Malcolm X and the revival of Black nationalism

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Abstract:

The revival of Black nationalism has caused an answering renewal of attention on Malcolm X and his fight against injustice to the Black community. Malcolm, along with Martin Luther King, Jr., serve as guides and examples in the pursuit of Black liberation.

Full Text:

The cultural rebirth of Malcolm X is the remarkable result of complex forces converging to lift him from his violent death in 1964. Malcolm's championing of the common Black person, and his crusade against the vicious stereotypes that have for centuries crippled Black communities, have won him a new generation of admirers. Indeed, a large part of the cultural crisis that has precipitated Malcolm's mythic return is rooted in an ongoing quest in Black America: the search for a secure and empowering racial identity.

That quest is perennially frustrated by the demands of our culture to cleanse ethnic and racial particularity at the altar of a superior American identity, substituting the terms of one strain of nationalism for the priorities of another. By this common ritual of national identity, for instance, the Irish, Poles, Italians, and Jews have been absorbed into a universal image of common citizenship. But the transformation of Black cultural identity is often poorly served by this process, impeded as much by the external pressures of racism and class prejudice, as by internal racial resistance to an "inclusion" that would rob Blacks of whatever power and privilege they enjoy in their own domains.

Malcolm's reborn appeal is also linked to the resurgence of Black nationalism over the last two decades. Gusts of racial pride sweep across Black America as scholars retrieve the lost treasures of an unjustly degraded African past, continuing a project of racial reclamation begun in earnest in the 1960s but recast to fit the needs of end-of-the-century utopian nationalists, ranging from followers of Leonard Jeffries to what Huey Newton termed "pork-chop nationalists." The Afrocentric movement has quickened the debate about multicultural education and cast a searching light upon the intellectual blindesses and racist claims of Eurocentric scholars, even as it avoids acknowledging the romantic features of its own household. Malcolm's unabashed love for Black history, his relentless pedagogy of racial redemption through cultural consciousness and racial self-awareness, mesh effortlessly with Black Americans' recovery of their African roots.

Malcolm's take-no-prisoners approach to racial crisis appeals to young Blacks disaffected from white society and alienated from older Black generations whose contained style of revolt owes more to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent philosophy than to X's advocacy of self-defense. Rap music has adopted Malcolm's militant posture, while exaggerating to shrill effect the already disturbing machismo and misogyny that laced his early rhetoric. Malcolm's articulation of Black rage—which, by his own confession, tapped a vulnerability even in Martin Luther King, Jr.--is the centerpiece of much of rap rhetoric, replacing a concrete politics aimed at renewing the conditions of social and moral decadence it graphically portrays. Ironically, the venting of anger, while cathartic and at moments even healthy, ultimately betrays the monumental task of supplying strategic alternatives to the unstinting suffering of aggrieved Blacks.

If the reemergence of Black nationalism and Malcolm's explosive popularity go hand in hand--are parallel responses to the continuing plague of an equally rejuvenated racism--then not only their strengths, but their limitations as well are mutually revealing. For example, Malcolm's brand of Black
nationalism was not only a fierce attack on white Americans, but a sharp rebuke as well to Black women. A product of his times, Malcolm went to extremes in demonizing women, saying that the "closest thing to a woman is a devil."

Although he later amended his beliefs, confessing his regret at "spitting acid at the sisters" and contending that they should be treated equally, Malcolm's Black nationalist heirs have failed to take his reformed position on gender seriously. Like the early Malcolm and other sixties nationalists, contemporary Black nationalists have cast the pursuit of racial liberation in terms of a quest for masculine self-realization. Such a strategy not only borrows ideological capital from the white patriarchy that has historically demeaned Black America, but it blunts awareness of how the practice of patriarchy by Black men has created another class of victims within Black communities.

Further, the strategy of viewing racial oppression exclusively through a male lens distorts the suffering of Black women at the hands of white society and loses focus on the especially difficult choices that befall Black women caught in a sometimes bewildering nexus of relationships based on race, class, and gender. Reducing Black suffering to its lowest common male denominator not only presumes a hierarchy of pain that removes priority from the Black female struggle; it also trivializes the analysis and actions of Black women in the realization of Black liberation. Malcolm's heirs ignored the virtues of his later, enlightened attitudes toward gender.

