

PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION

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Spike Lee vs. Malcolm X

by Dave Franklin

Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* adds a commercial exclamation point to the rapid growth of interest, particularly among Black youth, in one of the greatest fighters for Black liberation. As popular entertainment it is a measured success. As an indictment of racism it is powerful. But as an intended tribute to one of the most heroic and tragic figures in American history, it is a failure. And as a guide for Black people in their struggle against racist bestiality, it is nothing less than a disaster.

In terms of its length, scope, commercial resources — and most unfortunately, its content — *Malcolm X* can be accurately described as a Hollywood spectacle. As such, it hangs together reasonably well, maintaining keen interest for the most part, but with the typical lapses and doses of overly drawn-out scenes. Its success is achieved largely through some stunning acting performances, above all that of Denzel Washington in the incredibly challenging lead role.

But for all the cinematic talent, the real Malcolm X is never allowed to appear. As Marxists we are the last ones to demand dogmatically that art conform to a political line. But knowing who Malcolm was, it is impossible to portray his life without an authentic conception of what he stood for politically and socially.

Malcolm played a crucial, challenging role in the unfolding Black upheavals of his times. With good reason, more and more Blacks looked to him for leadership as the struggle deepened. Martin Luther King Jr. was weighed down in futile efforts to tap the conscience of the powers-that-be in capitalist America. The struggle was also exposing the social impotence of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam (NOI), whose separatism at first appeared to be an alternative.

Malcolm's evolving thought and conduct not only reflected the gains of the ongoing struggle but also seemed to be blazing a new path. His profound wrestling with the limitations and contradictions of the anti-racist movement toward the end of his life resonated throughout the community. But Spike Lee, because he attempts to reconstruct Malcolm X as a particular kind of role model for Blacks today, has in fact created a caricature of the mass struggles of the past.

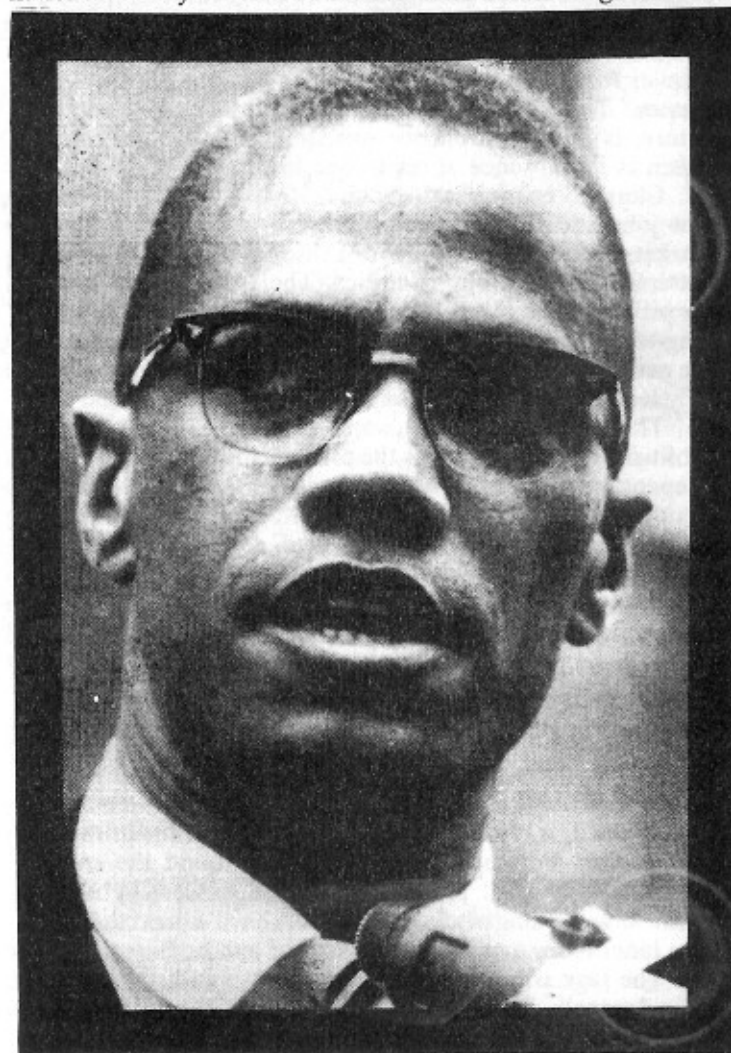
A BLACK HORATIO ALGER

It was no accident that in February of this year, Lee showed up at New York's Rikers Island prison, film in hand and a jacket with a big X done up in stars and stripes on his back. Lee's message was simple: Malcolm was once a prisoner too; he too was once a victim of poverty and racism; by dint of his personal character, he persevered and rose to become a Great Man. You can too.

