

## **OP-ED: Malcolm X: Hero or Villain?**

Perhaps one of the more controversial figures of the civil rights movement is Malcolm X. A loud firebrand, he was often accused of preaching hate and of stoking the fire of racial tensions in America. As a muslim who spoke out against America, his voice was seen by many as blasphemous. His adversaries would paint for him a caricature of an angry, illogical, and hateful man. However, this is far from the truth. With reflection it is easy to see that Malcolm X was a brilliant rhetorician who had much more than anger and hate behind his speeches. Further, he was a good person, who was not racist but who had his own way of combating a racist government and society.

### **Malcolm X as Rhetorician**

Though a loud and powerful speaker, it's important to establish that Malcolm X was not merely spouting angry or hateful words off the cuff- he was an accomplished rhetorician in his own right.

Nearly everyone has heard the words "Ethos, Pathos, and Logos," many times over, and Malcolm X makes amazing use of them. Most of his arguments focus on the oppressive nature of the world around them, serving as an ethical justification for the *justness* of his problems with society, and the *legitimacy* of the African-American struggle for freedom. From there, so long as the solutions he proposes are logical, they should be legitimate. For example, one of his biggest criticisms is that he is racist because he believed in racial solidarity. However, in the speech *Message to the Grassroots* (1963), he approaches the issue as such:

What you and I need to do is learn to forget our differences [...] You don't catch hell 'cause you're a Baptist, and you don't catch hell 'cause you're a Methodist. [...] You don't catch hell because you're a Democrat or a Republican. [...] You catch hell 'cause you're a black man (Malcolm X).

It is clear here that his call for racial solidarity is reactionary, based on self-defense and mutual-aid towards a common problem. The necessity of the call is proven by the problem- namely, "catching hell." The argument itself is logical, that people should organize based on the common base of their oppression. The argument given for racial solidarity in this context is so logically made that it is now hard to argue that he is racist. Malcolm achieves even more rhetorical success by addressing a major criticism of his without even mentioning it.

In sum, Malcolm uses Pathos to highlight the problems and ills of society, Ethos to point out the injustice of it, and Logos to point out what must be done. In doing so, Malcolm X makes use of three pillars of rhetoric.

Not only is Malcolm's rhetoric internally sound, but it is also externally sound. There is a theory of Rhetoric called "Rhetorical Situation" theory. Within this framework, a piece of rhetoric is successful if it 1) identifies an exigence, or a situation in need of addressing, 2) navigates constraints, which are the various obstacles and considerations in a given situation, and 3) addresses, engages, and moves the audience.

Under this theory, it is still clear that Malcolm X is a successful rhetorician. Examining the same speech, *Message to the Grassroots*, is all we need to get an example of this. Malcolm X identifies racial oppression and division as an exigence. He addresses constraints by rebuking criticisms or conflicting opinions and defending his own arguments. Finally, he engages his audience and gets them to participate in civic activity, the final litmus test of a successful rhetorician which he clearly passed.

### **Malcolm X as a Hero**

Admitting he was a successful rhetorician, the question might still remain: but was he a hero?

Martin Luther King is usually held up as the figurehead of the civil rights movement for his unwavering and commendable push towards a completely integrated society. Malcolm is often cast as the villain because he called for separation of the races and independence of African-Americans.

However, this is arguably misunderstood. Malcolm X did not wish to be separate from white Americans just because they were white. In fact, Malcolm was beginning to change his views on race shortly before being assassinated and had begun to think that trans-racial solidarity was possible. He wrote in his journal that "In America, 'white man' meant specific attitudes and actions toward the black man," showing that a readjustment is required when considering Malcolm's worldview. He was not preaching against the "white man" because he was racist, but because to him, "white man" meant the American oppressors.

While MLK always held a religious and cosmological view of the world, leading him to focus on the end-goal of racial harmony, Malcolm X was concerned with the practical idea that African-Americans needed better lives and more freedom right away. For this reason, I don't

think it's fair to say that MLK was not racist and Malcolm X was. Both were focusing on different ends of valid dichotomies- idealism and pragmatism, long-term and short-term. In this sense, both were attempting to improve life for African-Americans.

Another misconception is that Martin Luther King was seen as struggling to uphold American ideals, whereas Malcolm X is seen as being set wholly against them. But is this true? Malcolm X may rail against "America," but when he does, he is often criticizing the same imperialism, militarism, racism, and poverty that Martin Luther King protested. In Malcolm's mind, he was Anti-American because he had been forced to be by a country that was hostile to him and his people. If you consider pointing out problems and struggling to fix them as helping your country, then Malcolm did this. If the question is how good of a cheerleader you are, then Malcolm was certainly not an upholder of American ideals, although he was someone who pointed out where they went wrong.

One final difference should be pointed out between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, when trying to decide if Malcolm X deserves to be held to similar esteem, and that is their religions. Martin Luther King melds with the American psyche much easier, being Christian and having fought for change in a christ-like way. However, Malcolm X's approach is comparatively jarring. His willingness to, if not threaten, bring up the topic of violence feels wrong to Americans. However, under his Muslim faith it is morally justified. Malcolm is quoted as saying that his religion says to "be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts a hand on you, send him to the cemetery." Within this framework, there is no problem with threatening self-defense. It is morally justified.

In conclusion, I would argue that Malcolm X in addition to being a brilliant rhetorician, deserves to be in the pantheon of heroes. His charges of racism are misunderstood and based on the desire to see an effective organization of African-Americans in order to combat oppression. His charges of being "un-american" ignore the legitimacy of the problems he raises and accusations he levies. His refusal to engage in wholly non-violent protest and his willingness to speak about violence labelled him an instigator and public enemy, when in reality he was doubling down on his belief that everyone had the right to self-defence. In the end, Malcolm X was an American hero who fought to rid American society of some of its worst ills, and to bring freedom, security, and prosperity to the African-American population.

**Works Cited:**

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