Recovering Malcolm X

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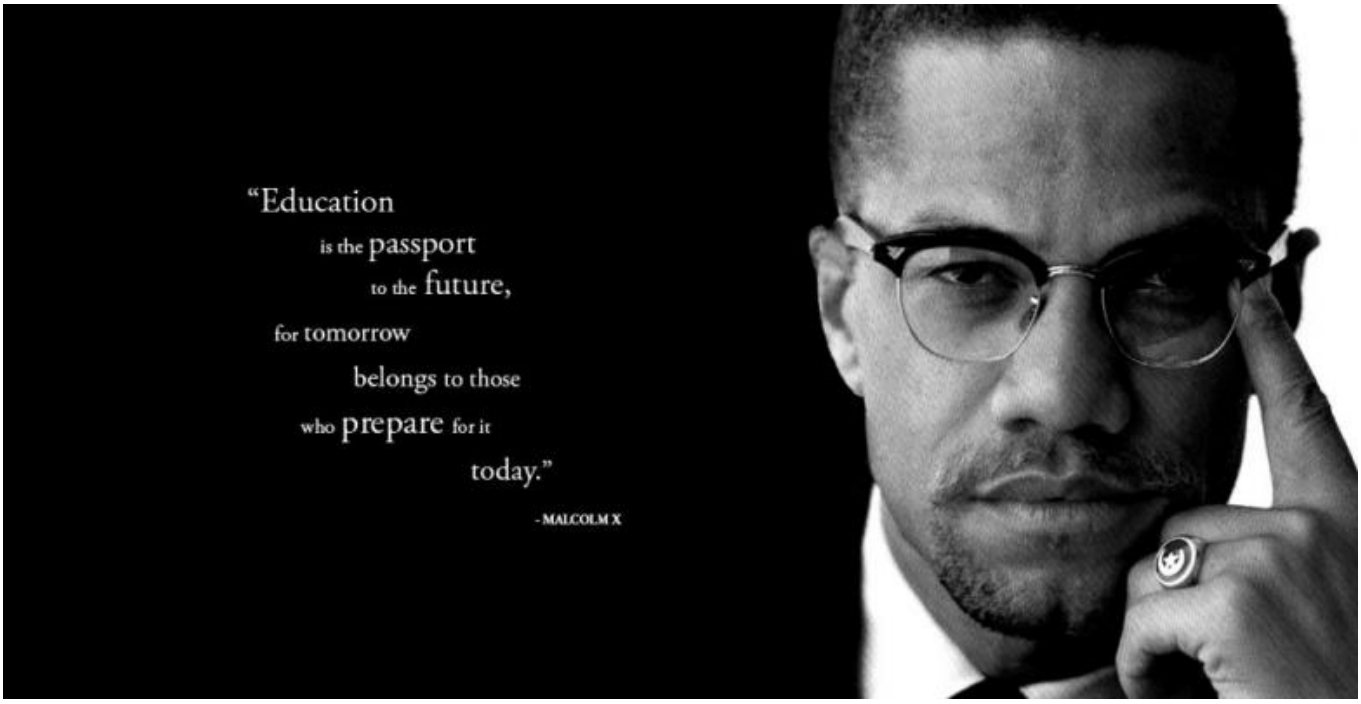

Today's growing movements face questions about social transformation: How to end racism? How can we end exploitation? These perennial questions are hardly new, but the approach taken by Malcolm X remains largely buried.

The occasion of Malcolm's 90th birthday May 19 seems a fitting time to recover his legacy from under a pile of distortions. He might have been still a living elder had he not been killed. His legacy, properly understood, remains powerful.

Manning Marable's book, the most recent, best-known biography of Malcolm was disappointing. Titled *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* it failed to treat Malcolm X's role as a revolutionary in the upheavals of the 1960s, instead looking at him as a man capable of radically recreating his own image. It was a version of Malcolm fitting for the media-dominated age in which we live: substance doesn't count, only appearance.

One of Malcolm's greatest strengths was his capacity for change. Always putting forth his best understanding, forcefully and persuasively, he was able to change his views as he learned more and as things changed. But he never altered his basic stance as a revolutionary, only his understanding of how best to pursue his aim of ending this rotten system. These are basic characteristics of a revolutionary, not just personal attributes, qualities are much needed today.

Malcolm played a central role in the revolutionary upheavals of the 1960s America. We need to reassess Malcolm's role to understand better our situation today and how to proceed.

Speaking uncompromisingly about the miserable conditions in which African Americans lived, Malcolm excoriated the US. "American democracy is American hypocrisy," was his catchphrase, unleashing a critique of the whole of America's culture of self-congratulation. He exposed the system of lies at the root of America's self justification and opened the way for historians like Gerald Horne to boldly reframe US history as that of a "slave-owners

republic."

Malcolm condemned the struggle for integration, in a manner similar to that of the American Indian Movement, which disdained integration into the society that was killing them.

In 1964 he denounced the 1963 March on Washington. Manipulated by big donations from the rulers it derailed the growing revolutionary upheaval, turning it into a "farce on Washington."

His critique of reformism was vivid and incisive. Asked by a reporter if the Voting Rights Act was progress, Malcolm said "no." Stunned, the reporter asked for more. Malcolm explained, "If a man puts a knife in your back 9 inches and pulls it out 6 inches, that's not progress."

Malcolm's critique had enormous impact, leading to a revolutionary turn in the movement. Not only did it contribute to the formation of the Black Panther Party and the political awakening of countless other revolutionaries, it affected Martin Luther King himself.

Two years after Malcolm was assassinated, in 1965 by persons still unknown and unindicted, Martin Luther King declared support for world revolution in his officially downplayed speech, Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.

King sought to end the "the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and economic exploitation." He embraced the world revolution saying, "(I)f we are to get on to the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society." He also said "our country is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."

One year to the day after this speech, King was assassinated in circumstances similar to those in which Malcolm was killed. Some believe the timing of King's murder was a signal sent by the government, a signal telling people to steer clear of the revolutionary road. If so, it was a signal well understood by African American people. King's murder was followed by uprisings in 110 cities, the largest upheaval in the US since the Civil War, an upheaval that threatened to overwhelm the entire order. This great rebellion is generally called "riots" and dismissed. It was a belated recognition of the influence of Malcolm X, who taught that revolution in the US was necessary and possible.

It's a legacy we would do well to ponder today.