[MS-0436.002.012.002]

CORE - NORTHEASTERN REGIONAL OFFICE
48 West 125th Street EN 9-0100
New York, New York
March 2, 1965

MALCOLM X : The Complexity of a Man in the Jungle

Introduction: Joyce Ware, Director, Northeast Regional Office

As a worker in the Civil Rights movement, and having read the following article, I feel a compelling need for some real discussion in response to some of the critical points raised.

I feel that for the movement in the North, CORE and other Civil Rights organizations must address themselves to an attempt to understand some of Malcolm X's theory, as well as the inherent implications of his rationale. Embedded in the article are the issues of all the Harlems of the North and (in part) a key to the success of the movement.

So, the burning question in my mind is, "What does this article have to say to the Civil Rights movement (CORE), or we to it?"

###########

The following article was written by Marlene Nadle for the Village Voice, a weekly newspaper of Greenwich Village in New York City, Thursday, February 25, 1965, prior to the assassination of Malcolm X. It is based on hours of interviewing of Malcolm X at his Hotel Theresa office and attendance at rallies at the Audubon Ballroom and Manhattan Center.

The article is presented exactly as it was originally written. No attempt has been made to make it conform to the events of Sunday at the Audubon Ballroom. (Malcolm was assassinated on Sunday, February 21, 1965.)

Malcolm X has three faces. One is turned toward Africa, one toward Harlem and one toward Washington. His masks are more numerous. They are juggled by both the actor and the audience. He's a charismatic leader. Then a cartoon figure waving a rifle. He's a racist. Then a Black Nationalist gone white. A symbol of hope and Father Divine An anti-semite and a preacher of brotherhood. An extremist and a man to move the Movement

In Harlem the people watch the performance.

The Black politicians mark the trickle of converts going through the glass doors of the Organization of Afro-American Unity he formed after the split with the Muslims (Black) in March 1964. They wait to see if it signals a flood, now that the gates are open to non-Muslims, and now that a separate black state is no longer the destination.

The politicians will not completely associate themselves with him. Nor will they disassociate themselves. The untested potential of Malcolm X keeps people like Adam Clayton Powell careful friends.

Harlem Cross-section

A cross-section of Harlem comes to measure the man and his methods on Sunday nights at the Audubon Ballroom. Seated on 500 wooden folding chairs are the disinherited people who never had any hope or answers and those, whether Nationalist or non-violent activist, who have run out of both There are children looking for pride, and there are many older church-goers who, unlike Mahalia Jackson, can't sing, "I found the answer, I learned to pray".

In the bars and grills - Small's and Jock's and the Shalimar on Seventh Avenue, the Palm's and Frank's on 125th Street - the debate goes on.

"Malcolm is a genius, " said a man at the bar in the Shalimar. "All he cares about is Malcolm X and money "

"Malcolm is a creation of the white press," said a doctor at Frank's

"Malcolm is a genius," said a lawyer in the back room at Jock's. "He is the most brilliant speaker I have ever heard."

"Malcolm X is a loser," said another man at Jock's. "He'll have to do a lot better than he's doing if he wants to make it in Harlem."

Down the street from Jock's, in his Hotel Theresa headquarters, sat the subject of the debate. With his long frame hunched over a phone in his closet-like office, Malcolm made arrangements to speak at Harlem Hospital. He fumbled through the pockets of his dark three-button suit, through his vest and his attache case looking for his pen. Then, hanging up, he pressed his fingers against his eyes and rested.

Testing Process

Remembering the interviewer he apologized and said, "I usually try and get four hours sleep a night. Last night I didn't make it."

The young executive in charge of revolution complained about the pace. About days that too often ran from 9 a.m. to 5 a.m

Then the mutual testing began. With a half-smile Malcolm said, "A lot of people have warned me about the Village Voice. It's supposed to be a liberal paper, but they say it is very narrow."

"Some people on the staff think you're a con man," I said, and waited for the reaction.

It exploded out of the chair. Now on his feet, he said, "If I wanted to be just a con man, I wouldn't be fool enough to try it on these streets where people are looking for my life, where I can't walk around after dark. If I wanted power, I could have gone anywhere in the world. They offered me jobs in all the African countries.