The cultural renaissance of Malcolm X also embodies the paradoxical nature of Black nationalist politics over the past two decades: Those most aided by its successes have rarely stuck around to witness the misery of those most hurt by its failures. The truth is that Black nationalist rhetoric has helped an expanding Black middle class gain increased material comfort, while Black nationalism's most desperate constituency--the working class and working poor--continue to toil in the aftermath of nationalism's unrealized political promise. Talk of Black cultural solidarity and racial loyalty has propelled the careers of intellectuals, artists, and politicians as they seek access to institutions of power and ranks of privilege as esteemed vox populi. Yet the irony is that the perks and rewards of success insulate them from the misery of their constituencies, cutting them off from the very people on whose behalf they claim to speak.

The greatest irony of contemporary Black nationalism may be its use by members of the Black middle class to consolidate their class interests at the expense of working and poor Blacks. By refusing to take class seriously--or only half-heartedly as they decry, without irony, the moves of a self-serving Black bourgeoisie!--many nationalists discard a crucial analytical tool for exploring the causes of Black racial and economic suffering.

This is not to say that nationalism's vaunted alternative, bourgeois liberal integrationism, has enjoyed wide success, either, in bringing the Black masses within striking distance of prosperity, or at least to parity with white middle and working classes. Commentators usually gloss over this fact when comparing the legacies of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. For the most part, Malcolm and Martin have come to symbolize the parting of paths in Black America over the best answer to racial domination. While Malcolm's strident rhetoric is keyed in by nationalists at the appropriate moments of Black disgust with the pace and point of integration, King's conciliatory gestures are evoked by integrationists as the standard of striving for the promised land of racial harmony and economic equity.

In truth, however, King's admirers have also forsaken the bitter lessons of his mature career in deference to the soaring optimism of his dream years. King discerned as early as 1965 that the fundamental problems of Black America were economic in nature, and that a shift in strategies was necessary for the civil rights movement to become a movement for economic equality. After witnessing wasted human capital in the slums of Watts and Chicago, and after touring the rural wreckage of life in Mississippi's deep Delta, King became convinced that the only solution to Black suffering was to understand it in relation to a capitalist economy that hurt all poor people. He determined that nothing short of a wholesale criticism and overhaul of existing economic arrangements could effectively remedy the predicament of the Black poor and working class.
This is a far cry from contemporary Black capitalist and business strategies that attempt to address the economic plight of Black Americans by creating more Black millionaires. Highly paid entertainers and athletes participate in the lucrative culture of consumption by selling their talents to the highest bidder in the marketplace—a legacy, we are often reminded, of King’s, and the civil rights movement’s, vision of a just society where social goods are distributed according to merit, not color. King’s willingness, toward the end of his life, to question the legitimacy of the present economic order and to challenge the logic of capital has been obscured by appeals to his early beliefs about the virtues of integration.

The relative failure of both Black nationalist and integrationist strategies to affect large numbers of Black Americans beyond the middle and upper class raises questions about how progressives can expand Malcolm's and Martin's legacies to address the present crises in Black America. Black progressive intellectuals and activists must view class, gender, and sex as crucial components of a complex and sophisticated explanation of the problems of Black America. There are at least two advantages to such an approach. First, it provides a larger range of social and cultural variables from which to choose in depicting the vast array of forces that constrain Black economic, political, and social progress. Second, it acknowledges the radical diversity of experiences within Black communities, offering a more realistic possibility of addressing the particular needs of a wide range of Blacks: the ghetto poor, gays and lesbians, single Black females, working mothers, underemployed Black men, and elderly Blacks, for instance.

Black progressives must also deepen Malcolm's and Martin's criticisms of capitalism and their leanings toward democratic socialism. The prevailing economic policies have contributed to the persistent poverty of the poorest Americans (including great numbers of Blacks), and the relative inability of most Americans to reap the real rewards of political democracy and economic empowerment. A democratic socialist perspective raises questions about the accountability of the disproportionately wealthy, providing a critical platform for criticizing Black capitalist and business strategies that merely replicate unjust economic practices.

