

How did the rhetoric of Malcolm X affect the perception of the American Civil Rights

Movement as a whole?

Mr. Lynch

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Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will explore the question: How did the rhetoric of Malcolm X affect the perception of the American Civil Rights Movement as a whole? This investigation will cover the years 1925 to the mid 1960s in order to be able to go in depth into the complete life of the man who spearheaded the Black Panther Movement as to better understand his use of rhetoric of and how different groups of people (e.g the media, students, the white middle class, etc) responded to it in comparison to the more nonviolent approach taken by the likes of Martin Luther King Jr.

The first source that will be evaluated in depth is “The Autobiography of Malcolm X”¹ itself, a collaborative effort written by Malcolm X and Alex Haley over the course of more than 50 interviews and published in 1965. The origin of this source is very valuable as it came directly from the mind of Malcolm X because he was able to very clearly lay out his ideas with his exact intentions, it was also published in 1965, the year of his death, so the views expressed in this book can be considered as the legitimate and final views of Malcolm X. The purpose of the autobiography, as explained by Alex Haley, was “for the reader to gain knowledge of Malcolm X as The content of the autobiography is self-described as a spiritual conversion narrative that contains Malcolm X’s views on Black pride, Black nationalism, and pan-africanism through a chronological retelling of the minister’s life. This source is highly valuable to my internal assessment, it is without a doubt the most vital piece of evidence that I

¹ X, Malcolm, et al. The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Ballantine Books, 2015.

could've used in this particular investigation as everything written in the book came directly from the mouth of Malcolm X. The major limitation of this source is the fact that the views presented are very linear and one-sided and there aren't a plethora of examples on the way in which others reacted to this loaded rhetoric which is an essential component of my investigation.

The second source evaluated in depth will be the 2011 installment in *The Journal of African American History* "'People All Over the World Are Supporting You': Malcolm X, Ideological Formations, and Black Student Activism"², written by Ibram H. Rogers, a historian with a focus on African American History who received his undergraduate degree in journalism and African American studies and his doctorate in the same field of study at Temple University. He is the leading scholar of race and discriminatory policy in the United States. His extensive publication history in the field of African American history adds value to the origin of this source. The publication year also adds value as it is a lot more recent than the previous source which allows it to provide a different perspective and nonlinear approach to the topic that explores the impact of the ideas presented in the Autobiography of Malcolm X on the black students and other black revolutionaries at the time. Rogers' purpose in writing the article was to outline the sheer impact that the words of Malcolm X had on the world, but this is limited by the fact that it does not go into much detail in the way in which he was viewed by the majority of white America during his epoch of relevance which would aid my investigation greatly because it would aid the explanation as to why the Black nationalist approach to civil rights might have been less effective than the nonviolent approach that we praise today.

² Ibram H. Rogers. "'PEOPLE ALL OVER THE WORLD ARE SUPPORTING YOU': MALCOLM X, IDEOLOGICAL FORMATIONS, AND BLACK STUDENT ACTIVISM, 1960-1972." *The Journal of African American History* 96, no. 1 (2011): 14-38. doi:10.5323/jafriamerhist.96.1.0014.

Section 2: Investigation

The views of Malcolm X and his follower and the conventional Civil Rights Movement that stressed nonviolence were both schools of thought with polarizing views on the advancement of the Black race during the mid twentieth century. Malcolm X was easily targeted and used as a symbol for Black aggression and almost rightfully so as much of his language can be interpreted as pro-violence. The conventional Civil rights movement on the other supported the cooperation of the races in this fight for equality while Malcolm X very explicitly opposed this notion as he believed the “white devil” would never be capable of seeing the Black man as his equal.³ These two different approaches, without surprise, led to two very separate levels of success in achieving the goal of a status of social and economic equality of the black race and this had much to do with the way in which these tactics and rhetoric were received by the rest of the United States.

The Black power focused faction of the civil rights movement was spearheaded by a handful of fiery yet for the most part misunderstood spokespeople throughout its lifespan such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Charles V. Hamilton⁴. A big part of understanding this movement is understanding the characters behind it, especially the most controversial yet most misunderstood of them all: Malcolm X. With the early death of his father, constant relocation which robbed him of a stable childhood, and the gradual mental deterioration of his mother all before the age of eighteen, it only makes sense that he would go about life with a chip on his shoulder and even less of a surprise that he would turn to crime, becoming a prominent member

³ Autobiography of Malcolm X

⁴ Ture, Kwame; Hamilton, Charles (1967). *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. Random House. p. 53

in the hustler society of Harlem which led to his arrest in 1946⁵. All problems which Malcolm X believed could be traced back to the white man, in fact he believed all plights of the black man were a direct causation of foul play on the part of the white man, a concept which he related to an unfair gambling match in the first chapter of his own autobiography, where he states, “It’s like the Negro in America seeing the white man win all the time. He’s a professional gambler, he has all the cards and the odds stacked on his side, and he has always dealt to our people from the bottom of the deck.”⁶ Might one agree or disagree with this take on American race relations, the fact that such a prominent member of the Black Power movement took upon such an accusatory opinion of the white man almost made it impossible for the movement to succeed in the rigidly white controlled political climate in which it existed. He was well aware of this status as well, understanding that he was a “specter haunting white America”⁷, he didn’t allow the fear of his perception to stop him from dueling with white broadcasters on live television. Another prime example of the media’s perception of Malcolm X and the rest of his peers in the Nation of Islam was the series entitled *The Hate That Hate Produced*, a five part television series exploring the Nation of Islam, which the host Mike Wallace presented as “a study of black racism”⁸. In the program Wallace assured viewers that “sober minded Negroes” saw no merit in the beliefs of the Negroes who called themselves the Muslims. This shows that there was a clear separation in the media between Black Americans who were respected among the majority of the population at the time and those who were easily dismissed as radical and irrational.

