

Malcolm X, Black Liberation & the Road to Workers Power

Authors: Alexander, Shawn Leigh¹

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Book Review

*NONFICTION

MALCOLM X, Black Liberation & the Road of Workers Power (Book)

Abstract:

The article reviews the book "Malcolm X, Black Liberation & the Road to Workers Power," by Jack Barnes.

Malcolm X, Black Liberation & the Road to Workers Power. By Jack Barnes.
New York: Pathfinder Press, 2009. 413 pp. \$20 (paper).

The history, legacy, and memory of Malcolm X has increasingly become a complicated story since his assassination in 1965. Over the years, scholars and activists have published numerous anthologies of his writings, as well as a number of studies attempting to capture the charismatic Malcolm Little developing into Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam and later El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, the slain leader of the Organization of Afro-American Unity. Some of the better, or more interesting, volumes include Peter Goldman's *Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Jrbana, IL, 1973), George Breitman's *Last Year of Malcolm X: Evolution of a Revolutionary* (New York, 1979), Bruce Perry's *Malcolm X: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, NY, 1991), Karl Evanzz's *The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X* (New York, 1992), William Strickland's *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* (New York, 1994), and Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York, 2011). Enter into the fray, Jack Barnes, national secretary of the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), with his *Malcolm X, Black Liberation & the Road to Workers Power*.

Barnes's book is a collection of the author's own writings and speeches on black liberation and interviews with Malcolm X, in addition to contributions by Leon Trotsky, James P. Cannon, and transcripts of discussions between Trotsky, C. L. R. James, and other Socialist Workers Party members on black liberation and black nationalism. *Malcolm X, Black Liberation*, according to Barnes, is a "book about the last year of Malcolm X's life. About how he became the face and the authentic voice of the forces of the coming American revolution" (p. 15). Barnes attempts to outline Malcolm's political re-orientation, or political growth, after his 1964 break with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam (NOI), a transformation that he defines as a "class break," a movement from nationalism to communism, and one that "deepened his political orientation to the working-class, toward the revolutionary proletarian movement on the world scale" (pp. 354-55). Moreover, according to Barnes, it was Malcolm's new "class political trajectory that led him to the conclusion to stop using the term black nationalism to describe his revolutionary course" (p. 355).

Yes, that is a leap. Barnes has taken nationalism away from one of the most celebrated black nationalists of the past century. Moreover, while doing this, Barnes has re-evaluated, or re-imagined, the SWP's position on black nationalism—one, since at least the 1930s after their conversations with Trotsky on black liberation, that had been supportive, not antagonistic. This is the very reason the SWP, and no other leftist groups, could find solidarity with individuals like Malcolm and believe they could work with him, particularly in the final year of his life after the break with the NOI.

Barnes believes, however, that this history is wrong and has been blatantly misrepresented throughout the years. For Barnes, Trotsky was not talking about black

nationalism; in fact, according to Barnes, he "never mentions Black nationalism." In his assessment, what Trotsky is talking about in 1933 is "Black self-determination" (p. 303). Though this may be semantics, this is the heart of Barnes's argument, and the only way he can re-evaluate the SWP and try to explain his interpretation of how much Malcolm X had grown after leaving the NOI.

Such a position not only slaps at the history of the SWP, and also Malcolm's legacy, but additionally at former SWP member George Breitman and his work on the black nationalist leader. This, however, may be the direct motivation of Barnes's publication of *Malcolm X, Black Liberation*. Barnes seems to be attempting to rewrite Breitman's work on Malcolm, in particularly his excellent *Last Year of Malcolm X*. He criticizes Breitman principally for his argument that Malcolm was "on the way to a synthesis of Black nationalism and socialism that would be fitting for the American scene and acceptable to the masses in the Black ghetto," and that Malcolm was a "Black nationalist plus revolutionary" (p. 336).

For Barnes this cannot be; Malcolm was becoming so much more than a "nationalist," especially if he was becoming the "authentic voice of the forces of the coming American revolution" (p. 15). Black nationalism was politically bankrupt and bourgeois, according to Barnes, and therefore had to be left behind (p. 318). Malcolm instead was creating "something more dialectical, inclusive, internationalist, and socialist" (p. 336), a "revolutionary leader of the working class" (p. 59).

While Barnes's work provides a new set of ideas of about the SWP's position on black liberation and a new interpretation of Malcolm X's transformation during the final year of his life, the book could have been better organized and more clearly stated. Moreover, the book could have been less involved in a debate over semantics and internal, sectarian, squabbles. Indeed, rather than rewrite the history of the SWP's position on black liberation and counter George Breitman's work successfully, Barnes may have resurrected both, as one would be encouraged to pick up both books and read them side by side to come to one's own conclusion.

Shawn Leigh Alexander
University of Kansas

The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South. By Andrew W. Kahrl. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. 376 pp. Illustrations and maps. \$39.95 (cloth).

An increasing focus on localism, land use, leisure, and the complex gender and class fragmentation among African Americans in the early to mid-twentieth century marks recent historical literature on the impact of segregation and strategies to confront it. Andrew Kahrl has now written a wonderful, incisive, yet depressing book about the myriad patterns in which African Americans sought to escape to the beaches of the American South and the long-term consequences of government poli-