

Manning Marable's Malcolm X book

On Mar 30 I waited for a car that Manning Marable was supposed to send to pick me up at my house so that we could meet later that day in his office at Columbia University because he wanted to interview me as part of an oral history project. I had met with him two weeks before to discuss how Columbia would handle my papers; that is when we scheduled this last project. But the car never came. I called another driver I knew, a friend of mine and we drove to Columbia, but Marable was not there. It seemed no one at the Africana studies department knew where he was. Finally some word got to me that Manning had gone back into the hospital. I went back home, the next day I got the news on the internet that he had died.

The strangeness of that missed appointment was weird enough, but the fact that his last work on Malcolm X was to be released two days later made the whole ending of our living relationship a frustrating incomplete denouement.

Initially, a friend of mine gave me a copy of the book at a happy discount. Taking it on one of my frequent trips out of town, I began to read. I gave that first copy to my wife when I returned because she had also, as many other people had, been clamoring to read it. As well as asking me relentlessly had I read it. I bought another copy of the book at the Chicago airport, and I guess started to get into the book seriously.

I have known Manning for a number of years. Actually I met him while he was still teaching in Colorado. I even worked under him, when I taught briefly at Columbia University, when he was chairman of the Africana Studies Dept. at Columbia. As well, I have appreciated one of his books, the DuBois ("Black Radical Democrat") work and at least appreciated the theme of "How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America", as well as the entire stance of his acknowledgement of the important aspects of American (Black American) history which had to be grasped.

But as recently as a few weeks ago, ironically I had written him a letter about his journal Souls about an essay that quoted a man* who had been accused of participating in the assassination, making some demeaning remarks about Malcolm. My letter questioned the "intelligence" of including the quote since it offered nothing significant to the piece. This was not just loose criticism; I really wanted to know just what purpose the inclusion served. (*This man Thomas 15X is the same one quoted by Marable as saying that it was the Nation of Islam that burned Malcolm's house down.)

But with the publication of what some have called "his magnum opus" "Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention" It is not just Marable's inclusion of tidbits of presumed sexual scandal that should interest readers, that I question, but more fundamentally, what was the consciousness that created this work?

First of all I don't think we can just bull's-eye the writer's intentions, we must include Marable's consciousness as the overall shaper of his intentions, as well as his method. Originally from Ohio, Marable was a freshman in college in 1969; he did not graduate until 1971. He has been attached to Academic institutions since 1974, Smith, Tuskegee, Univ. of San Francisco, Cornell, Colgate, Purdue, Ohio State, University of Colorado, Columbia. It is no denigration of his life to say that Manning was an academic, a well principled one, but an academic nevertheless.

But Marable did have a political aspect to his life, which I understood and why I think he was a very principled academic. He did understand that the "purely" academic was fabrication of the essentially unengaged. That whatever you might do, there was a conscious political stance that your political consciousness had to assume, even if you refused to take it. So his "membership" in the 1970's National Political Assembly chaired by Richard Hatcher, Mayor of Gary, Indiana, Rep Charles Diggs, the congressman from Detroit and myself as chairman of the Congress of African Peoples, signified that he was aware and a partisan of that attempt to raise and institutionalize Black political consciousness as a way to organize Black people nationally to struggle for Black political power.

In 1974 Marable joined the Democratic Socialists of America, and for a time was even a Vice Chairman of that organization which is called "Left" but is not a Marxist and certainly not a Marxist-Leninist organization. It is one of those organizations like the group that split from Lenin's 2nd International which he called socialists in word but chauvinists in reality. So that it is important that we recognize the specific political base upon which Manning's "observations" may be judged. He is not simply "observing". He is making judgments.

So that, for instance, for Marable to consistently, throughout his book, call the Nation of Islam a "sect"; is a judgment not an observation. The NOI certainly has and had more influence on society than DSA, certainly on Black people. The meaning as a small breakaway group of a religious order only used now to connote a "jocular or illiterate" character (according to the

OULD) is spurious. But then in relationship to revolutionary Marxism or Marxism -Leninism, DSA certainly fits the description.