A democratic socialist perspective—which criticizes capital accumulation and the maximization of profit for the few without regard to its effects on the many; which advocates an equitable redistribution of wealth through progressive taxation and the increased financial responsibility of the truly wealthy; and which promotes the restructuring of social opportunities for the neediest through public policy and direct political intervention—also encourages the adoption of political and social policies that benefit all Americans, while addressing the specific needs of Blacks, such as universal health care. Presently, Black Americans are overwhelmingly represented among the 37 million uninsured in our nation. A democratic socialist perspective asks why a nation that pays over $820 billion, or 13 percent of the G.N.P. for the well-insured cannot redistribute its wealth through a progressive tax of the wealthiest two percent (and a fair tax on the top 50 percent) of our country to help provide the $50 or $60 billion more needed to provide universal health coverage.

The quest for Black racial and economic justice has been heavily influenced by Black religious conceptions of justice, charity, equality, and freedom. During the civil rights movement, King articulated Black Christian conceptions of justice through the language of human rights and the political language of civil religion. Likewise, Malcolm X expressed his conceptions of divine retribution for racial injustice and the religious basis for healthy Black self-esteem through Black Islamic, and subsequently, orthodox Islamic belief that accorded with Black secular ideas about racial self-determination and cultural pride. A democratic socialist perspective encourages the broad expression of conceptions of justice, equality, and political freedom that are tempered by regard for the widest possible audience of intellectual interlocutors and political participants, including those trained in the rich traditions of Black social protest.

Finally, Black progressives must make sensible but forceful criticisms of narrow visions of Black racial identity, especially after the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill debacle. That wrenching drama provided a glimpse of the underdeveloped state of gender analysis in most Black communities and provoked a
serious reconsideration of the politics of racial unity and loyalty. In reflecting on Clarence Thomas’s nomination to the Supreme Court, Black Americans were torn between fidelity to principles of fairness and justice, on the one hand, whether Thomas was qualified for the nomination and devotion to race on the other, whether Blacks should support one of their own, despite his opposition to many of the legal principles cherished by Black communities.

The introduction of Anita Hill’s perspective into this already complex calculus ripped open ancient antagonisms between Black women and men. In a public and painful manner, the hearings forced many Black Americans to a new awareness of the need to place principles of justice above automatic appeals to race loyalty premised exclusively on skin color. Many Americans, including many Blacks, came to a clearer understanding of the social construction of racial identity, recognizing that Black folk are by no means a homogeneous group. The differences that factors such as geography, sexual preference, gender, and class make in the lives of Black Americans are too complex to be captured in a monolithic model of racial unity. Progressive Blacks share more ideological and political ground with a white progressive such as Barbara Ehrenreich, for instance, than they do with conservatives of the ilk of Clarence Thomas, or even Anita Hill.

For Black leaders, the political and social significance of this fact should be the building of bridges across the chasm of color in the common embrace of ideals that transcend racial rooting. Progressive Blacks must join with progressive Latinas and Latinos, gays and lesbians, feminists, environmental activists, and all others who profess and practice personal and social equality and democracy.

The absence of sustained progressive Black political opposition, or even a radical political organization that expresses the views of the working class and working poor, signals a loss of political courage and nerve in the United States that characterized Malcolm and Martin at their best. The nature and history of the remembrance of these two figures is also instructive about the character of political leadership in our own times. That two dead leaders are the twin pillars of contemporary Black culture, and the continuing object of its most passionate declarations of admiration, trust, and hope--serving not as signs but substitutes for present Black leaders, who often lack (as do their white counterparts) integrity and a will to sacrifice--reveals the crisis of purpose and vision among contemporary Black leaders.

In the end, Malcolm and Martin are in varying degrees captives of their true believers, trapped by literal interpreters who refuse to let them, in Malcolm's words, “turn the corner.” The bulk of each man's achievements lay in his willingness to place truth over habit in the quest for the best route to social reconstruction and racial redemption. Their legacy to us is the imagination and energy to pursue the goals of liberation upon as wide a scale as the complex nature of our contemporary crises demand and our talents allow.

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