

MALCOLM X IN 1993: THE EUROPEAN DEBATES

by
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Malcolm X is being discovered and debated in every major urban center in the world, especially among youth and students, and in radical political discourse. This radical global experience has to be compared to the impact of the Black Panther Party (USA), Bob Marley (Caribbean), or Stephen Biko (Africa) because all three made world wide impact on a generation of youth by influencing their political culture. There is no doubt that Black radicalism has found legitimacy everywhere in the world. But, this exists as a dynamic process in which there is wide ranging polemical debate.

It has been my unique position to be at the heart of a great deal of the 1990's Malcolm X debates, in the USA as well as in Europe. I was an activist in the 1960's, and was part of the immediate Malcolm X legacy of Black power, especially in Black culture and Black studies. In 1985 I wrote the Peoples College Black Liberation Month News edition on Malcolm X that has an international distribution of over 75,000. By 1990 we held a major international conference "Malcolm X: Radical Tradition and A Legacy of Struggle" to which over 2,000 people came, including participants from Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, England, Germany, Trinidad, and Puerto Rico, among others. (See Perspectives on Black Liberation and Social Revolution, 21st Century Books, 1991)

In the USA Malcolm X continued to draw the ideological focus of all strands of radicalism: Black Liberation Theology from Islam to Christianity, Marxism, Black Nationalism, PanAfricanism, and forms of Black Feminism/Womanism. This exploded during the 1991-1992 build up to the release of the Spike Lee film, a hollywood extravaganza billed as a radical and honest portrayal of Malcolm X.

Malcolm X (1925 - 1965) was a leader/teacher of immense significance because of his impact on the political ideology of the Black liberation movement, all aspects of it. Furthermore, Malcolm X was the link between the international struggle and Black militants in the USA. Not only did he point the way for militant Black people in the USA to reunite with the African revolution, but he also taught the relevance of China, Vietnam, and Cuba.

Fundamentally, the movie by Spike Lee is a "fun filled" reductionist exercise in mainstreaming Malcolm X. The first half of the film is a caricature of Detroit Red, Malcolm X's experience as a Black gangster. This is overdone, and as exaggeration belittles the cultural experience of the hipster as a cool and dignified working class Black negation of colonial ("white") assimilationist policy. Further, because he explains Malcolm X's identity as a Black outsider in terms of his childhood, Spike Lee buys into a "pop Freudian reductionism" rather than present us with a straight up confrontation with racism and class exploitation in the Harlem Malcolm X knew directly.

We get Malcolm X as an anti-racist militant and as a devout muslim. We get race and religion, but we do not get radicalism. The first time you hear the word revolution is when the rap group sings their song after the movie is over. We never see Malcolm X

locate our struggle in the context of world revolution, not hear him praise his contemporaries like Mao, Castro, Che, or Lumumba. My reaction was even more extreme after seeing the movie for a second time. I was outraged that once again we had been suckered by this film hustler who hawks his wares by misrepresenting himself as a reflection of our outrage.

So, I brought this approach to the film as part of a lecture tour that involved four countries, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, and England. The main sponsors of my tour were the International Conference Committee for the 11th Radical Black and Third World Book Fair, the Workers Party of Belgium, the Movement for Justice in Africa, and the Workers Community Party of Norway. This reflects the diversity of interest in Malcolm X.

In Europe the most heated aspect of the debate was Islam. Partly reflecting the rapid spread of Islam in Europe through waves of immigration from the Middle East, Pakistan, Turkey, Nigeria, and other Islamic countries, there is a close connection between immigrant communities and religious conflict. This has been polemicized by the Rushdie affair, the Gulf War, and now the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York.

The hard line Islamic position was that his greatness should be mainly attributed to his Muslim beliefs and discipline. Therefore, if one is interested in Malcolm X then one should be interested in and convert to Islam. The Spike Lee film seems to buttress this position by interpreting the last year of Malcolm X's life in terms of Islam, especially the his Hajj.

I argued that Malcolm X came to emphasize politics over ideology. He changed his own views based on his political involvement whereas in the past he had been an ideological dogmatist not impacted by political developments and history. In fact to emphasize the politics of cooperation and political unity he had argued that each of us should put our sectarian religious beliefs "in the closet" and united on what we shared in common.

The underlying philosophical issue here came out dramatically in the forum held in Sheffield, England. A young Muslim militant stood and said that I failed to understand why his privileging religion was so important, and gave an example for my consideration. He asked, if you are lost and isolated in the middle of the desert, the first question you would ask is "where do I come from? Who am I?" My reply was, "No, my brother, the first question I would ask would be where can I get a drink of water?" Malcolm X understood that the politics of unity had to be based on a materialist approach to the concrete realities of life. Those who are oppressed need to unite against those who exploit.