Malcolm X imparts the view that the lessons of its hero's life can be applied to living within this society, not to overcoming it. Self-reliance, picking oneself up by one's bootstraps, morality — these are the conclusions to be drawn, and no hint of an alternative is provided. It is no wonder that

even open conservatives like the *Wall Street Journal* and Clarence Thomas (can you imagine what Malcolm would have said of him!) liked the movie.

The film is a Horatio Alger tale with a Black twist. Alger's stories were propaganda yarns designed to sell the nations' white youth on the American Dream. He gloried in



social mobility: luck, pluck and hard work would pave the way for the deserving poor to rise high in the world. Of course, the dream was a myth for the multitude of white youth. For Blacks today it is an absolute mirage.

Lee's movie dulls the cutting edge of Malcolm X's life and message. There is no question that Black youth identify with Malcolm's rage against, and alienation from, the dominant racist society. But it is interesting that Black youth have not flocked to the film in the numbers expected.

One likely reason for this is that many see the film as yet

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another "role model" sermon of the "get your shit together and you can make it" variety. The reality of life today makes more and more Black youth understand America better than Spike Lee does. They won't find the way out from Lee, but they could understand the issues and learn some of the important answers by coming to grips with the real Malcolm.

THE MOVEMENT IS MISSING

The Horatio Alger morality play demands that Lee emphasize Malcolm's personal, as opposed to political, struggle against racism. So in a movie which runs chronologically, it makes sense that the early portions outlining Malcolm's childhood, hustling and prison days are strongest. There is less political material here to mangle, while some of the most pungent examples of racism that Malcolm discusses are brought out in sensitive detail: for example, the separating of Malcolm's family by the state, and a racist school teacher's scuttling of Malcolm's desire to be a lawyer.

But despite the high points, the time devoted to Malcolm's early life is excessive. Even the attempt to capture the cultural style and flavor of the times, one of the movie's strongest suits, is taken to annoying extremes. For example, the Roseland scene is undoubtedly meant to capture the feel of lindy-hopping that Malcolm describes. But the extended, choreographed dancing acts more like a Broadway musical, a substitute for the real panorama of everyday Black life and culture that produced Malcolm.

To be most revealing, the early scenes should have been presented as a springboard for the politically decisive years. After all, Malcolm's fame, the reason to even make a movie about him, comes from the growing recognition of the relevance of what he was saying about the social struggle. Instead, the early years are presented as part of Malcolm's dogged personal effort to fight his way upward.

The civil rights struggles and the emerging ghetto rebellions of the 1960's, so important to Malcolm's evolution toward political activism, are minimized. The result is a spectacular treatment, heroic and personalistic, which not only diminishes Malcolm's political role but belittles the monumental deeds of the Black masses.

It is also irritating to watch Lee's doctored material: the made-up bar scene where Malcolm smashes a bottle over a tough-talking dude; Malcolm's conversion to the Nation of Islam by a fellow prisoner, when in reality that was done by his brother Reginald, etc. For the sake of truth and the interest of drama, the real versions would have done fine.

MALCOLM'S POLITICAL EVOLUTION

The movie's latter half, from the growing conflicts within the Nation of Islam to Malcolm's assassination, is a particular letdown. The major events are covered, and snippets of Malcolm's political evolution are offered, but very sketchily. The incredible ferment in his conceptions, his increasing activism and exploring of political relations and the growing social struggles that provided inspiration for these changes are given short shrift. Lee chooses not to switch gears even here; he sticks with his micro-personalistic approach.

It is important to outline Malcolm's political development, especially for those unaware of it even after seeing the movie. As Adolph Reed Jr. pointed out in the *Progressive*,

Perhaps the most striking thing about X is how it slides over the source of Malcolm's prominence as a figure in American life — his running critique of the civil rights movement and its leadership. Lee rushes past the tension, depicting it primarily in a couple of passing, oblique images . . .

Malcolm's activism, his willingness to take on the white authorities, was as responsible as anything else for his split from the Nation of Islam. Yet the film only refers to his reaction to Elijah Muhammad's personal corruption and the jealousies of other ministers.

In life but not in the film, after leaving the NOI, Malcolm revealed his shame over having met with the Ku Klux Klan as Elijah Muhammad's representative; he noted that "from that day onward, the Klan never interfered with the Black Muslim movement in the South." One would think that Lee's hostility to racism would have angered him enough not to pass off a political crime as a personal peccadillo. After all, the logic persists: Louis Farrakhan, head of the NOI today, tried to forge an alliance in 1985 with Tom Metzger, former Klan leader and a prominent Nazi.

In life but not in the film, Malcolm's departure from the NOI opened up a new political vista, a whole period of intense, creative coming to grips with the upheavals going on across the world. Shortly afterwards he made his famous pilgrimage to Mecca and his announcement that whites were not all inherently evil. But this was only one factor in his changing political understanding.

