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"There will Ultimately be a Clash between the Oppressed and Those Who do the Oppressing"

In the U.S., February is Black History Month. This is a good time to review the life of Malcolm X, one of the great leaders of the Black Liberation movement of the 60s. Anarchism, as an overall theory, is well-known to be rather loose and eclectic. Therefore anarchists have taken a great deal from other schools of thought, such as Marxism, feminism, Queer theory, ecology, radical psychoanalysis, post-modernism, etc. In my opinion, revolutionary anarchists also have much to learn from the life and thinking of Malcolm X.

One weekend in the 70s, during a demonstration in New York's Central Park, I sat at a literature table for my radical group (then the Revolutionary Socialist League). A fellow with a picture of Mao pinned to his cap came to the table and glanced at a pamphlet we were selling (written by me, actually), titled, "Malcolm X: Revolution Knows No Compromise." He sneered, "That's anarchist!" and stalked off.

Malcolm X was not an anarchist. He wanted a revolution to break up the U.S. government in order to create an independent Black nation, but he was not anti-statist. In a general sense, he became anti-capitalist and pro-socialist, but was not for libertarian socialism. Yet that Maoist had a point! Like revolutionary anarchists, Malcolm X advocated Black Liberation-from-below. He did not advocate that African-Americans become part of the establishment and the power elite. He advocated armed-self-defense rather than love of those who assaulted or killed African-Americans. He called for self-organization and self-reliance for African-Americans, rather than reliance on White people or on the U.S. state. While the "integrationists" had a strategy of relying on the Democratic Party and the national government, he urged militant independence for African-Americans in every arena—what later became called "Black Power." He taught that African-Americans should be proud of their history and their looks, rather than judge themselves through the eyes of White people.

Malcolm X was an internationalist revolutionary, not a reformist. In the statement quoted in the title of the pamphlet disliked by the Maoist—from the last public speech he made as a member of the Nation of Islam–he said, "The black revolution is world-wide in scope and in nature. The black revolution is sweeping Asia, is sweeping Africa, is rearing its head in Latin America.... Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in the way" (1966; p. 9). Of course, compromises are made during a revolution, in particular when uniting differing groupings of the oppressed, and Malcolm X knew it. But ultimately there is no compromise between the oppressed and the oppressors. One or the other must dominate.

Malcolm X made a class distinction in the African-American community. He distinguished between the "house Negro" who, in the time of slavery, identified with the White master, living in the master's mansion, eating scraps from the master's table, and the

difficult for him to see that White workers, under certain conditions, might be part of a mass struggle for freedom. This was before the 1968 mass strikes in France and the 1969 strikes in Italy, or the large workers' struggles in the U.S. in the early 70s. Since his time, most of the "Third World" state socialists have abandoned socialism, either for out-and-out market capitalism or for some sort of religious dictatorship (with a capitalist economy).

At the time of his assassination, Malcolm X was on the road to becoming one of the U.S.'s great revolutionary leaders. The police (which had agents in both Malcolm's group and the Nation of Islam) had the ability and the motive to whip up hostility between the two groups, leading to his death. This was not that long before the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.,.... We cannot know what Malcolm X would have evolved into, if given the chance. No doubt he had his mistakes and limitations. But he was also an important figure who spoke for the oppressed and stood for human liberation. Revolutionary anarchists, who stand with every rebelling section of oppressed and exploited humanity, have every reason to respect Malcolm X, the great African-American revolutionary.

References:

Malcolm X (1966). *Malcolm X Speaks.* NY: Grove Press

Malcolm X (1965). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* (As told to Alex Haley). NY: Ballantine Books.

acceptable to the world was that the shrewd capitalists, the shrewd imperialists, knew that the only way people would run toward the fox would be if you showed them a wolf. So they created a ghastly alternative. And it had the whole world—including people who call themselves Marxists—hoping that Johnson would beat Goldwater. I have to say this. Those who claim to be enemies of the system were on their hands and knees waiting for Johnson to get elected….And at that moment he had troops invading the Congo and South Vietnam!" (pp. 201—202).

Naturally, Malcolm X identified with the international revolution against colonialism and imperialism. He admired the revolutionaries he met and read about around the world. Almost all of these at the time regarded themselves as some sort of "socialist": Marxist-Leninist, social democratic, Asian Socialist, African Socialist, Communist, etc. Malcolm X could see for himself the evils that world capitalism had created. "It is impossible for capitalism to survive, primarily because the system of capitalism needs some blood to suck….As the nations of the world free themselves, then capitalism has less victims, less to suck, and it becomes weaker and weaker" (p. 199).

He could see that revolutionaries everywhere identified with socialism. He also could see how difficult it was to label oneself a socialist in the U.S.A. Plus he was aware of how little he knew yet about socialist ideas. For such reasons he did not make a point about calling himself a "socialist." Anarchists can see that those who influenced him in a socialist direction were all state socialists (advocates of developing a new society through the use of the state). This is a program which can only lead, in practice, to state capitalism, with the state as the new national capitalist exploiter.