"Muhammed is the man, with his house in Phoenix, his $200 suits, and his harem. He didn't believe in the black state or in the getting of anything for the people. That's why I got out."

Do you feel a distorted image of you was created by the press?

"It was created by them and me. The reporters came with preconceived answers to their questions. They were looking for sensationalism, for something that would sell papers, and I gave it to them. If they had asked probing, intelligent questions, they would have gotten different answers."

Why encourage the distortion?

"It's useful. The only person who can organize the man in the streets is the one who is unacceptable to the white community. They don't trust the other kind. They don't know who controls his actions."

The man in the street is the one Malcolm has described as living on the bottom of the social heap. The one who has given up all hope, all ambition, all plans. The one who says, like the old blues song, "I've been down so long till down don't bother me."

Did he plan to use hate to organize the people?

"I won't permit you to call it hate. Let's say I'm going to create an awareness of what has been done to them. This awareness will produce an abundance of energy, both negative and positive, that can then be channeled constructively."

The Bad Symbol

Like the trade-union organizer, Malcolm wants to aggravate the people's frustration and discontent until anger overcomes apathy and they act on their own behalf. This will be done primarily by attacking the whites' treatment of Negroes.

The Jew would seem to be an inevitable scapegoat for this attack. For the Jew like the policeman is a visible white in the life of the ghetto. Harlem sees them both not only in terms of their own deeds or misdeeds, but as walking symbols of all whites. It's easy to stir a black audience on both subjects, and stir them is what Malcolm wants to do.

"The greatestmistake of the Movement," he said, has been trying to organize a sleeping people around specific goals. You have to wake the people up first, then you get action."

Wake them up to their exploitation?

"No, to their humanity, to their own worth, and to their heritage. The biggest difference between the parallel oppression of the Jew and the Negro is that the Jew never lost his pride in being a Jew. He never ceased to be a man. He knew he had made a significant contribution to the world, and his sense of his own value gave him the courage to fight back. It enabled him to act and think independently, unlike our people and our leaders."

No Tarzan

To compensate for the pride and heritage that was aborted by slavery, on almost all occasions, but especially at his Sunday meetings, Malcolm assumes the role of teacher.

Unwinding himself from a hand microphone, without any formal introduction, he comes before his class at the Audubon Ballroom. He chats with, and kids them for a while and then gets on with the lessons.

He shows them films of Africa he took on his trip last summer. He tells them, "We have got to get over the brainwashing we had. No matter how much of an Africanist we are, it is hard for us to think of Africa as anything but a place for Tarzan. Look at these films and get out of your mind what the Man put in it."

Narrating from a chair in the first row, he points out the beaches and sky-scraping cities and says, "They told us there was nothing but jungle over there. Why, the only jungle I ever saw was right here in New York City."

He reads them an article about James Farmer in U.S. News and World Report. He attacks the magazine for being anti-black like all the press, but he tells his pupils to read it. "Read everything," he said, "You never know where you're going to get an idea. We have to learn how to think. We have to use our heads as well as out bodies in a revolution."

Rhytha Changes

He urges them to watch the kinds of books being used in the schools. "If when we were coming up, " he said, "we had a better idea of Africa and our past, we could think more of ourselves."

He closes the meeting with the announcement that child-care classes are going to be taught at the OAAU office.

Before this black audience, Malcolm has a different sound. The extensive vocabulary, the precise grammar, the level resonant voice g . Even the rhytha changes.

Was it deliberate? I asked him. "Sure," he said, "Different audiences have different rhythyms. You have to be able to play them, if you don't want to put the people to sleep."

"Now take someone like Bayard Rustin. He's a brilliant man, a real whiz just like Baldwin. But, he talks white. You know, Oxford accent and all. He came up here to Harlem to debate me .... Poor Bayard .... He spent so much time trying to figure out how to say things and still sound white that by the time he got around to the words, I had already whipped him."

Racism is Mask

During the debate, during the speeches on on Sundays past, and during the speeches on Sundays future, Malcolm will continue to try to wake Harlem. He will use a a negative attack to produce a positive goal. To a white ear the attacks will sound like the ranting of a racist.

