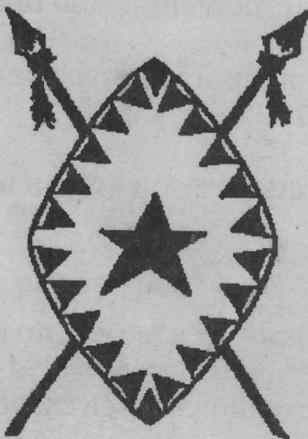


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Spear & Shield Publications
1340 West Irving Park Road
Suite 108
Chicago, IL 60613

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MALCOLM X & BLACK PERSPECTIVES ON THE CRISIS OF SOCIALISM

by: ABDUL ALKALIMAT

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It is a great challenge to speak on the topic "Malcolm X and Black Perspectives on the Crisis of Socialism" at this time in our history. This is so whether we think of this country in particular or the world in general. In the last decade we have seen an explosion of contradictions produce unprecedented changes and we continue to see these changes unfold before our eyes virtually on a daily basis. To put together the name of Malcolm, with the theoretical and practical experience of Socialism, is to place before us the most strategic aspects of the question being debated at the center of this storm: Can society be reorganized to produce a better quality of life than ever before, both in terms of race and nationality on the one hand, and politics and economics on the other?

Further, the results of this historical debate is no mere academic exercise, but will determine how all of us will live our lives into the 21st century. There will be a new world order, and everyone will be playing by new rules. The 50 year dominance of the USA since World War II is over, everyone who takes a serious look at the situation seems to know that. As well, every country and regional power bloc is being restructured and realigned. Thus, the debate that is raging over the future course of history is itself a historical necessity.

Some would argue that History has ended, some would argue that progress is over and some would argue that scarcity and greed will destroy morality and reduce all of society, finally, to a cash nexus, the ultimate market. These are the prophets of doom—our doom—who usually hold these beliefs as expressions of their commitment to capitalism as a system, especially their position of privilege within it, and in response to the deepening crisis, these forces are prepared to carry their defense of capitalism to extreme and ominous limits—Yes, once again we face the specter of fascism from Maastricht to Moscow, from Louisiana to Latvia.



On the other hand, those of us who would raise the name of Malcolm as one whose life and politics contains positive lessons for the future, and who believe that socialism remains a viable historical form of social transformation have "the awesome responsibility of revolutionary leadership," the task of historical criticism, strategic vision, and tactical action. The doom sayers offer barbarism, genocide and war for the masses of people—check it out, look around in New York, you can see advanced forms of social degeneration everywhere. But we gather to argue the possibility of

prosperity, peace and justice. My hope is that this session contributes to our collective grasp of socialism as a plausible scenario, and then together we can leave here and work to link this vision with the practical tasks of the day to day struggle.

In my brief time I would like to address three main issues:

1. **Was Malcolm X a Socialist?**
2. **What is the crisis of Socialism?**
3. **What is the relationship between a Black agenda and a Socialist agenda?**

1. WAS MALCOLM X A SOCIALIST?

On one level this is one of the most controversial and easy to solve problems. **No**, there is no evidence that Malcolm X publicly committed himself to the principles of Socialism. But we can't leave it at that, since defining people only by the text of their talk is limited at best, and usually would have to assume that their context and social practice was irrelevant while in fact no serious interpretation of someone's speeches and interviews can take place independent of their context and social practice.

Malcolm was a northern Black working class voice who emerged out of the **Radical Black Tradition**. Our Radical Black Tradition is rooted in the cumulative experiences of Black peoples struggle for survival – lessons paid for, learned, and encoded in a culture of resistance. The ultimate historical significance of Malcolm X is that he reaffirmed the tradition and pushed us forward to open up the debate we are having today.

The Little family nurtured Malcolm in a cradle of Panafricanism, Nationalism, Religion, and Feminism. Earl Little, Malcolm's father, was an itinerant Baptist preacher who steeped him in the Bible as a historical paradigm of the Black experience and armed him with the Old Testament ethics of revolutionary violence. Louise Little, Malcolm's mother, was a strong personality in family and politics, while connecting Malcolm to the African diaspora through her Caribbean origin in Grenada. Both of his parents were activists in the UNIA, his father being an organizer and spokesperson, and his mother an administrative official at the local level.

Malcolm was snatched out of this context and put under direct "white" supervision where he gave that a shot and grasped the spirit of mainstream achievement and success with an open mind. He was negated in this experience by whites in a foster home and school, just as his parents had been negated by white terrorists and welfare bureaucrats. This was a reflection of the conditions facing Black families who either tried to uphold the Radical Black Tradition (Malcolm's Parents) or Black youth who try and conform to the behavior required for success by the mainstream educational institutions. Both were negated – by rejection, by institutionalization, and by murder.

In turn Malcolm then negated the conventions of society by striving for success in the underworld of street hustlers. This was a gangster hedonism that required the mainstream as much as if one were in it. And then of course in place of being killed he was locked up for burglary.

In this scenario, the main overall contradiction is that we find the radical

black tradition of the Little family liquidated by the racist terror of US capitalism.

In the depths of this prison experience Malcolm was "reborn" within the Radical Black Tradition through a religious conversion experience by joining the Nation of Islam. Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, became a father figure for Malcolm as he had been for several of Malcolm's sisters and brothers.

The Nation of Islam was a highly stylized form of nationalism. Elijah Muhammad was a man from Georgia with little formal education, but who was wise and skillful in training his organizational representatives and devising a program. He was in direct lineage, from Garvey to Noble Drew Ali to Fard to Elijah Muhammad. On the one hand the Nation of Islam was a sectarian dogmatic organization upholding a form of Black capitalism run by an authoritarian leadership, while on the other hand its newspaper was usually edited by a Black socialist who filled the pages with radical critiques of US capitalism and Western imperialist interests throughout the world.

Malcolm X was tormented by great conflicts within the Nation of Islam that pulled him from the dogmatism of Elijah Muhammad into the historical dynamic of the Black liberation movement and world revolution. His leaders' shortcoming was partly the reason, but mostly I think it was Malcolm's links with the peoples movement, the motion of history drew him into the great debate of the 1960's, and he began to change and grow within that context free of sectarianism and dogmatism.

The only critical theoretical issue within that debate that sums up Malcolm's motion for at least the last two years of his life points to socialism. Consider the following;

1. Malcolm took a class position. He consciously argued the case for the "bottom of the pile Negroes" and proudly proclaimed himself "field Negro" in opposition to the Uncle Tom "House Negroes."
2. Malcolm declared himself a revolutionary and among others gave particular reference to China and Cuba;
3. Malcolm noted that the only white people who seemed to want what he wanted usually turned out to be socialist;
4. Malcolm finally came to the position that the struggle would not be a race war, but a world wide struggle of the oppressed of the world, in opposition to "western interests" or in other words imperialism.

In sum, for me, the issue then is not really the question was Malcolm X a socialist, but rather the clear and undeniable fact that Malcolm X guided us to take up the issue of socialism (directly and indirectly) as part of the main debate driving forward the Black liberation movement. Of course, Malcolm was not alone in this but was joining the ranks of virtually all significant liberation movements in the third world. In this way Malcolm finally helped resurrect the fifth aspect of the Radical Black Tradition that had been virtually silenced since the McCarthy purges and the isolation of figures such as W E B DuBois, Paul Robeson, and Claudia Jones among others.