However, Malcolm X had no experience with revolutionary anarchists who might have raised an antistatist sort of socialism. Also, the level of struggle among White workers, in the U.S. or even Europe was fairly low at the time. Malcolm X could see that White students were capable of opposing the state and racism, but it was

"field Negro," who was forced to work in the fields, was beaten by the overseers, and had little love for the masters. Today, this meant a split between the middle class "black bourgeoisie," with its integrationist goals and nonviolent methods, and the militant, alienated, poorer, working class Blacks. Malcolm X claimed to be one with the "field Negroes" of his day.

He was able to express his ideas in a plain, direct, fashion, that did not talk down to his people but could explain difficult, unpopular, ideas in a clear way. Unlike many would-be radicals, who hide their full views from the workers, he said what he believed, despite its unpopularity, telling the truth to Black working people. "I know you don't like what I'm saying, but I'm going to tell you anyway" (p. 16).

Such an approach implied an aggressive, militant, strategy against African-American oppression. Yet his first organization, the Nation of Islam, held him back. His leader, Elijah Muhammad, was happy to be the head of his own little religion (his peculiar version of Islam), living well off his members' offerings and having a harem of "secretaries." He taught that Whites were (literally) non-human "devils," and that Blacks should wait passively for God to save them. While his "Muslims" talked tough, they really did very little to help African-Americans. Meanwhile the nonviolent integrationists, whatever their faults, were leading mass demonstrations and illegal campaigns ("civil disobedience"). Malcolm X was unhappy about this, but his boss limited Malcolm X's political activism and eventually expelled him from the Nation.

After this, Malcolm X came to reject his opinion of European-Americans as a solid racist bloc which could not be split apart. This change is often ascribed to Malcolm X's visit to Mecca and his learning orthodox (Sunni) Islam. This view is presented in The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965), edited by the moderate Alex Haley. No doubt there is truth in this view. But Malcolm also ascribed his abandonment of racial thinking to his international contacts with

revolutionaries (not Muslim theologicans). These influenced him to abandon Black Nationalism altogether as a political philosophy.

"When I was in Africa in May [1964], in Ghana, I was speaking with the Algerian ambassador who is extremely militant and who is a revolutionary in the true sense of the word (…having carried on a successful revolution against oppression in his country). When I told him that my political, social, and economic philosophy was black nationalism, he asked me very frankly, well, where did that leave him? Because he was white. He was an African, but he was Algerian, and to all appearances he was a white man. And he said, if I define my objective as the victory of black nationalism…where does that leave revolutionaries in Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, Mauritania? So he showed me where I was alienating people who were true revolutionaries….

"So, I had to do a lot of thinking…. Can we sum up the solution to the problems confronting our people as black nationalism? And if you notice, I haven't been using the expression for several months. But I still would be hard pressed to give a specific definition of the overall philosophy which I think is necessary for the liberation of the black people in this country" (1966; pp. 212—213).

In his last year, Malcolm X gave up his racist conception of Whites, saying that he was willing to work together with Whites of good will. Asked, "But you no longer believe in a black state?" he responded, "No. I believe in a society in which people can live like human beings on the basis of equality" (p. 197). Nor was he, in principle, against all multi-racial organizations. He gave up his opposition to racial intermarriage. He separated his religious organization (the Muslim Mosque Inc.) from his political organization (the Organization of Afro-American Unity). "Our religion is Islam but we don't mix our religion with our politics and our economics and our social and civil activities—not any more" (p. 38). He declared his willingness to cooperate with Martin Luther King, Jr. and other integrationists, without changing his own views. Malcolm X noted that it was the fear of Black rebellions

("riots") and of "extremism" as represented by himself which made the White power structure willing to compromise with moderates such as King.

"I believe 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…but I don't think that it will be based upon the color of the skin, as Elijah Muhammad had taught it" (p. 216).

None of this changed Malcolm X's belief in the importance of African-American self-organization, separate political organizations, rifle clubs, and independence of the two-party system. He continued to have a cultural and political identification with Africa and with the international revolution. He ceased being a "nationalist" but he did not become an "integrationist" (in the sense of being a liberal who wanted African-Americans to completely assimilate into White America). Like C. L. R. James before him, he rejected both nationalism and integrationism. African-American self-organization, yes; creating a new African-American capitalist state, no. The fight for equal rights for African-Americans, yes; assimilation into White capitalist society, no.

Liberal Black leaders looked to an alliance with the Democratic Party, particularly with presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Malcolm X despised the electoralism of the liberals and their bootlicking of the White politicians. During the 1964 U.S.presidential election, the Democrat Johnson was opposed by the far-right-wing Republican, Goldwalter, and the liberals, reform socialists, and Communists went all out for Johnson. Black leaders called off civil rights demonstrations, so as not to hurt Johnson among Whites. Malcolm X had a different response. He declared,

"It isn't a president who can help or hurt. It is the system. And this system is not only ruling us in America, it is ruling the world.…If Johnson had been running all by himself, he would not have been acceptable to anyone The only thing that made him