My point being that Marable must be judged by what he says not by what others say he "intended". The best thing about the book, of course, is that it raises Malcolm X to the height of our conversation again, and this is a very good thing in this Obama election period. (Post racial it ain't!)

The very profile of Malcolm's life, the outline of his life of struggle needs to be spread across the world again, if only to re-awaken the fiercest "blackness" in us to fight this newly packaged "same ol' same ol' emergence of white supremacy and racism.

Whatever Marable is saying or pointing out, in the end, is to convince us of the superiority of social democracy which he refers to as "the Left", which is anything from DSA to the Trotskyists. The characterization of Bayard Rustin's "superior" reasoning in a debate with Malcolm or the response of James Farmer to Malcolm's bringing a "body guard" to Farmer's house, "Do you think I want to kill you?" tries to render Malcolm some paranoid case when indeed there were people plotting very actively to kill him.

Ultimately, it is Marable's own political line that renders the book weakened by his consistent attempts to "reduce" Malcolm's **known** qualities and status with many largely unsubstantiated injections, many described by Marable himself as "rumors". Is there, for instance, any real evidence of Malcolm's or Betty's sexual trysts. People who knew Charles Kenyatta, for example, in Harlem, will quickly recall a vainglorious fool & liar. Could much of this rumor material actually have come from Marable's "official" sources, the FBI, CIA, BOSS, NYPD, as well as those in the NOI who hated him. About Malcolm, a sentence like Marable's "That evening Sharon 6X may have joined him in his hotel" is inexcusable.

When I wrote the FBI asking them to release surveillance materials they had gathered on me, at first the director even denied such papers existed. It was Allen Ginsberg's lawyer that finally got an admission that such papers existed, and that I could get them for ten cents a page. But when I got the papers, it was my wife, Amina, who said how do we know that the information they haven't crossed out is stuff they want us to see and so confuse us about what was really going on.

I would submit that is exactly what those agencies would do in this case! To assume because you are given "access" to certain information, that

that information is not "cooked", as people around law enforcement say, is to labor in deep naiveté as to whom you are dealing with!

Marable never made any pretensions about being a "revolutionary". His hookup with the DSA is open acknowledgment that he rejected Lenin's prescription for a revolutionary organization, or party of the advanced, or such concepts as "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat". In fact the DSA says they are not a party, aligning themselves very clearly with Lenin's opponents in the 2nd International.

Such people, social democrats, are open opponents of revolution, so that at base Marable was opposed to the political logic of Malcolm's efforts to make revolution. Marable is even more dismissive of the Nation of Islam which he brands a "cult" a "sect" dismissing the fact that even as a religious organization, the NOI had a distinct political message, and that it was this message, I think, more than the direct attraction of Islam, that drew the thousands to it.

If Marable was giving a deeper understanding of Elijah Muhammad's call for Five States in the south, he would have mentioned the relationship of this concept to Lenin's formulation of an **Afro American Nation** in the *black belt* south (called that because that is the largest single concentration of Afro Americans in the US). It was not simply some Negro fantasy.

If Marable actually understood the political legitimacy of Malcolm's Black Nationalism and how Malcolm's constant exposure to the revolutionary aspects of the Civil Rights movement and the more militant Black Liberation Movement shaped his thinking and made his whole presentation more overtly political and that this was not only negative to the core of the NOI bureaucracy but certainly to the FBI, &c. They have even written Malcolm X was much safer to them in the Nation than as a loose cannon roaming the planet outside of it. They understood that what Malcolm was saying, even in *The Ballot or the Bullet* was dangerous stuff. That his admission that all white people might not be the Devil was not morphing into a Dr. King replica but an understanding, as he said at Oxford University, that when Black people made their revolution there would be some white people joining them.

The meeting with the Klan was not Malcolm's idea, certainly it was Elijah Muhammad's as it had been Marcus Garvey's idea before him. Malcolm's Black Nationalism became more deliberately a Revolutionary Nationalism, such as Mao Tse Tsung (or Cabral or Nkrumah) spoke of,

necessary to rally the nation's forces together to make 1st a national revolution to overthrow foreign domination and followed by a revolution to destroy capitalism.

