



Malcolm X Socialism and black nationalism

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Colin Lloyd reviews *Malcolm X: Socialism and Black Nationalism* by Kevin Ovenden, Bookmarks 1992

The cult of Malcolm X is reaching fever pitch. The release date of Spike Lee's long awaited film about the black leader is approaching. Malcolm's image is emblazoned on the baseball caps and t-shirts of hundreds of black and white youth.

Everybody from Al Sharpton to orthodox muslim god-squadders claim to stand in the tradition of Malcolm-X. But nobody can agree on what that tradition is.

Clearly a Marxist account of Malcolm's life and politics is long overdue. This is what Kevin Ovenden sets out to do in his recent book. As a basic Marxist account of Malcolm's life it is useful. But the weaknesses of the book reflect the politics of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which Ovenden is a member of.

Malcolm X grew up in the ghetto wanting to be a lawyer. Denied this by the racist education system, he became a small time crook and wound up in Uncle Sam's racist penal system. There he was recruited by the black muslims of the Nation of Islam. After finishing his sentence Malcolm rose to prominence as the right hand man of the muslims' leader Elijah Muhammad.

Oppressed

The muslims advocated radical, religious black nationalism. They set out to organise the most oppressed amongst the black working class—the jail population and the ghetto youth. Their movement grew into a mass force parallel with, but opposed to, the 'integrationist' reform movement led by Martin Luther King.

In the early 1960s Malcolm had become enemy number one for white racism in America, because of his uncompromising advocacy of black separatism and armed resistance to racism, summed up in the slogan 'By any means necessary'. But his commitment to a revolutionary struggle against racism also brought him up against the limits of the Nation of Islam, which told its supporters to abstain from the growing 'non-violent' mass demonstrations of black workers. This, and a personal dispute, propelled Malcolm out of the Nation of Islam in 1964, and into an intense period of political rethinking, cut short only one year later by his assassination on 21 February 1965.

Influenced

During his last year Malcolm came into contact with the anti-imperialist petit bourgeois nationalism of African liberation fighters, orthodox Sunni Islam, Stalinist 'socialism' and even centrist Trotskyism. He was influenced by all of these ideologies, and his speeches and writings in 1964-65 reflect a confused but valiant attempt to supersede black nationalism with a revolutionary synthesis of black self reliance and reformist utopian socialism. (For a fuller account of Malcolm's life and politics see *Workers Power* 151, February 1992)

Kevin Ovenden's account of these events is both accurate and informative. Unlike other potted biographies it attempts to situate Malcolm's political evolution within national and international developments in politics and economics. It uses quotations from Malcolm's writings and those of his opponents to spell out the key issues within the black movement of the time.

In its critique of Malcolm's later political development however, the book is neither detailed nor perceptive enough. Ovenden asserts that Malcolm was not a socialist. He backs this up with a quote where Malcolm speaks against

workers' solidarity as an illusion, but then admits that later Malcolm made explicitly anti-capitalist statements.

Strangely that is where the brief section 'Socialist or nationalist?' ends. There is no attempt to grapple with the wrong but influential argument that Malcolm was an 'unconscious revolutionary' pioneered by the centrist Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party of the United States (no relation to its British namesake). There is no critique of Malcolm's explicit programme, drawn up for the Organisation of Afro American Unity (OAAU) which he founded after his break with Elijah Muhammad.

It is easy to see the reason for these omissions. The British SWP cannot see the point of political programmes. Every year they are given a lecture by their guru, Tony Cliff, who tells them 'I'd rather have a machine gun than a blueprint for a machine gun'—that is, political programmes are useless. It is not surprising that Ovenden doesn't bother to analyse Malcolm's programme.

Explicit

If he did, he would have been able to prove how the explicit anti-capitalism of Malcolm's later speeches is not adequately translated into political strategy.

Malcolm's call for organised black self defence squads is very close to the transitional demands fought for by real Trotskyists—something incidentally the British SWP always refuses to fight for. On the other hand his solution to black poverty was a utopian and reformist social programme involving the training of skilled black workers and the creation of a parallel black economy servicing the needs of Africa.

It is not enough to say 'Malcolm was not a socialist'. It is far more accurate to say his socialism was reformist and that it was mixed up with black separatism plus revolutionary tactics on black self-defence.

The second part of Ovenden's book concerns the legacy of Malcolm X, the black movements which followed his death. Again, as a potted history it is not bad, explaining and contextualising the rise of the Panthers, Black Power and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). However, Ovenden is particularly weak wherever he has to deal with revolutionary Marxism and centrism's attempts to relate to black nationalism.

His account of the experience of the Communist Party and the black struggle completely leaves out the so called 'Third Period' of international Stalinism. During the years 1928-33 the Comintern adopted an ultra-left policy internationally. In the USA this led them to a specific orientation to black workers, and to espouse the demand for national self-determination for blacks in the USA.