But in this analysis we still have the dialectic of racism and nationalism to be grappled with. The rise of racism and fascism in Europe is galloping along at an alarming rate, on the ideological level and in terms of murderous physical attack. This is forcing many Black and immigrant youths into narrow nationalist positions because they have not been politicized with a radical political culture.

In Belgium this has taken the form of a call for "self organization" within the immigrant community. It is clear that this is a legitimate spontaneous impulse, for people to organize in

their own communities and fight back. However, the nature of the fight will depend on how two issues are dealt with: 1. which class forces are in control? and 2. what coalitions are built to win the fight?

In Belgium, the critical debate concerns the so-called immigrant youth from Morocco. It is strange that even if someone is born in Belgium but has parents born in Morocco they are called immigrant youth. These youth are marginalized socially, and face severe economic hardship. If they organize and fight back against police brutality and all other forms of racist oppression, then they will reach out to the militant fighters and democratic loving people in Belgium to unite on a broader basis to wage a victorious struggle against the Belgium state and rulers. But, if "self organization" means focusing mainly on ones cultural identity, and trying to incorporate the entire immigrant community, then the leadership will be seized by the religious elites and turned into a conservative opportunist travesty of struggle.

In the overall democratic movement in Belgium there are two lines and two major organizing efforts over the question of equal rights. The Trotskyites unite with the narrow nationalists who argue that the fight is for citizenship, but that the immigrant community should maintain its own nationality as a matter of law. However, Belgium law is written in terms of nationality and not citizenship, and more profound as long as Belgium nationality is rooted in racial homogeneity then the legal basis for racism and fascism will be forever present. The position that upholds a consistent democracy would grant automatic nationality (and therefore citizenship) after 5 years of residence, or upon birth a person with immigrant parents would automatically have dual nationality.

This debate emerged in Manchester England as well. Afrocentric militants demanded that proclaiming ones "African" identity be regarded as an ideological litmus test for ones authenticity. They are idealists who unite with the man without water in the desert, and therefore are ideologically dangerous at a time when Black people are under attack in these societies that are in crisis.

Manchester has a large area of projects called the Moss Side Estates. This is a low income community attacked by drug dealers, gangsters, and all kinds of violence. The people here regard themselves variously as Afro-Caribbean, Black British, Africans of all kinds, Asians of all kinds, and some don't care. While at one point Malcolm X would have lectured them on identity, after he left the narrow dogmatic sect of the Nation of Islam, he would have concentrated on uniting the people around their common problems and not emphasized abstract beliefs that would divide them.

My overall month long tour ended during the 11th International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books. Here the contradiction changed from those within Europe to the debate between African Americans when they venture out to engage in an international discourse. We almost always find out that the USA forces people to think that a conservative discourse ruled by the threat of right wing terror is normal, and therefore people think that to be liberal is to be radical. Its understandable if you

keep in mind that people think in their own context.

The forum on Malcolm X was at the University of London, with the radical dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson as the chairperson, with two speakers, June Jordan and myself. Linton ran down his connection to Malcolm X, especially his involvement in the British version of the Black Panther Party. I ran my rap, and June ran hers. We differed on several issues, but mainly two stood out: on Black leadership she positioned herself with the Congressional Black caucus and I dug in with the Up and Out of Poverty Movement; on South African Leadership she gave almost uncritical support for Nelson Mandela while I insisted that Malcolm X's link was through Biko, and that all revolutionary leadership required criticism.

This brought forth a host of comments and questions, and several points became clear: 1. the Black movement in the USA has a special role to play, and therefore more analysis must be popularized from a revolutionary perspective because people simply do not understand the development of the revolutionary forces that have continued the legacy of Malcolm X (for some information contact The Peoples Tribune, P.O. Box 3524, Chicago, Illinois USA phone 312-486-3552); 2. revolutionary intellectuals have to intensify their critical commentary on politics and culture because this discourse is being dominated by liberals disguised as credible radicals; and 3. the cultural innovations of the youth, especially rap music must enter into the cultural and political life of all revolutionary forces so that their debate is our debate and together we can define the line of march and political voice of the dispossessed and exploited.

The 1990 Malcolm X European Debates will continue as they do in the USA. We need to have a summation of the debates in Africa and the Caribbean. We need active debate and the forging of plans of action to carry forth the revolutionary legacy that Malcolm X was part of building. Now is the time, brothers and sisters, now is the time!