Malcolm became more involved with the issues of the civil rights struggles that the Nation had stayed aloof from. He weighed tactical alliances with civil rights leaders that he would have never considered before. But he remained adamantly opposed to liberalism and condemned the pacifist and pro-Democratic strategy of integrationists like Martin Luther King. He correctly saw the Democratic Party as a deathtrap for Black people because of its pretense of working in the interest of the oppressed.

Spike Lee's rendition is wrong not only in that it minimizes Malcolm's political journey in favor of his personal ascension; not only in that it seeks to confine his message within the limits of bourgeois society rather than in revolutionary opposition to it. It is also wrong because its "role model" approach is closely linked to the implicit message that Blacks should look to a Great Man on Horseback for deliverance. This messianic theme has been one of the banes of the Black struggle historically.

MALCOLM AND CAPITALISM

Nevertheless, Lee's version of Malcolm is not made up out of whole cloth. For much of his adult life, Malcolm was a leader of the Nation of Islam, which rejected political activity in general and revolutionary politics in particular. Malcolm idolized Elijah Muhammad as Allah's Messenger who would deliver Blacks from captivity by white devils.

Our point is that Malcolm clearly strained against these constrictions always, and that he broke with them decisively after his split. Like its ancestors, Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, the NOI advocated a free enterprise outlook: Blacks must pick themselves up by their bootstraps by forming their own businesses and hiring other Blacks. There is no record of Malcolm specifically rejecting this approach, and this lends support to Lee's case. Yet there is considerable evidence that, before his assassination, Malcolm was grappling with the question of the capitalist road in general.

In that period, Malcolm (or El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz,

as he now called himself) refined his opposition to white racism, seeking an institutional rather than a spiritual basis for it. Increasingly he saw its connection to the social system, pointing out that "you can't have capitalism without racism." He wanted to build a political alternative, in his mind a revolutionary one, making clear this wasn't some sort of militant reformism:

I shall tell them what a real revolution means — the French Revolution, the American Revolution, Algeria, to name a few. There can be no revolution without bloodshed, and it is nonsense to describe the civil rights movement as a revolution. It is going to be different now. I'm going to join in the fight wherever Negroes ask for my help, and I suspect my activities will be on a greater and more intensive scale than in the past. (George Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X*, p. 10.)

He began exploring socialism, and observed: It's impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism. . . . And if you find one and you happen to get that person into a conversation and they have a philosophy that makes you sure they don't have their racism in their outlook, usually they're socialists or their political philosophy is socialism. (*Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 69.)



The Lee Lie: star-spangled Spike at New York prison. The real Malcolm refused loyalty to imperialist, racist U.S.

Malcolm saw a profound relationship between struggles in America and abroad. At a speech at the end of 1964 at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem (where he would later be assassinated), he stated:

It is incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a racial conflict of black against white, or as a purely American problem. Rather, we are today seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the

exploited against the exploiter.

In this regard, it was his position that "all of the countries that are emerging today from under the shackles of colonialism are turning toward socialism."

Malcolm maintained almost to the end his belief in Black nationalism. But under the impact of all the changes, he brought even this into question. From a 1965 interview:

So I had to do a lot of thinking and reappraising of my definition of black nationalism. Can we sum up the solution to the problems confronting our people as black nationalism? And if you noticed, 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 black people in this country.

In short, Malcolm was groping towards a revolutionary internationalist and interracialist solution to Black liberation and capitalist misery. But while many pieces of the political puzzle were falling into place, Malcolm had not become a communist revolutionary by the time of his death. Above all, he didn't see the working class as the key to the social struggles, including Black liberation.

We have got to get our problems solved first and then if there's anything left to work on the white man's problems, good, but I think one of the mistakes Negroes make is this worker solidarity thing. There's no such thing — it didn't even work in Russia. (*The Last Year of Malcolm X*, p. 20.)

Malcolm had illusions in African rulers who proclaimed themselves socialist opponents of racist imperialism but who in reality led nations that had never really broken from the imperial world order. He still held unjustified hopes in the capacity of the United Nations to aid the oppressed in the U.S. and abroad. His continued adherence to religion also took its toll: for example, Islam gave him an unfounded hope in the openly reactionary Saudi Arabian regime.

Malcolm wasn't gulled into viewing the USSR or other Stalinist countries as saviors, as did most leftists of the period. Still, he was a product of his times. It is not hard to see why even so perceptive a leader and social critic failed to see workers' solidarity as an answer to capitalism and racism.

