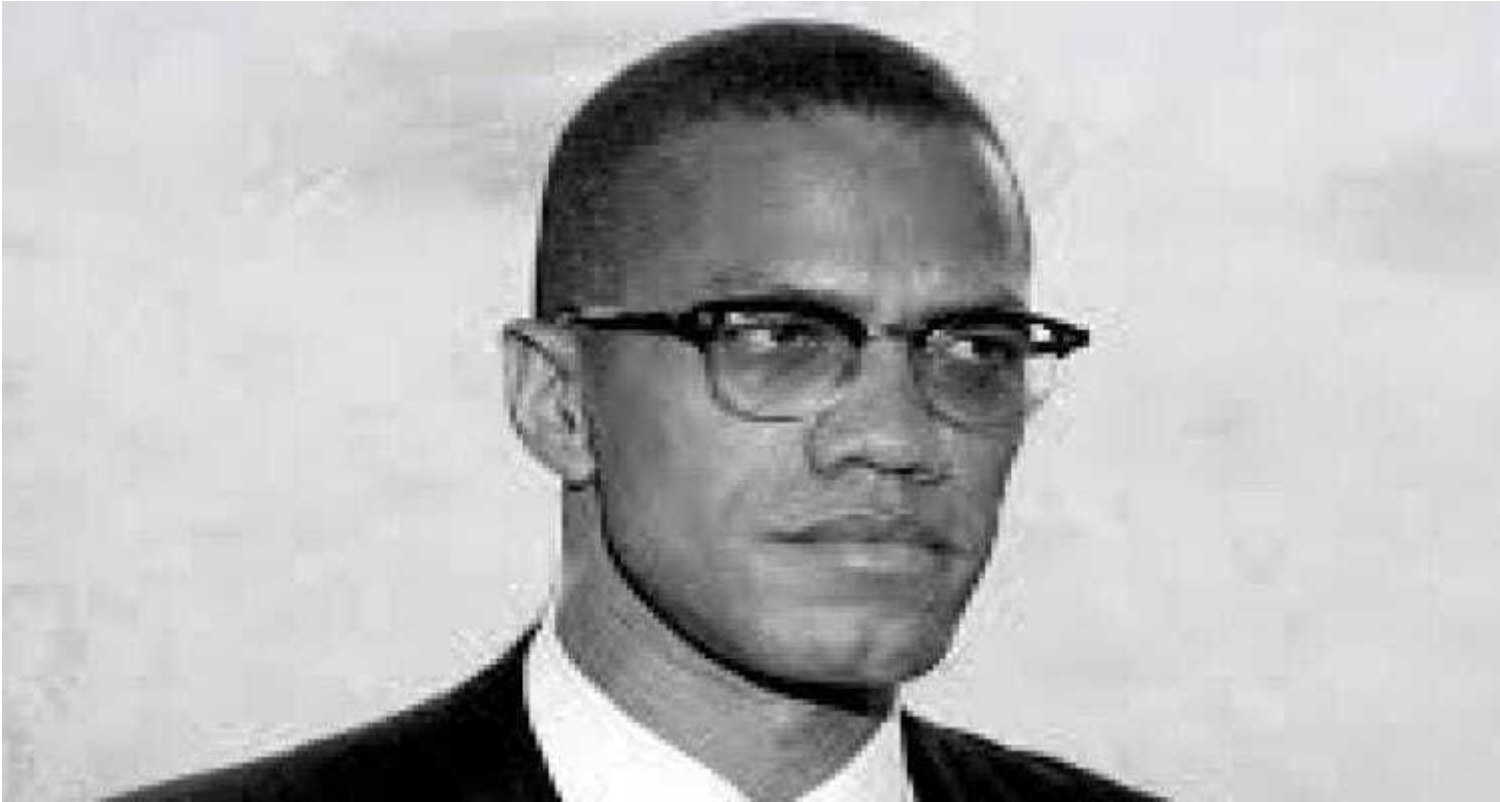# *The legacy of Malcolm X*

The legacy of Malcolm X

By Charles McKelvey

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The sustained protests in the United States against police violence toward the black population has impacted the entire world, and there have been many expressions of solidarity with the black community. In Cuba, the government, the press, and research centers have been for years careful observers of the United States, with a perspective of solidarity with the black movement and with popular movements of the Left. In accordance with this historic tendency, in the context of the protests in the United States, Cuban television rebroadcast on Friday the film, Malcolm X.

The award winning 1992 movie, directed by Spike Lee and starring Danzel Washington as Malcolm, begins with direct quotes from Malcolm's speeches. Malcolm declares, "I accuse the white man of being the greatest murderer on earth." "I am not an American," he says. "We have not experienced American democracy, only American hypocrisy." The film soon turns to reenactment of Malcolm's autobiographical account of the Klan murdering his father.

The film treats with accuracy the major turns in Malcolm's life: his youth life of crime and drugs; his conversion to the Nation of Islam in prison; his rapid rise in the Nation of Islam, on the basis of his exceptional capacity to find a discourse that struck a responsive chord among black folk in the urban

North, a discourse that was both political and spiritual, and that was for the most part carried out in the street or in small rented public halls; his breaking with the Nation of Islam, and his subsequent travel to Mecca, which led him to declare that he no longer believes that all whites are evil; and the events leading to his assassination on February 21, 1965. In its reenactment of Malcolm's speeches, the film also accurately presents fundamental principles that Malcolm formulated, including: black ownership of the businesses of the black community; black control of the institutions of the black community; and the need to overcome economic, cultural, and political colonialism in the United States and the world.