⁵ Epps, Archie C. "The Rhetoric of Malcolm X." *Harvard Review*, no. 3 (1993): 64-75.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27559632>.

⁶ *Autobiography of Malcolm X*

⁷ DOHERTY, THOMAS. "MALCOLM X: IN PRINT, ON SCREEN." *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000): 29-48.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23540201>.

⁸ *Malcolm X: In Print, On Screen*

Malcolm X's stance on the American Civil Rights issue was quite unapologetically pro-black. He would oftentimes promote the self-sufficiency of the black race and opposition of integration.⁹ Which would seem to be an easy way to achieve success for the movement because so many white citizens held the same stance on integration, but the reasons behind these views could not be more different. Those associated with the Black Power movement who opposed integration did so because they believed that such a move would simply provide another opportunity for the Black race to sit at the bottom of the social ladder yet again, however, if the races were to stay segregated the black race could flourish economically with programs, businesses, and most importantly educational systems with the genuine interest of improving the Black condition in the United States.¹⁰ This genuine belief in the fact that the condition of the African American race could only be improved by the African American race itself could be easily mistaken for arrogance, and even more so this self sufficiency and cooperation among the black race which was a fundamental belief of the Black Power movement had strong socialist undertones which were quite dangerous during a time period so soon after McCarthyism and the Red Scare and literally in the midst of the Cold War when irrational fears of communism were higher than they might have ever been.¹¹ Although not as prominent as it was made to seem, the violent tendencies of the Black Panther Party made the group very easy to be used as a scapegoat by opposing politicians¹², but even without violence, the diction alone of the Black Power movement made it easy to villainize the group, from protests in 1972 that

⁹ Joseph, Peniel E. "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field." *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (2009): 751-76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25622477>.

¹⁰ Nelson, Alondra (2011-01-01). *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination*. U of Minnesota Press.

¹¹ Harris, Jessica C. "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party." *The Journal of Negro History* 86, no. 3 (2001): 409-21. doi:10.2307/1562458.

¹² The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field

promoted “African Liberation” to the namesake of the movement itself, it was much too easy for the media as well as political opposition to undermine any of the actual goals of the movement.

The tactics of the fundamentally nonviolent parts of the Civil Rights movements led by iconic leaders which are still revered in today’s society such as the notorious Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks were different in various ways from those used by the constituents of the Black power movement. For example, they prioritized the importance of non violence when protesting, even when sicced on by dogs or publicly humiliated by bystanders, these men and women took it upon themselves not to fight back which made it much easier to be seen as innocent victims of an oppressive system as opposed to thuggish perpetrators of violence and borderline terrorist acts¹³. This tactics was so much more effective in the eyes of the media because these Negroes were defensive against the institution of racism as opposed to offensive. In the words of Mike Wallace, they were “sober minded”, able to roll with the punches and wait for their freedom to be granted as opposed to the rather eager views of Malcolm X and many other Black Power leaders to seize this freedom themselves. The grassroots approach to civil rights which also attempted to do as much to recruit white students as it did to recruit black constituents was also a major factor in the general success of this more fundamental approach to civil rights it proved that this process could be collaborative in nature and actually made much of white America feel as if they were truly doing something to aid this cause.¹⁴

¹³ Nimitz, August H. 2016. "Violence and/or Nonviolence in the Success of the Civil Rights Movement: The Malcolm X–Martin Luther King, Jr. Nexus." *New Political Science* 38, no. 1: 1-22. *Sociological Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 25, 2018).

¹⁴ Phipps, Gregory. 2015. "He Wished That He Could Be an Idea in Their Minds": Legal Pragmatism and the Construction of White Subjectivity in Richard Wright's *Native Son*." *Texas Studies In Literature & Language* 57, no. 3: 325-342. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 25, 2018).

From the end of the Second World War to the passing of the Civil Rights act, there were several approaches to the issue of acquiring equality for the Black race in the United States. The more fundamental approach, which is still praised today, believed that this could be done through nonviolent means as well as in cooperation with the white population of America while the Black Power approach clinged to the idea that these rights would be claimed by self sufficiency among the race which coincided with the infamous, “By any means necessary,” Malcolm X quote (stated in 1964 at the founding rally of the organization of Afro-American unity) which meant that this equal status would have to be achieved with or without the help of the government or white America in general. This approach proved unsuccessful in the long run and was not taken seriously in the eyes of the media and the majority of the US population as a whole.

Section 3: Reflection

In my investigation I considered multiple sources and perspective throughout the development of my argument, for example I used the autobiography of Malcolm X, which is a primary source because it was actually written and published during the time period in which I focused on throughout this investigation, and I used a handful of secondary sources which were produced more recently which has made it so that the authors have a better overview of the time in which they studied and can analyze it in more detail than a primary source would be able to. It was challenging though to differentiate between the different biases between the various sources, such as the academic background of the authors or experience in their respective fields. I evaluated the reliability of the sources by looking at the credibility of the various journals in which they were published as well as the credibility of the authors themselves, many of the

authors in which I have cited in this assignment are very acclaimed historians of African American history and have been educated at some of the highest levels possible in this field. I was also able to act as a historian because I was forced to utilize sources with limited perspective. For example, the autobiography of Malcolm X itself was a very one-sided piece of evidence and provided very little real world context that wasn't tainted by either Malcolm X's or Alex Haley's narrative voice, so I had to use more objective and recent sources to put this all of the primary information gained into perspective..

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