To the man who leans casually against the wall at the Theresa, racism is a mask he dons when it will be effective. But even the mask is different from the way it is perceived. To himself he is a racist because he is concerned with the black race. He is a racist because he will attack all people who abuse that race. He is not a racist who hates all non-blacks.

"I care about all people," he said, "but especially about black people. I'm a Muslim. My religion teaches me brotherhood, but doesn't make me a fool."

The white world is not the only place that is concerned with his racism. In parts of Harlem where white means devil, they are also testing him.

He was challenged at a Sunday meeting. A man stood, rocked back on his heels, and very slowly said, "We heard you changed, Malcolm. Why don't you tell us where you're at with them white folks?"

Without dropping a syllable he gave a black nationalist speech on brotherhood.

Militant, Not Dogmatic

"I haven't changed," he said, "I just see things on a broader scale We nationalists used to think we were militant We were just dogmatic. It didn't bring us anything

"Now I know it's smarter to say you're going to shoot a man for what he is doing to you than because he is white. If you attack him because he is white, you give him no out He can't stop being white We've got to give the Man a chance He probably won't take it, the snake. But we've got to give him a chance

"We've got to be more flexible. Why, when some of our friends in Africa didn't know how to do things, they went ahead and called in some German technicians. And they had blue eyes

"I'm not going to be in anybody's strait jacket, I don't care what a person looks like or where they come from. My mind is wide open to anybody who will help get the ape off our backs."

White Allies

The people he feels that can best help are the students, both black and white. But he considers all militant whites possible allies.

He qualifies the possibility And woven into the qualifications are the threads of the emotions running through Harlem.

"If we are going to work together, the blacks must take the lead in their own fight. In phase one, the white led. We're going into phase two now "

"This phase will be full of rebellion and hostility. Blacks will fight whites for the right to make decisions that affect the struggle in order to arrive at their manhood and self-respect."

"The hostility is good," Malcolm said. "It's been bottled up too long. When we stop always saying yes to Mr. Charlie and turning the hate against ourselves, we will begin to be free."

How did he plan to get white militants to work with him or even to walk into the Theresa with the kind of slings and arrows he was sending out?

There was the half smile again. Then, thoughtfully stroking his new-grown beard, he said, "We'll have to try to rectify that."

Master Juggler

He admitted it would be difficult to get militant whites and blacks together. "The whites can't come uptown too easily because the people aren't feeling too friendly. The black who goes downtown loses his identity, loses his soul. He's in no position to be a bridge because he has lost contact with Harlem. Our Negro leaders never had contact, so they can't do it.

"The only person who could is someone who is completely trusted by the black community. If I were to try, I would have to be very diplomatic, because there are parts of Harlem where you don't dare mention the idea."

The diplomatic skill of the master juggler will also be needed to get white militant support. For, while wooing it, he must continue to attack whites for the benefit of the Harlem audience.

Bluntly he says, "We must make them see that we are the enemy. That the black man is the greater threat to this country than Vietnam or Berlin. So let them turn the money for defense in our direction and either destroy us or cure the conditions that brought our people to this point. For if we cannot live in this house as human beings, we would rather be dead."

As Malcolm finished his comment, he left little doubt that he was willing to go all the way in the fight. Yet he doesn't seem like a man who is in love with violence. On the contrary, he relaxed during the course of the interview, and the impression conveyed by this soft-spoken, non-smoking, non-drinking Muslim was one of gentleness.

Concern for the People

When he is not on the stage, another side of the man is revealed. The private rather than the public man is seen when you watch him relate to individuals. He stops and listens to a worried white student despite the fact that the police and his party are trying to hurry him out after a speech. He remembers to buy coffee for everyone in the office when he orders some for himself. He interrupts his sentence on the need for black hostility to ask, with genuine concern, whether I was abused coming to the Theresa.

Violence has no real part in his history. Even the crimes of burglary and larceny he committed as Big Red were mercenary, not sadistic.

Why then is he willing to go to such extremes?

"Only violence, or a real threat of it, will get results," he said. "The only time the government moves is in reaction to crises. When it's too costly to let our people continue to suffer, Washington will give the massive federal aid needed to solve the problem."