Beyond Spike Lee's film, a deeper understanding of Malcolm's understanding can be found in his autobiography as well as in a collection of his speeches, edited by John Henrik Clarke and published in 1969. Those committed to social justice ought to study these texts, so that Malcolm's legacy will be present among us today.

As a young man, Malcolm lived a life of crime and drug addition, guided by materialistic and individualistic values, in Boston and Harlem. He seems to have chosen this life as a consequence of his consciousness of the hypocrisy of white society, which had brutally murdered his father with impunity, had broken up his family, had place his mother in a mental institution, and had offered him limited opportunities for education and employment, even as it recognized his intelligence and capacities. In sharp contrast, the Nation of Islam provided Malcolm with social support for a disciplined and spiritual life, and for the possibility to develop his considerable leadership talents. The Nation also provided an alternative narrative on the United States and human history. The Nation of Islam was Malcolm's emancipation from a depraved life.

As Malcolm matured in understanding and political experience, the Nation of Islam itself began to shackle his evolution. The extent to which his intellectual and political development had been constrained became clear following his break with the Nation of Islam, which he had not initiated. The undesired and unanticipated break freed him to rethink a number of issues, at a time in which the nation was compelled by international events to adjust its domestic policy toward race and foreign policy with respect to the Third World. His break with the Nation of Islam was the foundation for his second emancipation.

The Nation of Islam, at that time, departed from orthodox doctrines of Islam. It taught that all whites were evil, and that blacks should live separately from whites. It embraced the unrealistic political proposal that blacks be conceded land in the national territory of the United States, where they would have self-government and independence.

Once freed from the need to internalize this conceptualization, Malcolm was able to reflect more fully on the possible relations between the black community and U.S. society. In numerous speeches in the last year of his life, he emphasized black nationalism, which he defined as black control of economic, cultural, political, and all institutions of the black community. He viewed black community control not only as fundamental for economic development, but also as providing a context for overcoming cultural colonialism. He saw Islam as important in this regard, because it taught discipline, self-control, and self-respect.

He also was able to reimagine the relation of the U.S. black community to the world. During his second visit to Africa, he addressed the Organization of African Unity and met with heads of African states, seeking support for an African-American demand before the United Nations, accusing the United States of human rights violations. With deepened international consciousness, Malcolm emphasized the solidarity and spiritual connectedness of Afro-descendants with African peoples and nations. And he discerned a common international struggle by all the world's peoples of color against white colonialism in all of its forms.

In his rapid political maturation following his break with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm had evolved toward a mature black nationalism, seeking to promote the autonomous economic and cultural development of the black community. He envisioned an autonomous black community able to draw upon its own spiritual resources to overcome the sins of crime, drug addiction, alcoholism, and materialist individualism, which

the white man had seeded in order to destroy the soul of the black community. Such an autonomous black community would necessarily have relations with the larger white society.

At the same time, in his last months, Malcolm expressed willingness to work with civil rights leaders that he had previously criticized in strong terms, and also to work with sectors of white society, insofar as they respected the black nationalist principle of black control of the institutions of the black community. His political evolution in the last year of his life established the basis for him to play an important leadership role in the African-American community, precisely at a time in which the nation and the world were moving toward a historic moment of social and political confrontation. He was 39 years of age when he was taken from us, and the consequences of that loss remain with us.

The black nationalist frame of reference formulated by Malcolm is fundamentally different from an anti-racist frame of reference. The black nationalism of Malcolm is the foundation for a comprehensive plan for community development and for an anti-imperialist foreign policy. In contrast, an anti-racist frame focuses on the persistence of racism in white society, and its tendency to lead to violence against blacks. The anti-racist frame is unidimensional, leaving aside the colonial context of the development of racist ideology, as well as the multifaceted anti-systemic movements forged by the colonized. Moreover, anti-racist discourse is often heard by whites as an accusation, thus provoking uncertainty, defensiveness, and resentment. In contrast, the black nationalism of Malcolm would make sense to many whites, because the notion of an oppressed people that wants to control its own community and destiny and to have relations with its continent of origin is consistent with their own experiences and struggles.

What is disseminated throughout the world in the context of the current protests is the analytically weak, less politically effective, and divisive anti-racist frame. Why? Because the anti-racist frame is in the interests of the U.S. power elite. Anti-racism diverts attention away from the principle of the full protection of the social and economic rights for all. Even when the anti-racism frame speaks of social and economic rights, it does not proclaim their universality; even less does it proclaim that blacks and whites should unify to attain universal social and economic rights. Nor does anti-racism focus on U.S. imperialist policies and the necessity in today's world of respecting the rights of the nations of the world. An anti-racist frame of reference is adaptable to the neocolonial world order and U.S. hegemony.

Although the anti-racist demands are what we hear outside the United States these days, there surely must be black nationalist voices in the black community. It cannot be that the legacy of Malcolm has been lost. Perhaps it is a question of others voices, speaking beyond an anti-racist frame, coming to the fore.

Sources

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