Importantly, Marable does draw a clearer picture of Malcolm's childhood and early days, especially indicating the Garvey influence his parents taught him and how that would make him open to what Elijah Muhammad taught; unlike the obscure flashbacks of Spike Lee's version of Malcolm's early days. Though Marable ascribes some wholly political "defiance" to the conked hair and zoot suits of the 40's rather than understanding that there was also a deep organic cultural expression that is always evident in Black life. It is not just a formal reaction to white society. African pants are similarly draped. Access to straightening combs or conkolene are a product of the period, and certainly if any straight hair is gonna be imitated, there was some here before the Latinos.

The "antibourgeois" attitude of the Black youth culture is organic and an expression of the gestalt of black life in the US and Marable seems not to wholly understand it. For instance; his take on BeBop as the music of "the hepcats (sic) who broke mostly sharply from swing, developing a black oriented sound at the margins of musical taste and commercialism". BeBop was a revolutionary music, dismissing Tin Pan Alley commercialism and raising the blues and improvisation again as principal to black music.

The essential "disconnection " in the book is Marable's failure to understand the revolutionary aspects of Black Nationalism, as a struggle for " Self Determination, Self Respect and Self Defense". A struggle for equal democratic rights expressed on the sidewalks of an oppressor nation by an oppressed Afro American nationality.

What the book does is try to remove Malcolm from the context and character of an Afro American revolutionary and "make him more human", by dismantling that portrait by redrawing him with the rumors, assumptions, speculations, questionable guesses and the intentionally twisted seeing of the state and his enemies.

Was Captain Joseph (who later changed his name to Yusuf Shah) close to Malcolm? He appeared on television calling Malcolm "Benedict Arnold" and told Spike Lee that I had come up to the Mosque and stood up to question Malcolm and Malcolm told me to "sit down until you get rid of that white woman". I met Malcolm only once, the month before he was murdered. This was in Muhammad Babu's room at the Waldorf Astoria. Babu had just finished leading the revolution in Zanzibar, and would later become

Minister of Economics for Tanzania(which was Zanzibar and Tanganyika).

At that meeting Malcolm responded to my demeaning of the NAACP by saying I should be trying, instead, to join the NAACP, to make a point about Black people needing a "United Front". That idea was not an attempt at "trying to become respectable", to paraphrase Marable, Malcolm had come to realize that no sectarianism could make the revolution we needed. Interestingly, Stokely Carmichael also called for the building of a Black United Front, and Martin Luther King, when he visited my house in Newark, a week before he was murdered, called for the same political strategy. It was such a front that was a major part of the national democratic coalition that elected Obama.

As for Yusuf Shah, when Spike Lee repeated Shah's wild allegations about me in his book *How I Made The Movie X*, I asked a college friend mine, who had become my part time lawyer, Hudson Reed, to file a suit against Shah demanding he be questioned in court for any "exculpatory" evidence relating to the murder of Malcolm X, particularly as to the involvement of himself and organized crime. A short time later, Shah, who had moved to Massachusetts, died in his sleep. Marable reports that Captain Joseph/Yusuf Shah's FBI file was "empty"!

It is Marable's misunderstanding of the revolutionary aspect of Black Nationalism that challenges the portrait not only of Malcolm but of the period and it's organizations as well. He treats the split between Malcolm X and the NOI much like he assumes the police did; (though this is patently false.); as a struggle between "two warring black gangs", a sect splitting from the main.

So that there is much more from Marable framing Malcolm's murder as directed by the NOI, rather than the state. Marable's general portrait of Malcolm is as doomed and confused individual about whom he could say that "Malcolm extensively read history but he was not a historian"; as if the academic title "HISTORIAN" conferred a more scientific understanding of history than any grassroots' scholar might have - simple class bias.

