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Book Reviews

Jack Barnes. *Malcolm X, Black Liberation and the Road of Workers Power*. New York: Pathfinder, 2009. 413 pp.

Malcolm X, Black Liberation and the Road of Workers Power by Jack Barnes is a timely discussion that centers on the last months of the life of the slain leader, Malcolm X. Barnes is the national secretary of the Socialist Workers Party and has written previously on Malcolm X, including the works *Malcolm X Talks to Young People* (1969) and *The Last Year of Malcolm X* (2008). Barnes's book, rather than a monograph, is instead a collection of his speeches and essays as well as interviews of Malcolm X and others, delving into such questions as the historical role of socialism in the African American struggle for freedom. Much of the focus is on examining black resistance and resilience, which according to the book are personified by the figure of Malcolm X, whom Barnes hails as a "revolutionary leader of the working class," at one point comparing him with Fidel Castro (41). The book traces the political legacy of Malcolm X back to the post-Civil War period of Reconstruction when the (black) proletariat were empowered; indeed, according to Barnes, Malcolm's revolutionary lineage is ultimately traceable to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 (118).

Barnes contends that toward the end of his life, Malcolm X, rather than moving closer philosophically to Dr. Martin Luther King and the mainstream civil rights movement, was moving politically and philosophically toward socialism. Barnes, who interviewed Malcolm X in January, 1965 for *Young Socialists* magazine, asserts that over the final fifty weeks of his life, "Malcolm emerged on American soil as the most representative revolutionary leader with a mass hearing in the latter half of the twentieth century" (81). Barnes's 1965 interview helps to paint the picture of a Malcolm X who had changed his mind on numerous controversial issues such as interracial marriage and religion, and was in the process of evolving further. Ultimately, it is Barnes's contention that Malcolm made a "class break" over the last few months of his life and that he was moving toward becoming a part of "the revolutionary proletarian movement on a world scale" (355). Barnes claims that rather than a convergence with King and his ideals, there was an acceptance of socialist thought and its revolutionaries, such as Clifton DeBerry of the Socialist Workers Party (150-51). Within the book, indeed, within its introduction, Barnes

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makes the case that the Malcolm X whom he interviewed is not the leader that the world has come to know, pointing out that such documents as Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and Spike Lee's 1992 film, *Malcolm X*, present distorted images of the leader in that they "freeze Malcolm's political trajectory in April 1964 when he made his hajj to Mecca, only a month after his public break with the Nation of Islam" (20). The book invites and challenges readers to examine more closely the last ten months of the slain leader's life, which was a period when, in the estimate of Barnes, Malcolm was moving away from religion and even black nationalism. At one point, Barnes states, "he no longer thought his political views could be summarized and described as 'Black Nationalism'" (317).

As mentioned, an additional related theme is the historical connection between the African American freedom struggle and socialism. On this subject, Barnes argues that "everything new and progressive on the Negro question came from Moscow, after the revolution of 1917," and he attempts to illustrate how the African American struggle for freedom is historically allied with and indebted to the socialist struggle. Chapters in the book that support this argument include a 1984 essay by Barnes which discusses the post-Civil War era of Reconstruction, labeling it "Radical Reconstruction" and holding it up as a sterling example of a "revolutionary experience by the producing classes" (161). There is also a speech by Barnes to the 2001 Social Workers Conference in which he discusses the history of Jim Crow and racial segregation in the South, and also addresses the significance of the confederate flag, citing contemporary controversies over its public display. Following this is a letter by Barnes written for the occasion of a celebration of the life of Robert F. Williams, who led a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chapter in North Carolina during the 1960s. Williams organized blacks to defend themselves against the Ku Klux Klan and was also a defender of the Cuban Revolution. Also included are discussions between Leon Trotsky and other socialist leaders on the African American question, such as an intriguing conversation in 1939 between Trotsky and noted Pan-Africanist C.L.R. James on the issue of black self-determination.

In one of the more controversial sections of the book, Barnes addresses social stratification and political division within the African American community. In discussing the class divisions within the black community, Barnes zeroes in on the "enlightened meritocracy," of which President Barack Obama is a member. This meritocracy, rather than being divided by race, is held together by social class and is united in its contempt for the poor and the working-class, particularly the black working class. Furthermore, according to Barnes, the early policies of the Obama administration point to its class-bias. Barnes makes the point that the relationship of President Obama to the Congressional Black Caucus "is decidedly not symbiotic;

they need him, not vice versa,” and in making that assertion, he further contends that Obama and other members of the “enlightened meritocracy” are antagonistic toward the working-class, irrespective of race. Within this chapter, Barnes also addresses the incarceration rate of black males today, as yet another example of the assault on poor and working people, particularly the black poor.

Especially illuminating are the photographs within the book, which document the workers’ movement world-wide. The photographs are accompanied by Barnes’s captions, which serve to further emphasize the major themes of the book—that of the history of the global struggle of the proletariat for equality and dignity, and that of the political importance and evolution of Malcolm X. There are, for example, photographs of Malcolm X speaking to crowds in New York City and talking with college students in Selma, Alabama. There are also photographs documenting the Cuban Revolution; the civil rights movement; and the 1980s revolution in Grenada, led by the charismatic Maurice Bishop. These photos of revolutionary leaders and revolutions—from Cuba, to South Vietnam, to the American South—serve to show the connections between the African American or black liberation struggle, which is, of course, the overarching theme of this book.

Malcolm X, Black Liberation and The Road to Workers Power is a polemical book, one which adds to the ongoing conversation about the life and legacy of Malcolm X from a socialist perspective. This challenging and strident book seeks to help its readers connect the actions of the past with those of the present, albeit from a socialist perspective. Furthermore, it positions Malcolm X at the center of those struggles as one who was expanding his worldview and political philosophy and was, in Barnes’s view, on his way to becoming a communist. In writing this book and forwarding this reading of the last months of Malcolm’s life, Barnes offers up an intriguing and challenging appraisal of an enigmatic leader as well as a valuable addition to the scholarship on this seminal African American leader of the twentieth century.

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