To the South

Violence doesn't mean a huge race war to Malcolm. His strategy is primarily defensive.

He'll work on voter registration in the North and South. But if his people work in a place like Mississippi, they'll be armed. "If the federal government won't protect the voters," he said his people will.

He has already begun to offer his services in the South. He addressed a voter-registration rally in Tuskegee, Alabama, on February 3, and was in Selma on February 5, and will speak at a Mississippi Freedom Party rally in Jackson on February 19.

Malcolm is also willing to go along with Bayard Rustin's strategy of causing social dislocation in the white community, but he is not willing to do it non-violently. For he says the people in Harlem who are willing to get involved in such activities aren't willing to have apoliceman crack their skulls and not fight back.

He will use demonstrations and picketing, but not the kind that play by the rules of the establishment. "Power doesn't back up in the face of a prayer and a smile", he said. "The only demonstrations that they pay attention to are the ones that contain the seeds of violence."

Black Guerrillas

There is another tactic he wants to use. It is the exception in his defensive strategy. He wants bands of invisible guerrillas who would strike and slip back into society. Bands that could match the Klan.

"I'll be the first to join," he said, " and lots of people you don't think will, are going to line up behind me."

It's over the tactics of violence vs. non-violence - or, as Malcolm puts it, self-defense vs. masochism - that he and other civil-rights leaders disagree. This difference is what has prevented the unity that he feels is one of the keys to the struggle.

"It's not that there is no desire for unity, or that it is impossible, or that they might not agree with me behind closed doors. It's because most of the organizations are dependent on white money and they are afraid to lose it. "I spent almost a year not attacking them, saying let's get together, let's do something. But they're too scared. I guess I will have to go to the people first and let the leaders fall in behind them."

That does not mean ruling out cooperation. He will try and stress the areas and activities where the groups can work together. For he says, "If we are going into the ring, our right fist does not have to become our left fist, but we must use a common head if we are going to win."

Black Schools

Asked if he would support things like a school boycott, he said he would if he agreed with its goals. He would not support it to get more busing. He also wouldn't fight school construction in black communities. Until a better plan for integration is found, he wants more and larger schools built in black neighborhoods. Even more than in comparable white ones, because of the birth rate.

In discussing other things he felt should be done, he said, "We must begin to move into politics and economics. They are two areas where our people are very immature. That's why the OAAU started the liberation school. We want to teach them how to operate."

The political lessons won't be just theory. Malcolm wants to run militant candidates on the local level. They would be race men like the Southern politicians. These candidates would plant angry soap boxes on all the street corners of Harlem. They would make the vote a channel for the discontent for the apolitical man in the streets. Once a political habit is established, it could be a powerful weapon in the struggle.

Would he be a candidate?

"I don't know at this point," he said, "I think I am more effective attacking the establishment. You can't do that as well once you're inside it."

Did he think an all-black party like the Freedom Now Party in Michigan was needed?

"Yes, in some cases you have to create new machinery. In others it's better to take over existing machinery. Either way, we're going to be involved in all levels of politics from '65 on."

Miami Approach

Malcolm also wants totake a new economic approach to integration. He thinks blacks should use the same strategy as Jews did in Florida. Instead of spending huge sums of money on lawyers' fees and bail bonds for sit-ins, they should pool their resources and buy housing. Then anybody who wanted to could come in.

He also thinks efforts should be made to have blacks control the food, shelter and clothing in the communities where they live.

As we spoke and drank the coffee he ordered, it became clear that there is one feature common to all Malcolm's masks. It's determination. Determination to solve the problems of his people at whatever cost. To smash through the deafness of the white world. To force into actions and words the rage that is churning in the guts of the blacks.

On the train I rode downtown, that black rage broke free in one drunken Negro. He spit his anguish and obscenities into emotionless white faces.

For endless blocks the drunk shrieked against the sound of the subway, "You're full of shit! Youre all full of shit! Youre killing me! You mothers! You're killing me!"

That rage is what Malcolm wants to shape into a weapon to be used against the continued moral, spiritual, political, cultural, and economic strangulation of the blacks.