and not their relationship to their

white countrymen, that he concentrated on. Marlene Nadle, in an interview she conducted with Malcolm X for the *Village Voice* in February, 1965, missed this point. She was thinking about white people when she asked him if he planned to use hate to organize. "I won't permit you to call it hate. Let's say I'm going to create an awareness. . . you have to wake people up first, then you'll get action," he responded. Nadle's query--"Wake them up to their exploitation?"--seems, to the white reader, logical--until Malcolm's answer rockets back: "No, to their humanity, to their worth, and to their heritage."

We see Malcolm resisting a "white" slant on his thought. Two months before his death he told an audience, "It's a dangerous thing, you know, to let yourself get to where every time someone's talking, you think they're talking about you. It's not so good." Such a mistake on the part of whites is understandable and predictable, considering the elaborate psychological contortions necessary for them to feel white. As Baldwin has explained, "whiteness" requires "blackness" to define itself; once black people decide they no longer care about the values of whites, whiteness is left strangely anchorless. Hence the distraught, crying woman who pleads with Malcolm X to know "What can I *do*?" "Nothing," he tells her. And until his death, that answer remained essentially the same - unless she happens to be the John Brown sort of person.

Malcolm X tells in the *Autobiography* of his amazement at, and distaste for, whites who frequented Harlem clubs, excitedly gushing over how much they appreciated Negro "soul." It is not hard to imagine these same people a few years later tearfully pleading to know where they fit into Malcolm's program. It is a strange feature of American racism that whites need black people in some way - perhaps because they hope black people have that bit of humanity they themselves gave up in becoming "white." As Baldwin wrote, "though [whites] have never learned how to live with the darker brother, they do not look forward to having to learn to live without him."

Malcolm X insisted on being understood as a leader of

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and for American black people, before any other group. To whites, the suggestion that black people could look for a solution to their problems that does not involve, indeed feature, them "constitutes," as Baldwin wrote, "the most disagreeable of novelties." Faced with this suggestion, whites (and some black people who cannot escape the racial categories Malcolm X found so crippling) see Malcolm as either a hater of whites or an integrationist. He was neither. Both racism and integration accept the American system as given, and Malcolm X was an enemy of the fundamental hypocrisy he saw in the American system. There is no way to understand Malcolm X fairly and fit him into the patterns America has created.

## Works cited

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*Editors' afterword.* This issue of Race Traitor goes to press before the release of Spike Lee's film on Malcolm X. The Boston Globe of November 9 features a front-page article by Patricia Smith anticipating (and attempting to shape?) the film's impact on viewers, particularly young black people. It is a handy example of the sort of thinking Kurnick addresses. After reporting black anger at the latest (near-fatal) beating by whites of a black man in South Boston, Ms. Smith reports that "many blacks . . . latch onto the words 'by any means necessary,' not taking the time to learn that Malcolm was not speaking of retaliatory violence, but of mental and spiritual preparation."

"Malcolm X," according to Ms. Smith, "advocated a strict black nationalism that stressed responsibility--and by the time of his death he had come to the conclusion that blacks and

whites could live peacefully in the same sphere--if the black man took steps to control his own fate." (Did Malcolm X ever say that blacks and whites could live peacefully together without changes on the part of whites?)

She quotes Malcolm's words, "I for one will join in with anyone, I don't care what color you are, as long as you want to change this miserable condition that exists on this earth."

"This does not," comments Ms. Smith, "sound like the man [some young blacks] say preached about 'an eye for an eye.'" The Malcolm she hopes will emerge from the film "spoke of power through racial inclusion."

Ms. Smith's categories apparently do not allow for a man who would no longer let people's color determine his opinions of them but who still called upon Afro-Americans to defend themselves from their enemies, "by any means necessary."