By and large, the big working-class leaders in the U.S., the labor officials, were no friends of the Black struggle. Many still discriminated in their own unions, while others, nominally anti-racist, waged no fight against their racist fellow bureaucrats. Those who declared in favor of civil rights were part of the "Negro-Liberal-Labor Alliance" that was a conservative brake on the radicalizing Black struggle. The Black Power current, inspired by Malcolm X, split with the integrationists out of hostile reaction to this alliance.

The union bureaucrats not only failed to fight racism; they were also busy undermining the growing working-class struggles against capitalism's deepening attacks. Thus they stimulated the growth of racism among angry white workers who turned against Blacks as scapegoats for their job and income losses. Given the policies of the working-class misleaders, it is no wonder that Malcolm did not reach a Marxist understanding of the proletariat's potential.

MALCOLM'S MURDER

In ancient Greek drama, the great protagonists were rendered tragic by virtue of some profound contradiction in their personalities. As far as we know, the contradictions that Malcolm wrestled with were social and political, not personal flaws. His murder made him a figure of tragedy — high tragedy, since he was the one major figure whose understanding, direction and rapport with the masses might have led

him to further resolve the contradictions and help overcome the impasse the Black struggle faced.

Lee understates the tragedy of Malcolm's assassination. It is very likely that the U.S. government played a behind-the-scenes role in the killing. But there is no doubt that the NOI, including Farrakhan, whipped up the venom leading to Malcolm's murder — and that Nation members actually pulled the triggers. Yet in Lee's account, Elijah Muhammad and the NOI get off easily; Farrakhan isn't even mentioned.

The main reason behind Lee's interpretation is that Lee himself has an affinity for nationalism; that's why Malcolm's departure from this view is never mentioned. The ostensible goal of Black nationalism is to create a separate nation-state — or at least separate self-ruled communities. But in practice nationalist groups have tried instead to build a separate Black economy based on small businesses. Lee's own life as well as his films reflects his partiality for the more or less separate, identifiably Black business end of "nationalism," as opposed to the ideological goal.

Another reason, closely tied to the first, is that Lee's vision of a unified Black community not only leads him to downplay criticism of the Nation; it extends to the minimization of criticism even of integrationists like King. Where as the film cites Malcolm's perhaps transient embrace of Black enterprise notions, Malcolm's blistering attacks on integrationism and bourgeois lifestyle are ignored. For example:

Only a few thousands of Negroes, relatively a very tiny number, are taking part in "integration." Here, again, it is those few bourgeois Negroes, rushing to throw away their little money in the white man's luxury hotels, his swanky nightclubs, and big, fine exclusive restaurants. (*Autobiography of Malcolm X*, p. 276.)

Of course, Lee, like the nationalists (including the earlier Malcolm X), emphasizes a separate Black economy with a distinct Black bourgeoisie. But in concrete American conditions, such a set-up would at best be an internal dependency of the industrial and financial interests of the imperialist U.S., with the tiny Black bourgeoisie totally subordinate to white capitalism.

Not only could the goals of Black equality and power not be achieved; the road projected by Lee's Horatio X is unreal even for the few Blacks who still imagine they can climb high in bourgeois America. Most Black businessmen still work in white-owned corporations. Most "separate" businesses are

tied to white financiers, suppliers and customers. Even Spike Lee, who has far more leverage than most, exercises his independence more in terms of style than by creating any distinct economic institution.

It is impossible to read or hear Malcolm X's speeches without realizing his genius in popular propaganda and agitation. He took theoretical propositions and abstract truths and, through metaphor and example, made them easily comprehensible to Black working people. He was the opposite of a demagogue: he unmistakably thought it absolutely necessary that the masses themselves understand what conditions were, what lay behind them and what was to be done. More than many self-styled Marxists, he recognized the decisive importance of mass consciousness and action for the liberation struggle.

MALCOLM'S LEGACY

Malcolm's was determined to overcome the contradictions he was fighting his way through, not only for his own clarification, but for the masses' as well. This is the key to his evolution, the reason he had the possibility of transcending the limitations of both nationalism and integrationism.

Indeed, the masses did break out, in contrast to the failures of both variants of middle-class leadership. The ghettos did explode. And only through such revolutionary actions was the capitalist state forced to make concessions never won before.

Today, however, as can be seen ever more graphically, the inability of the ghetto revolts of that era to smash capitalism means that their own accomplishments are being destroyed. If the barriers of the labor bureaucracy on the one hand, and the middle-class wannabes on the other, had been overcome, then the situation would have been decisively different. Such a turn would have needed a developed revolutionary leadership, a proletarian party, leading increasingly conscious masses to a new society.

History has decreed that, as a result of their struggles and their position within the working class and society, Black people will be in the leadership of the future revolutionary workers' party in very large numbers. The greatness of Malcolm X was his potential to spearhead such a development. His tragedy was that this potential was cut short by murder. Yet the lessons he taught still furnish revolutionaries with a legacy on which to build.●