To say of the NOI that it was not a radical organization obscures the Black Nationalist confrontation with the white racist oppressor nation. Marable thinks that the Trots of the SWP or the members of the CP or the Committees of Correspondence are more radical. That means he has not even

understood Lenin's directive as pointed out in Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism*, in *The National Question*:

"...The revolutionary character of a national movement under the conditions of imperialist oppression does not necessarily presuppose the existence of proletarian elements in the movement, the existence of a revolutionary or a republican programme of the movement, the existence of a democratic basis of the movement. The struggle that the Emir of Afghanistan is waging for the independence of Afghanistan is objectively a revolutionary struggle, despite the monarchist view of the Emir and his associates, for it weakens, disintegrates and undermines imperialism; whereas the struggle waged by such 'desperate' democrats and 'socialists', 'revolutionaries' and republicans...was a reactionary struggle. ...Lenin was right in saying that the national movement of the oppressed countries should be appraised not from the point of view of formal democracy but from the point of view of the actual results, as shown by the general balance sheet of struggle against imperialism" -*Foundations of Leninism*, p77

Marable thinks that the Trots like the SWP or the soi disant Marxists in CPUSA or the Committees of Correspondence (a breakaway from the CPUSA) or the DSA are more radical than the NOI or Malcolm X. Perhaps on paper. But not in the real world of the Harlem streets. Malcolm came out the NOI, Dr. King from the reformist SCLC. But both men were more objectively revolutionary on those Harlem streets or in those southern marches than any of the social democratic formations and the social democrats ought to face this.

Marable spends most of his time trying to make the NOI Malcolm's murderers. Information from FBI, BOSS, CIA, NYPD, would tend to push this view, for obvious reasons. In this vein Marable says that Malcolm's Africa trips "made his murder all the more necessary from an institutional standpoint." That Malcolm's actions "had been all too provocative" to Elijah Muhammad and the NOI; but what about the Imperialist U.S. state and its agencies of detection and murder? They would be more provoked and better able to end such provocation. If there's a well-known murderer of Malcolm X still running loose as Marable and others have pointed out, how is it he remains free and we must presume that those agencies of the state know this as well as Marable and the others!

But even as he keeps hammering away that it was the Nation of Islam, he still says contradictorily "The fatwa, or death warrant , may or may not have been signed by Elijah Muhammad, there is no way of knowing." Many of Marable's claims fall under the same category.

He even quotes Malcolm after he was refused entrance into France that he had been making a "serious mistake" by focusing attention on the NOI Chicago headquarters "thinking all my problems were coming from Chicago and they're not". Asked then from where, Malcolm said "From Washington".

Marable also tells us that even today the FBI refuses to release its reports on Malcolm's assassination. Yet he will quote one of those agencies without question. Of Betty Shabazz' death Marable says flatly, of Malcolm's daughter Qubilah..."her disturbed twelve-year old son set fire one night to his grandmother's apartment". How does he know this? Is an official government "information" release that impressive? There are many doubts about that murder; shouldn't some of them have been investigated?

Some of the characterizations in the book are simply incorrect and suffer from only knowing about the movement on paper. Marable saying about Stokely Carmichael, after splitting with "pacifist" Bob Moses and SNCC that he would subsequently join the Black Panthers" is such an example. Carmichael didn't join the Panthers; he was "drafted" along with Rap Brown.

Marable says in effect that Malcolm misunderstood Martin Luther King's influence on Black people. He didn't misunderstand that influence he was trying to provide an alternative to it. Though ultimately, I believe both leaders later conclusion that a United Front would be the most formidable instrument to achieve equal rights and self-determination for the Afro American people. I would have liked to see Malcolm and Martin in the same organization, and for that matter Garvey & DuBois. They could argue all day and all night and in the end some of us might not agree on the majority's decision, but like the Congress of the United States we'd have to say "I don't even agree with that...but that's what we voted to do"!

Interestingly, on the back of the book are three academics who represent the same social democratic thought as Prof Marable. Gates who disparages Africa, looks for racism in Cuba not Cambridge and says the Harvard Yard is his nation.

My friend Cornell West who in response to me calling out at the Left Forum: "Where are the socialists, where are the communists" shouts "I'm a Christian!"; and Michael Eric Dyson who wrote a book on Dr. King calling it the "True Dr. King" somewhat like Marable's approach to Malcolm. But who and what else in the paper "Garden of Eden" of "Post Racial America"? So it is necessary that we rid ourselves of the real leaders of our struggle, in favor of Academics who want to tell us we were following flawed leaders with flawed ideas. We don't need equal rights and self-determination, an appointment to an Ivy League school will do just fine.

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