

## Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A life of reinvention*

(London: Allen Lane 2011, 590pp hbk, £30)

I got to know the author's name while I lived in New York 1980-85 and read a left-wing weekly newspaper to which Marable was a regular contributor. Then he moved from I think Ohio State University to Columbia in New York, and we met a number of times on my subsequent visits to NY. A couple of years ago, when he heard that I had begun to work on Malcolm X's travels, he invited me to give a seminar paper to his students and his co-researchers filmed an interview with me. I was certainly hopeful of the book.

My hopes were dashed as soon as I heard the full title. What on earth did Marable mean by a 'life of reinvention'? So I began to read the book trying to convince myself that this made some sense. My hopes were dashed. Just to give a few examples: on p.9 we read that 'OAAU programs were choreographed'. Not quite the word I would use for whatever arrangements/preparations I have to undertake for any public meeting/conference I organise. And somehow it sounds very negative – part of this 'reinvention'. Then a few pages further on we read that Malcolm had 'layers of personality expressed as a series of different names' (p.10) – well, so have I! And I would guess many of us have different names at different times in our lives as we assume/play different roles. However, I am certainly not one of those 'many whites' who had been 'fascinated' by Malcolm in a 'sensual, animalistic way' (p.10): I was overwhelmed by his strength, his intelligence, his determination to fight for equal rights 'by whatever means necessary'. On the next page we are told that Malcolm presented himself as an 'uncompromising man...': again, somehow as if this is negative or questionable. So all I can say about 'reinvention' is that I, too have 'reinvented myself many times: for example, today I am very far from the young administrator working at IBM in Sydney in my early twenties; and which 'bit' of myself I present to any audience depends, of course, on what I think they ought to learn/hear about me, or what will influence them.

So I decided not to read most of the text, but to concentrate on Marable's account of Malcolm's travels in the last year of his life, which is what my own book is about. I hoped, given that Marable had not only funding for his research but research assistants, that he would have found much more that I could in my unfunded research. Here I should explain that my reason for undertaking research on Malcolm's travels when his travel notebooks were released a few years ago, was that I always wanted to know whom he was talking with – what was it that made him, in this the last year of his life, talk about American 'dollarism', about American imperialism, about the 'impossibility' for 'capitalism to survive'? (Read his speeches in *Malcolm X Talks to Young People* (1991) and *Malcolm X Speaks* (1966) It seemed to me that while the Nation of Islam might have wanted to silence him, it was probably the US government that wanted him dead. After all, you cannot have someone who is front page news around the world, launch such attacks on the US.

Even this reduced reading is disappointing. Marable comments, for example, that 'Malcolm counted on the support of the Trotskyists, making overt appeals to them in speeches that seemed to be in support of a socialist system, often at the expense of building alliances to his ideological right' (p.407). Now what sort of nonsense is that? Yes, Malcolm spoke on the Militant Labor Forum and Socialist Workers Party platforms. Does that mean he was dependent on them? And why would he want to build alliances with people opposed to his evolving beliefs, ie, the 'ideological right'? And there is further nonsense (or is this ignorance?) on the previous page: 'Malcolm increasingly sought refuge under the political rubric of Pan-Africanism... which ranged from the anticommunism of George Padmore to the angry Marxism-Leninism of Nkrumah in exile after 1966'. Malcolm had travelled in North, East and West Africa; he had attended a meeting of the Organisation of African Unity, spoken at length with Abdul Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Oginga Odinga, Jomo Kenyatta. Sékou Touré – all pan-Africanists; and he met many more in London when he attended and addressed the Committee of African Organisations, February 6 to 8, less than two weeks before his death. (Marable

does not even mention this. Nor does he mention Malcolm's conversations in Kenya with international trade unionist and publisher of the bi-monthly *Pan-Africa*, Pio Gama Pinto.) Moreover Padmore was long dead and whatever Nkrumah's philosophy might have become after his exile is immaterial as Malcolm was by then also dead.

Enough is enough. There is really no need for me to say more. The book is grossly disappointing and appears to me to indicate that Marable did not value Malcolm X and his contributions to the still ongoing struggles. I suggest that those interested in Malcolm read his speeches and interviews, his autobiography, attempt to see the film of his speech at the Oxford Union Debate and then assess a man who was honest enough to admit in the last few months of his life that he was going in a new direction, but that the path was not yet wholly clear to him. Given that he said a number of times that he knew his 'death had been ordered', he could have swerved to that 'ideological right' mentioned by Marable, to attempt to save his life. But he didn't. He was shot dead in the absence of the New York police, who were supposed to be safeguarding him 24 hours a day.

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