The CP's line prompted a debate within American Trotskyism, which Leon Trotsky himself participated in, arguing for the right of self-determination up to the formation of a separate black state if the black population desired this. The conditions which Trotsky envisaged for such a struggle were being rapidly undermined during the 1930s, with the migration of southern blacks to the industrial northern cities of the USA. But it was not out of the question for Trotsky to consider the possibility of revolutionaries having to support such a national struggle by blacks in the USA, even if they did not themselves advocate it as a solution.

Ovenden's failure to deal with the Marxist debates on black nationalism is not accidental. It reveals the SWP's own failure to develop a political strategy to combat racism and achieve black liberation.

The third and final part of his book is an exposition of the British SWP's explanation of racism. It is the weakest section and the one genuine fighters for black liberation and socialism should focus their arguments against in Ovenden's coming speaking tour.

Ovenden correctly sets out to show that it is not in the interest of the white working class to be racist. But the interests of workers are defined as narrowly economic: racism drives down wage levels we are told, by dividing black and white. So why are white workers racist? Part of the answer is the racist propaganda we are surrounded by, Ovenden says. However:

?Racism can lodge in the minds of workers because it appears to correspond to one part of their experience of living under capitalism?the compulsion to compete in order to get by. As Karl Marx explained, competition invades all aspects of society, and ?separates individuals from one another, not only the bourgeois but still more the workers?. . . For the white worker living on a run down housing estate it can seem the solution is to take housing from black people. Racism can appear to make sense.? (p75)

But another part of the workers? experience under capitalism counteracts racism: the experience of collective struggle in the workplace:

?The more workers succeed in uniting and ?ghting, the less relevant seem the individualism and ideas of competition which stoke racism?.

This is a crass, one sided explanation, thoroughly imbued with the British SWP?s central method, which revolutionary Marxists label economism.

Economism reduces the class struggle to the struggle in the workplace over basic economic goals. It presumes that the basic economic interests of the working class spontaneously lead to the achievement of class unity and a revolutionary consciousness, to the overcoming of racism, sexism and anti-gay bigotry, and to overcoming reformist legalism.

This is not the same as saying ?workers learn in struggle?. No Marxist would deny that. But economism means belittling the role of a conscious vanguard, of a clear political programme, of revolutionary transitional forms of organisation.

Using only the SWP?s economism to guide him Ovenden comes up with a very inadequate explanation of racism. Clearly he doesn?t want to locate racism simply in the realm of ideas. That would lead directly to the reformist schema of ?race awareness training? as the solution to oppression, which the SWP rightly opposes. But locating the material roots of racism in the competition capitalism engenders amongst individual workers does not tell the whole story.

To put it simply; why, when they are indulging in this individualism and competition, do the white workers on a council estate turn against black people more than against each other? Nothing in the economics of individual competition dictate it. It has to be rooted in some other material structure. Ovenden cannot explain this.

For revolutionary Marxists it is rooted in the existence of capitalist imperialism, the degenerate form of capitalism that developed in the twentieth century. Imperialism created a world economy, an international labour market, and at the same time massively intensified the competition between capitalist nations, giving rise to virulent and exclusive modern nationalism.

Imperialism

Racism?s economic advantages for the bosses go far beyond ?divide and rule?. Through the pro?ts generated by plundering the globe imperialism is able to create a labour aristocracy of relatively privileged workers. At the same time it is able to utilise black workers as part of the ?reserve army of labour??super exploited workers with few rights.

We do not have to subscribe to the Maoist theory that all western white workers are labour aristocrats to see that a layer of white workers is tied through ideology and short term material interest to the racist state. But this is how the SWP caricatures the ?labour aristocracy theory of racism? (see for example Alex Callinicos? ?Race and Class? in IS55, Summer 1992).

Yet imperialism ?gures nowhere in Ovenden?s account of racism: it is purely rooted in the existence of working class individualism.

The political consequences of the SWP?s economistic theory of the causes of racism are its simplistic recipes for overcoming it. Taken at face value, once workers overcome individualism they should overcome racism. But that does not explain the existence of racism amongst organised workers.

Spontaneously

And whilst struggle is the best place to overcome racism it is facile to suggest that it is overcome spontaneously 'the more workers unite and fight'. That is why the SWP's principal slogan against racism, 'black and white unite and fight', on its own, is useless in the fight against racism and is rightly scorned by most black activists.

It is one thing for black and white workers to be standing together on the picket lines at Dagenham. It would be another thing altogether to suggest that this once and for all kills off the racism of the white workers.

Ovenden's book and speaking tour will no doubt spark off a furore amongst the self-appointed heirs of Malcolm X: the Stalinist black separatists of the Black Unity and Freedom Party, the middle class black leaders of ARA, and orthodox black muslims will no doubt hotly dispute the SWP's right to hold meetings on Malcolm X.

We will defend not only their right to do so but the general thrust of the socialist critique of Malcolm X that Ovenden's book contains. But we remain implacable opponents of the SWP's centrism and economism, both vividly illustrated in the book's analysis of racism and recipe for destroying it.

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